

# Cinderella: other worlds, other versions

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(This paper is based on illustrations of different versions of Cinderella to a large extent. As it was impossible to obtain permission to use the illustrations from all the copyright holders, these have been omitted, but references are provided to the works containing the illustrations – Editors).

There was once upon a time a gentleman who married for his second wife the proudest and most haughty woman that ever was known. She had been a widow, and had by her former husband two daughters of her own humour, who were exactly like her in all things. He had also by a former wife a young daughter, but of an unparalleled goodness and sweetness of temper, which she took from her mother, who was the best creature in the world (Perrault 1961).

★

In a great palace by the sea there once dwelt a very rich old lord, who had neither wife nor children living, only one little granddaughter, whose face he had never seen in all her life. He hated her bitterly, because at her birth his favourite daughter died; and when the old nurse brought him the baby, he swore, that it might live or die as it liked, but he would never look on its face as long as he lived.

So he turned his back, and sat by the window looking over the sea, and weeping great tears for his lost daughter ... And, meanwhile, his granddaughter grew up with no one to care for her, or clothe her; only the old nurse, when no one was by would sometimes give her a dish of scraps from the kitchen, or a torn petticoat from the ragbag; while the other servants of the palace would drive her from the house with blows and mocking birds, calling her “Tattercoats” (Jacobs 1968:185).

★

There are some men who are loving, fearless and brave. There are others who are kind-hearted enough in their way, but as gutless and spineless as a jellyfish. The Nobleman in this story was definitely one of the latter.

The Nobleman's wife adored him, however, and he knew he was lucky to have her. She was young and beautiful, and did everything for him. So much so that, when she died, he could scarcely tie his own shoelaces, let alone look after himself and his daughter.

I must find a new wife at once! he decided. If she was rich, so much the better (he had lost his own money long since)!

He married a rich widow with two daughters (May 1992:21).



There once lived a young woman named Cinderella, whose natural birth-mother had died when Cinderella was but a child. A few years after, her father married a widow with two elder daughters. Cinderella's mother-of-step treated her very cruelly, and her sisters-of-step made her work very hard, as if she were their own personal unpaid labourer.

One day an invitation arrived at their house. The prince was celebrating his exploitation of this dispossessed and marginalized peasantry by throwing a fancy dress ball (Garner 1994:31).

... Every head in the ballroom turned as Cinderella entered. The men stared at and lusted after this woman who had captured their Barbie-doll ideas of feminine desirability (Garner 1994:33).



I guess you think you know this story,  
You don't. The real one's much more gory.  
The phoney one, the one you know,  
Was cooked up years and years ago  
And made to sound all soft and sappy  
Just to keep the children happy.  
Mind you, they got the first bit right,  
The bit where, in the dead of night,  
The Ugly Sisters, jewels and all,



Departed for the Palace Ball,  
While darling little Cinderella  
Was locked up in the limly cellar (Dahl 1982:3).

The examples I have quoted are from tales known collectively as Cinderella stories. They prove that folklore is living literature. They echo the voices and values of past storytellers, of other cultures and other times. The stories are kept alive in the nuances of retellings by new tellers for new audiences, Cinderella can be whatever size, shape, nationality, or age we wish (MacMath 1994:29).

The Cinderella stories are perhaps the most widely recorded of all traditional narratives. Now considered a children's story, and censored to fit adult ideas of what is and is not suitable for children, tales of Cinderella and her cousins were once told by adults for all members of the community. The evils that befell the heroine in oral tales were frightening, even gruesome. But Cinderella survived unharmed and triumphant, with the help of strange and magical beings.

### **What is a Cinderella story?**

The story of Cinderella is best known as a children's story by the French writer Charles Perrault, *Cendrillon, ou la petite pantoufle de verre* (1697). However, other forms of the tale exist in the oral and written traditions of many parts of the world. The different versions are not independent of one another. Their structure and message is similar and they have detail in common.

Almost all tell the story of a young woman persecuted by her family who receives magical help from unusual sources, so that her true worth can be known by a potential husband of higher rank. The core images include association of the heroine with hearth and ashes, help from the dead mother; gift-giving tree; helpful animal; food magically produced by an animal; magic tree; clothing produced from remains of a dead animal; impossible tasks accomplished with the help of animals or a strange old woman; threefold visit to dance or church with threefold flight, proof of identity through shoe, ring, or other item of adornment; marriage (Sierra 1992:161).

### The origins of Cinderella



Folklorists devoted their lives to compiling and analysing all known versions of Cinderella, trying to discover the oldest form of the story and to trace the development through time. In 1893 the English Folklore Society published the astonishing research effort of Marian Roalfe Cox entitled *Cinderella: three hundred and forty-five variants of Cinderella, Catskin and Cap o' Rushes, abstracted and tabulated, with a discussion of medieval analogues and notes*. More than half a century later (1951) the Swedish folklorist Anna Birgitta Rooth wrote her doctoral dissertation on the tale, identifying 700 versions (Sierra 1992:161–168).

Gradually the quest for origins were abandoned and the folklorists' were substituted by comparative studies of illustrated versions, et cetera.

## **The purpose of this paper**

No child should be brought up without learning the story of Cinderella or Red Riding Hood. The purpose of this paper is to explore the phenomenon of how a folktale may vary as it is told in different cultures and different times. Each century tends to create or recreate folktales after its own taste. Each teller and illustrator brings to the tale something of his or her own cultural orientation.

For this discussion I have chosen versions that represent a broad range of cultures and geographical areas, styles and variations on the basic theme of the persecuted heroine. I will pay particular attention to the illustrations, as it is through illustrations that the enquiring mind gets insight into different periods and different cultures. However, I would first like to give a short overview of different versions of Cinderella, originating from different cultures.

## **Yeh-shen**

The first complete Cinderella story to be written down, comes from China. It tells of Yeh-shen who was mistreated by her stepmother and stepsister after her father remarried. Like the heroine of several other Cinderella tales, Yeh-shen was helped by a magical being, in this case a talking fish.

The tale of Yeh-shen though set in China and differing in some details, is basically the same as the familiar European fairy tale of Cinderella. But surprisingly, it is at least 1 000 years older than the earliest known Western versions of the story (Jameson 1932).

## Cinderella, or The Little Glass Slipper

The French author Charles Perrault published Cinderella (Cendrillon) in 1697 in a collection of fairy tales under the title *Histoires au contes du temps passé* (Dundes 1988:14). When Perrault first wrote down these fairy tales they had already existed, in one form or another, for years, some for centuries, as part of the unwritten tradition of folklore handed down by word of mouth from one generation to another. Perrault's version is the story most people recognise as the "real" Cinderella, and if one were to select the single most popular version out of all the hundreds of texts of Cinderella that have been reported, it would be this one. Walt Disney's animated film is based on Perrault (Dundes 1988:110).

In the Perrault version a stepmother requires the girl to clean for her two daughters. She lives by the hearth. Her godmother turns a pumpkin into a coach, mice into horses, a rat into a coachman and six lizards into footmen. She provides a gown and glass slippers for Cinderella. The prince dances with Cinderella at the ball. She must leave by midnight. Thrice she attends the ball and flees at 12. Her glass slipper is lost. The slipper is tried on by all the maids of the kingdom. It fits Cinderella and she weds the prince.

Perrault's version demonstrates the well-bred 17th century female traits of gentility, grace and selflessness, even to the point of Cinderella graciously forgiving her wicked stepsisters and finding them noble husbands.

*Ash Girl / Cinder-fool / Aschenputtel*

No two individuals did more to stimulate the study of folklore than did Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The publication of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* in 1812

and 1814 burst like a literary bombshell on the European scene. The Grimms frequently combined different versions of the same tale, thereby producing what modern folklorists call a composite text. The published versions of Cinderella reported by the Grimm brothers may well be as popular and well-known as the Perrault versions, but are not necessarily the most authentic in terms of the oral versions of the tale (Dundes 1988:23).

In the Grimms' corpus one can find different forms of the Cinderella story: Aschenputtel, Allerleirauh and The Dress of gold, of silver and of stars (Cap o' Rushes).

In Grimms' Ash girl the stepsisters try to make the slippers fit them by cutting of parts of their feet. Gruesome detail is included in many versions. Other elements found in this tale, but not in Perrault's Cinderella, are the magic tree on the mother's grave and the impossible task of picking up thousands of peas or tiny grains before going to the ball. Cinderella gets pigeons to help her.

At the wedding the pigeons sat on Aschenputtel's shoulder and, if the stepsisters had not suffered enough by cutting off their toes and heels to fit their feet into the glass slipper, the pigeons pecked out their eyes while they were acting as bridesmaids – this is a Grimm story!

Other versions on the Cinderella theme from the Grimm collection are *Cat-skin/Allerleirauh* and the *Many-furred creature*. The heroines of this type of tale are usually kings' or rich men's daughters. The dying queen asks the king to wed only one as fair as she. He decides to wed his daughter. The daughter covers herself with a cloak and goes forth disguised as a poor woman.

## **Tattercoats and Rushen Coatie**

These two versions are published in *English fairy tales* (1968) which were collected by Joseph Jacobs in the English countryside in the late 1800s.

## **The Indian (Native American) legend**

The collecting of North American Indian tales began with the sporadic records of missionaries and explorers, but not until the 1830s was there any serious attempt to bring together the rich body of existing material. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, a government agent for the Ojibwa Indians, recorded their myths and legends. Since then ethnologists and folklorists have collected a wide variety of Native American folklore.

A rich variety of tales came to America with immigrants from Europe and Asia, and their stories can be seen to have overlaid Indian folklore. Native variants of European tales are often found. Rafe Martin retells the Algonquin Indian version of Cinderella in *The Rough-face girl* (see *Die Aspoester-meisie*).

## **Modern versions**

In the 1970s feminist writers began to attack the heroine tales, and Cinderella in particular, as bad role models for young girls. If the tales are accepted literally, the argument must be valid. Fairy tales originated in societies in which a

woman's possible roles were very limited. Careers were not an alternative to marriage. In the past years efforts have been made to produce "modern" fairy tales. Retellings and parodies have become the order of the day and many adaptations of Cinderella are available that show a young girl as having many choices. In many instances modern writers have written farcical versions of the old fairy tales.

### **African folktales**

While the folktales have African settings, many of their motifs are common to European fairy tales.

As stated, the purpose of this paper is to explore how a folktale may vary as it is told in different cultures and different times. By examining the illustrations in different versions one can see how each teller and illustrator brings his or her own cultural orientation to the interpretation of the Cinderella story and tries to make the story meaningful to a new audience.

I have selected common incidents recognised by folklorists, namely the portrayal

- ★ of the ill-treated heroine
- ★ Cinderella at work
- ★ birds to the rescue
- ★ the ugly sisters
- ★ the shoe fitting episode.



## The Heroine

1. *Yeh-shen, a Cinderella story from China*. 1982. Retold by Ai-Ling Louie. Illustrated by Ed Young. New York: Philomel.

This is the complete Hsueh Chin T'oo Yun edition of the Chinese Cinderella story recorded from the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1912). Chinese characters on block printed pages are shown. The illustrations are set in panels like those of the Chinese folding, painted screen. The style of clothing, jewelery worn and hairstyles establish the story's setting. The magic of the Cinderella motif comes from the bones of the fish that Yeh-shen loved and her stepmother killed.

2. "Cinderella; or, The Little glass slipper", in *The Classic fairy tales*. 1974. Edited by Iona and Peter Opie. London: Oxford University Press:123–127.

In a coloured wood engraving from an 1876 edition of Cinderella, she is shown dressed in a beautiful, and very stylishly tailored ballgown.

3. *Cinderella and other tales from Perrault*. 1989. Illustrated by Michael Hague. London: Methuen Children's Books.

The artist has paid meticulous attention to detail such as the fraying dress, the stone floor, kettle, chairs and beautiful border. The illustrator pictures Cinderella as a tired peasant girl.

4. *Aspoestertjie*. 1982. 'n Sprokie van die Grimm-broers, oorvertel deur Linda Rode met illustrasies deur Bernadette. Verskyn onder die titel *Aschenputtel*. 1977. Mönchaltorf: Nord-Süd Verlag.

The expressionistic painting of Cinderella has an air of tranquility. She is neatly dressed and pictured in a middle-class, quite modern looking home.

5. *Cinderella; or, The Little glass slipper*. 1972. Charles Perrault. Illustrated by Errol le Cain. London: Faber & Faber.

Cinderella is a picture of grace and femininity. The beautifully composed scene has an aura of elegance and charm and is filled with a wealth of detail. Every object in the kitchen has been painted with the greatest care.

6. *Cinderella and the little glass slipper*. 1971. By Bernadette Watts. London: Franklik Watts.

The superbly executed picture of Cinderella in rich colours gives a completely different version of the little ash girl.

7. *Prince Cinders*. 1987. By Babette Cole. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Here we have a contemporary Prince Cinders who was not much of a prince, because he was small, spotty, scruffy and skinny. He had three big hairy brothers who were always teasing him about his looks. They spent their time going to the palace disco with princess girlfriends and made Prince Cinders stay behind to clear up after them.

8. *The Starlight cloak*. 1993. Jenny Nimmo. Illustrated by Justin Todd. London: Harper Collins.

Oona, the youngest daughter of an Irish King is shown carrying frozen branches up the winding staircase of their castle.

9. *Rainbow warrior's bride*. 1981. By Marcus Crouch. Illustrated by William Stobbs. London: Pelham Books.

Originally published in 1884 as "The Invisible one" in *Algonquin legends of New England*. A collection of the myths and folklore of the Micmac, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes.

The beauty of Marcus Crouches' illustrations evoke the mystery and magic of Native American culture. The illustrations depict a village typical of that period.

10. *Chinye, a West African folktale*. 1994. Retold by Obi Onyefulu. Illustrated by Evie Safarewicz. London: Frances Lincoln.

Far removed from her European namesakes, this West African Cinderella is shown working in the garden and fetching water in a lush African forest.

11. *Alex and the glass slipper*. 1991. Written and illustrated by Amanda Graham. Flinders Park: Keystone Books.

Alex was the kitchen hand at the Flinders' Cellars restaurant. He was a hard and honest worker and it was not long before the chefs took advantage of this. Besides peeling the potatoes and washing the dishes, Alex also had to wash and press the two chefs' uniforms.

### **Birds to the rescue**

In the Grimm's version of Cinderella, she is given an impossible task in order to delay her so she will not be able to attend the ball. Through magic intervention birds flock in to help her pick up lentils/peas/stones.

12. *Cinderella*. 1978. Illustrated by Svend Otto S. Translated by Anne Rogers. London: Pelham Books. First published in Denmark by Glydendal in 1978 as *Askepot*.

A fragile Danish Cinderella watches as the birds help to pick lentils from the ashes and put them in the bowl.

13. "Cinderella" in *Grimm's fairy tales*. Illustrated by Pauline Ellison. Selected and introduced by Richard Adams. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul:34–41.

A Flemish Cinderella helps the birds to pick up the lentils. The illustration is filled with a wealth of detail capturing the earthiness of 15th century farmhouse kitchen.

14. *Aspoestertjie*. 1988. Verteller: Roelf van Rensburg. Illustrasies: Agusti Asensio. – 1991. Parramo'n Ediciones, Spanje. Afrikaanse uitgawe. Pretoria: J.P. van der Walt.

In this modern Spanish version, Cinderella gets help from birds to hang the washing so that she will be finished with her chores and be able to go to the ball.

### **The ugly sisters**

15. *Aspoestertjie*. 1990. Deur Charles Perrault. Vertaal en geïllustreer deur Diane Goode. Kaapstad: Anansi. Oorspronklik uitgegee onder die titel *Cinderella*. 1988. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Diane Goode dresses the ugly sisters in beautiful dresses, showing the humour and elegance of 17th century France.

16. *Cinderella; or, The Little glass slipper*. 1972. Charles Perrault. Illustrated by Errol le Cain. London: Faber & Faber.

The beautiful glassware on the dressing table and the elegant gown worn by the ugly sister is typical of nobility of the 15th century.

17. *Cinderella*. 1981. Illustrated by Moira Kemp. London: Hamish Hamilton.

The ugly sisters are depicted in a style suggestive of period Flemish art.

18. *Chinye, a West African folktale*. 1994. Retold by Obi Onyefulu. Illustrated by Evie Safarewicz. London: Frances Lincoln.

The ugly sisters are wearing colourful African clothing and accessories.

19. *Rainbow warrior's bride*. 1981. By Marcus Crouch. Illustrated by William Stobbs. London: Pelham Books.

Two ugly sisters cut the hair of Soft Breeze, the Native American Cinderella.

20. *Die Aspoester-meisie*. 1993. Deur Rafe Martin. Illustrasies deur David Shannon. Kaapstad: Anansi. Oorspronklik uitgegee onder die titel *The Rough-face girl*. 1992. New York: G.P. Putnam.

Two ugly sisters from the Algonquin Red Indian tribe are beautifully dressed in colourful traditional clothing.

## The shoe fitting scene

21. *Aspoestertjie*. 1990. Deur Charles Perrault. Vertaal en geïllustreer deur Diane Goode. Kaapstad: Anansi. Oorspronklik uitgegee onder die titel *Cinderella*. 1988. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

The illustration shows the verve and grandeur so typical of the Baroque style.

22. *Cinderella and the little glass slipper*. 1971. By Bernadette Watts. London: Franklin Watts.

The simplicity of this shoe fitting scene stands in complete contrast to the illustration in the previous work. We see a peasant girl trying on the magic shoe.

23. *Cinderella*. 1981. Illustrated by Moira Kemp. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Moira Kemp captures the earthiness of 16th century village life, reminiscent of a Bruegel painting.

24. *Prince Cinders*.

A modern Princess Lovelypenny decreed that she will marry whoever fits the trousers lost by the prince who saved her from being eaten by the big, hairy monkey.

## Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that folklore is virtually indestructable. We have Cinderella stories today to make use of and to enjoy as we think best, yet we need to retain a sense of respect for and responsibility towards them. What others, in future ages, may, in their turn come to find in them and get out of them, is in their hands (Adams 1981:11).

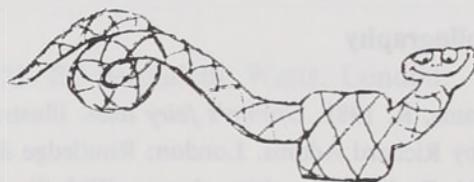
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# The Implications for humour in children's literature,

with particular reference to the contemporary  
South African situation

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## Introduction

Humour may be defined as that quality of action, speech or writing, which excites amusement, or the faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing (Sutherland ... *et al* 1991:966). To be able to see humour in a situation is to add a dimension to experience; to find a thing funny is to remove the threat from that thing; to be able to laugh is to find a way of moving away from pain.

Sigmund Freud (1985:428–429), in his essay on Humour, commented on some of the characteristics to be attributed to it:

Like jokes and the comic, humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation ... The grandeur ... clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's vulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure.

Writing for children in South Africa is still a fairly new phenomenon, with relatively few books having been published in English, the number of publications having risen from just a handful to approximately 100 a year in the last part of the 20th century (Jenkins 1993:1). Even this small number has been difficult to sustain in view of the limited readership consequent upon socio-historical circumstances, but there is an increasing desire to achieve a truly South African literary voice.

In the past South African literature has been seen mainly through white eyes. In many cases nature and the environment has provided subject matter, as has also the cultural heritage of the black in the form of folktales. The criticism that such literature has been colonial in nature is not without foundation, and one of our best-known writers, Es'kia Mphahlele has stated:

I appreciate that there is a dearth of reading material for our children. What exists conveys most unwholesome images as the focus is mostly on the nurturing of the white child and is condescending towards other races.<sup>1</sup>

Another thing is that South Africa and its literature are presently in states of change and development. South African writers for children have, from early on, attempted to find an authentic voice by “doing the South African thing”. Unfortunately they have been involved in a Catch-22 situation. For historical reasons most South African writers to date have been white, and have brought European attitudes into their writing. What is regarded as colonialism is widespread, and it only now that South African writers are beginning to express themselves with relevance, in the language of their choice, under the influence of such writers as Ngugi wa 'Thiongo, Njabulo Ndebele and Es'kia Mphahlele. This attitude has been supported by Nadine Gordimer, who has commented on the desirability of social realism in the novel.

It is not difficult to understand therefore that humour, which is a relatively new phenomenon in children's literature anywhere, is not a priority in South African children's literature at the present time. It is worthwhile, however, to consider the phenomenon of humour in children's literature, and attempt to assess its importance for South Africa.

### **Humour in children's books**



To determine what children find funny is not an easy thing, and the adult has to approach this subject with humility, for the passage of time tends to dull memory of the past.

It is averred that appreciation of humour probably begins at the age of seven or eight ( *Horn book sampler* 1959:152), before which age the child has difficulty in differentiating between fantasy and reality. The consequence of this is that episodes such as that in which Alice falls down the rabbit hole would appear exciting rather than fantastic.

From about the age of seven the ability for differentiation grows, and the child is entranced with practical jokes and various types of coarseness. Bawden (1994:5) comments that

until they become sophisticated adolescents, children laugh at the same awful jokes they always did. Bottoms, farts and belches, the very thought of a teacher – or the Queen – going to the lavatory, can guarantee hysteria.

It has been ascertained that older children do not look so often for funny books: they prefer humour *in* the book itself, whether this be in school stories, family stories or fairy tales. But it seems that humour must be a part of the totality of the book, and not simply for its own sake.

Children delight in slapstick but, like anything else that is written for them, it must be spontaneous and honest. Children are indefatigable judges of honesty, and will not tolerate being spoken down to. It is for this reason that Billy Bunter and Anstey's *Vice Versa* have not moved into the contemporary child's reading sphere, whereas the Gauls smashing up the Romans in *Asterix* never fails to inspire mirth.

Absurdity also goes down very well. A warm favourite here is Norman Hunter's Professor Branestawm, whose incredible adventures rely on absurd machines, or the stereotypical absent-mindedness of Branestawm. Perhaps the fact that we are now clearly in the Age of Technology is a factor in the popularity of these books. Take for example the episode in "The Pancake Day at Great Pagwell", when the pancake machine runs amok:

The Professor struggled out of his pancake just in time for another one to drop over him. Two pancakes were on the clock, four were draped over the light. The Mayor was eating his way through a complete set of pancakes of varying sizes that had fallen in front of him. The four firemen put their helmets on and brandished their axes, but only succeeded in smashing two cups, one saucer and the sugar basin. Mrs Flittersnoop put her head gingerly out from under the table and was immediately gummed to the carpet by a three-foot pancake two inches thick, that had just shot out (Hunter 1979:123).

## Wit

Children also like wit, particularly when there is a nonsense aspect to it. Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll and, on the more contemporary scene, Shel Silverstein, are masters of this aspect of humour.

### *Edward Lear*

Edward Lear who was, at another level of his creativity a superb painter, produced some of the most charming nonsense in the English language, including poems such as “The Owl and the pussycat”, limericks, and nonsense recipes. These, together with his naive illustrations, continue to provide a source of joy for both child and adult reader. His first *Book of nonsense* was published in 1846, and his *Nonsense songs and stories* in 1871. His characters, for example the Pobble who has no toes, the Dong with the luminous nose, and the adorable Owl and Pussy-cat, who eat slices of quince with a runcible spoon and dance to the light of the moon, are unforgettable.

### *Lewis Carroll – Nonsense logic*

Lewis Carroll, whose real name was Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, is the master of nonsense logic in English literature. Although the Alice books – *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking glass* are not the only ones he wrote, they are certainly the most famous.

Lewis Carroll was, in fact, an acclaimed mathematician who lectured at Christ Church, Oxford. (The story is told that Queen Victoria was so captivated by *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland* that she asked Dodgson to send her his next book, which he

did – a mathematical treatise). Many readers (and this includes myself) have found the Alice books more pleasing at a later stage. If young children are to enjoy them they will probably do so because an adult has read the books aloud to them, in which case episodes such as the baby turning into a pig, or the Cheshire cat disappearing – all but for its grin – will be seen as fun and laughable.

Carroll's books incorporate various aspects of humour, including fantasy, absurdity and verbal wit, of which he was an undisputed master. The poem "Jabberwocky" contains a number of "portmanteau" words, which are best described by the character Humpty Dumpty as having two meanings packed up into one word, and produced by saying two words simultaneously. "Brillig", for example, is made of the words "bright" and "light", and the other strange words in the poem (some of which can be seen in the following stanza), are constituted according to the same rule:

Twas brillig and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.  
(*Through the looking glass*, chapter 1.)

It could be suggested that Carroll's nonsense logic is peculiarly valid for the present day, when values are so uncertain and relative. Both in the Alice books and the contemporary world it is difficult to assign precision, and words can change their meanings. Again Humpty Dumpty has something to say in this respect:

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

And herein lies a whole deep philosophy of linguistics and life.

## **Animal characters**

The presence of animal characters in stories follows an ancient tradition. Even in the Bible it is possible to find Balaam's ass, who talks like a human being, and the Fables of Aesop, the first collection of which was made by Demetrius of Phalerum about 320 BC, is filled with talking animals.

One of the best-known and popular animal characters of the 20th century, who live and speak like human beings, is Winnie-the-Pooh. The Pooh books were written by AA Milne for his son, Christopher Robin. The first were poetry books – *When we were very young* and *Now we are six*.

The characters have all too human traits and failings. Pooh is a happy-go-lucky bear of "little brain", who is so addicted to honey that he consumes a quantity guaranteed to expand his girth so that he is unable to get through the door of Rabbit's house. Owl the verbose, Piglet the nervous, Eeyore the depressed, Kanga the caring, Roo – who likes everything until he has tried it – and all the other characters, belong to and are subservient to Christopher Robin. This omnipotence on Christopher Robin's part is valuable for children who can relate to it and thus also feel their own powers.

## **Richmal Crompton – The human element**

There would be an inadequacy in children's literature if all the characters were animals. So it is that, to the great joy of those brought up on *William*, Richmal

Crompton's books are currently experiencing a come-back and a new wave of popularity.

William Brown is a dirty-faced, sock-becrumped boy, of the sort acceptable before sexism reared its head. When I was a girl there was no literary character I loved more, and I would sincerely hope that the children of today would permit themselves to feel similarly.

Nina Bawden, author of serious books such as *Carrie's war*, feels the same way, having been confused by her own children's lack of interest in William, who takes life very seriously from his own point of view, and cannot understand why adults so seldom agree with him. Bawden (1994:5) comments:

I hope my grandchildren will enjoy them, although I remember that when I pressed them on my own children, they didn't find them funny. (This had puzzled me until I compared the nice new editions I had bought them with my own battered originals, and found they had been bowdlerized. Most of William's long, philosophical soliloquies had been deleted, losing, as a result, the whole essence of the comedy.)

It is important for the purposes of this essay to understand that William lives in a time of stress – World War II. Although, living in an English village, he does not undergo the trauma foisted on the less fortunate children of his era, the war has nonetheless a reality for him.

In one instance he and his chums (the Outlaws) set themselves up as archers, with a view to protecting their country from the enemy. It just so happens that military maneuvers are set up in the village, and General Bastow, in charge of these, is construed by the Outlaws as being an enemy agent and therefore fair game. The Outlaws decide to get his map from him, thereby confusing the maneuvers:

General Bestow, walking peaceably down the road studying his map as he went, was amazed to see a boy suddenly scramble up out of the ditch by the roadside. A moment later he was still more amazed to receive the full force of the boy's bullet-head in his stomach, and to be forced by its sheer iron weight into a sitting posture in the dust. For a moment physical agony blinded him to everything but the outrage committed by that dastardly boy upon his digestive organs. Then his vision cleared. He found his map gone and a boy disappearing on the horizon. It was not General Bastow's habit to receive any outrage sitting down (except as in this case inadvertently). With a roar of fury he set off in pursuit, less in order to recover his map (of which he had other copies) than in order to inflict condign punishment upon the person of his assault. But it was not for nothing that William was pursued regularly and unfailingly by all the local farmers. William's life had perforce been largely spent in throwing off pursuers.

... "Well," chuckled (William) "now they'll be in a nice fix. They jolly well won't know what to do without the map. They won't know where they are or anything."  
(“William and the archers”, in *William the good* [London: George Newness, 1935])

### **Mark Twain – Realistic humour**

Mark Twain (pseudonym for Samuel L Clemens) has been accused of racism, but on this I would like to take issue. The “nigger” Jim is one of the most human characters in American fiction, and the term “nigger” is not so much pejorative as one in use at the time.

*Huckleberry Finn* (1884), acknowledged by many as the definitive American novel, is not clearly intended for children, whereas *Tom Sawyer* (1886), is.

Tom is friendly with Huck, son of the town drunkard. Together the two have some exciting adventures, and eventually come into a fortune as a result. The important fact of the book is not so much the adventures, as the humour. An

incomparable episode occurs when Tom, set to whitewashing the fence by way of punishment, manages to get the job done by all his friends, who actually pay him to do it. The philosophy emerges that what one *has* to do is work, whereas what one *wants* to do is play.

### **Maurice Sendak – The wild world**

Maurice Sendak is undoubtedly the finest artist/writer of children's fiction in the Western world. His books are captivating, compelling, and replete with humour tinged with sadness.

His best-known book is the 1964 Caldecott prize-winner, *Where the wild things are*, in which Max is accused of being a “wild thing” by his mother, on account of his noisy ebullience. His retort, “I’ll eat you up”, results in his being sent to his room, where he vaults into the imaginary kingdom of the Wild Things. They proclaim him their leader, and a massive frolic begins. Eventually Max is obliged to leave his wild “subjects” and return to his room, where a hot supper awaits him.

This delightful book latches into the fears and frustrations of the young child, and demonstrates the restorative power of the imagination.

### **Humour and South African children's literature**

The writers and books discussed above are simply a few amongst many who have contributed to humour in children's literature. All of them emanate from either

the American or the English situation. The question arises as to whether South African children would find them relevant, or appreciate their humour. This is not easy to answer. It would be advantageous if research were done in this area.

There are doubtless many children who would appreciate the humour, but South Africa is a highly complex society, and it is neither possible nor desirable to attempt to fit all its children into one mould. The strength of South Africa lies in its diversity: its children come in different forms, and from different cultures and backgrounds, and it is almost a truism that humour tends to be culture-specific. There are 11 official languages, apart from those imported from Europe and Asia. There are different religions, different educational and socio-economic standards, and people live at various levels, from the first world to the third world. In the former I have heard children talking seriously about fairies whilst, in the latter (a stretchchild's environment), I have listened to pre-adolescent children making jokes about female genitalia. The differences can be extreme, and it is clear that there is no single humour that will raise the mirth of all.

It must not be denied, however, that humour fulfils a valuable function in life. There are those in South Africa, particularly from the disadvantaged sectors, who deem that humour is frivolous and irrelevant, and that social reality demands a more serious view of life. This attitude does not take into account the healing qualities of humour.

Laughter provides a release from tension and, in a society – nay, in a world – fraught with tension and suffering, this is most necessary. Freud's view that humour has something liberating and elevating about it should not be forgotten.

It is now accepted in literary circles in South Africa that the time for protest literature has passed. The old order has given way to the new, and now is the time for reconstruction and development. And what better way than through laughter?

There is indeed a need for books for our youth that portray social realism: the ills of society, the sadness of poverty and homelessness; the inability to attain empowerment. But there is also a need for our youth to gain release through laughter – as William did during World War II, As Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn and Jim did when confronted by the social inequities of the deep South, as Max the ebullient did when having to deal with the prospect of punishment.

This is the time for our writers to draw upon the well-springs of humour, in order to offer the gift of laughter and creative imagination to the children of South Africa.

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1 Personal correspondence



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# Children's books in African languages:

an overview

Johan Lenake

African people in general are regarded as poor readers. This might be true to some extent and the reasons might be as follows: most of them have to rise early in the morning to go to work, travelling long distances of between 20 to 65 km, work the whole day, at times doing manual labour, late in the afternoon they have to travel back home, get there late and tired, eat and sleep.

Those who have been to school have read most of the books available and do not feel like reading them again after leaving school. Until recently the libraries in most townships were poorly stocked and in rural towns there were no libraries at all. About 80 percent of the libraries in the Free State, for example, were built between 1990 to 1994.

With regard to children's books the position is as follows: In Southern Sotho the first school readers were written by the missionaries. Franz wrote *Mmulakgoro* for Sub B (second year at school), Germond published *Paliso tsa Sesotho* (1939) (Sesotho Readers) for Standards 1 to 4 (third to sixth year at school). In 1942 the Khabele brothers published *Beisang mabeoana* for Standards 1 to 4 (1946). Maile wrote *Re tswela pele* for Standards 1 to 4 (1946). In the early 50s the three

Engelbrecht brothers wrote *Matima-Lenyora* – Sub A to Standard 6 (first to eighth year at school). Most of the stories contained in these readers are almost the same as those in the Lente-reeks (Afrikaans readers). Malie, who is the fourth author, might have translated the stories. Thejane and Engelbrecht published *Ntataise* – Sub A – Standard 6 in 1955. Moiloa and Nteo published *Mmulakgoro* – Sub A – Standard 6 in the 60s. Of all these readers, only *Ntataise* and *Matima-Lenyora* are still read in all the Sesotho schools. In 1989 Lenake and Moeketsi published *Mapetle* – Sub A to Standard 5.

Apart from these readers, there are no other children's books besides translations. Most translations were done in the 80s and early 90s. The following publishers seem to be leading in this field: HAUM-Daan Retief, De Jager-HAUM and Educum. Translations cover seven African languages, namely Sesotho, Setswana, Sesotho sa Leboa, isiZulu, isiXhosa, Tshivenda and Sitsonga.

Translations in these languages were done by mother-tongue speakers who are knowledgeable, but here and there one finds some problems. In our languages we have the problem of sounds that differ in pronunciation such as “ng”, “g”, “tsh” in Sotho and “tj” in Zulu. In Zulu and Xhosa the “ng” is not a single phoneme, whereas in Sotho it is a single phoneme. There is a book which won a prize, entitled *Songololo*. This is a Xhosa word for a millipeet, and is pronounced “Son-go-lo-lo”. The book is also translated into Setswana, but the translator forgot that in Setswana “ng” is a single phoneme, pronounced “Songolo-lo”. This to a Motswana child is meaningless. The sound “g” is also problematic. In Zulu and Xhosa it is a voiced sound, for example “ugogo” (granny). In Setswana and Northern Sotho its pronounced softly, “go bona” (to see) and “ugogo” is “koko”. “Gogo” in *Songololo* is wrong. “Gogo” is a bogeyman to frighten children.

Another problem that most translators encounter, is that of names. Names in African languages have meaning. For happiness we have “Thabo”, “Njabulo”, “Mbulelo” in Sesotho, Ndebele and Xhosa. “Sipho”, “Mpho” in Zulu and Sesotho. If you translate into Sesotho “Sipho” should be “Mpho”.

Some translators also forget to adapt the milieu to suit the readers.

One Motswana translator translated stories meant for the Basotho children where the environment is Qwaqwa and Lesotho with mountains, snow and very cold winters. These things are strange to most Batswana children because they do not occur in their regions.

But on the other hand, we should not be too rigid about the question of environment because as Snyman (1983:61) rightly states:

Daar word dikwels uitsprake gemaak soos: die stadskind sal hierdie verhaal nie begryp of geniet nie, of Kleurling – of Swartkinders kan nie identifiseer met Witmense nie, of die kind uit 'n minder gegoede buurt het stories nodig uit soortgelyke omstandighede, of wat sal ons kinders hê aan 'n verhaal uit die Viktoriaanse tyd, hulle weet tog niks daarvan nie.

(Often pronouncements are made like: the city child will not understand or enjoy this story, or coloured or black children cannot identify with white people, or the child from a less affluent neighbourhood needs stories from similar circumstances, or what would our children get out of a story from Victorian times, they do not know anything about it after all.)

Snyman goes further and indicates how children react when you converse with them, watch their movements in the library, how they react when told a certain story. To her children's literature is international and children behave in a similar manner throughout the whole world.

Earlier I indicated that most translations were done by mother-tongue speakers. There was, however, a period when some nonmother tongue speakers also tried their hand at translations. In one case the translations were done hurriedly and so badly that the translator was threatened with court action. Another translator who thought that he knows our languages set out to translate some of Dick Bruna's books. These books are an indication of how contemptuous the translator is towards African languages: the titles are wrong and literal, the sentence construction is hopeless, spelling mistakes abound, the tense, concords, punctuation are all wrong, for example

Nkgelli ke borakana *ya* mahlo  
a matsho o ka re ke mosidi  
ho tloha hloohong yo ya *maoto*  
ke e *tshootho*.

Ha a na lerata

Hoseng ha nkgelli  
a dutse a shebela ntle  
a bona mosajana a eme  
a bonala a swabile

A matha ka ntle kapele  
A mo botsa hore molate keng

Nkgelli, ngwanana wa ka o  
lahlehetswe –  
O ne a le kwano honajwale!

Nkgelli ke borakana *bo* mahlo  
a matsho a kang mosidi  
ho tloha hloohong ho ya *maotong*  
e sootho.

ha e na lerata

Ke hoseng, nkgelli  
o dutse o shebile ka ntle,  
o bona mosetsana a eme,  
mme a tadimeha a hloname

Bo mathela ka ntle  
bo mmotsa hore molato keng

Nkgelli, ngwanana o  
lahlehile –  
O ne a le mona hona tjena!

The series is meant for the children from six to nine years of age and the aim is to teach them to read and appreciate the language. But how can a child appreciate a book with so many mistakes: wrong sentences, words which do not occur in the language, wrong concords, et cetera. To date these books are found in most of our libraries – public and school libraries – and apparently they are there to stay.

Another common problem found in translations is literal translation. In the two books published by Educum, the names *Bongani* and *Vuyo* are taken as they are from Zulu and Xhosa, whereas their Sesotho equivalents are *Teboho* and *Thabo*. The translation itself is fair, but here and there one encounters literal translation and foreign words ... “ke se nahannweng ke moshanyana” for “the boy thought”; “ya fofela e tobile ho Vuyo” for “ya fofa e tobile Vuyo”; “o ne a na le mohau” for “o ne a le mohau”.

Despite the few negative ideas indicated above, translations play a vital role in children’s books in the nine African languages of the Republic of South Africa. The publishers who appear to have published a sizeable number of translations in these languages are HAUM-de Jager and HAUM-Daan Retief. The books translated from English and Afrikaans texts cover fiction and nonfiction on a variety of topics: animals, birds, insects, parts of the human body, wild life, adventures, folktales, et cetera.

In the past few decades some language committees and boards were not in favour of translations. The idea is characterised by the few translations found in almost all the African languages: in 1983 for example, translated works numbered a mere 30. This was despite the fact that translation commenced

immediately after the arrival of the missionaries in the 19th century. Among the 30 works we have mentioned, the one which played a decisive role in vernacular literature, was John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Swanepoel (in Gerard 1983:61) has this to say about translation:

Bunyan's work foreshadowed two additional complementary features of vernacular literature in this region: the role translation would play in initiating creative writing, and the appearance of a so-called "rambling character" in novels with rather episodic structures.

Swanepoel's view is relevant to the many translations of children's books produced by the quoted companies. This is further supported by Snyman's comments on the initial attitudes on translations of Afrikaans children's books:

Eerstens word gesê dat die kind nie boeke met 'n vreemde agtergrond sal begryp nie. Tweedens word aangevoer dat vertalings die Afrikaanse skrywer "dooddruk" (Snyman 1983:76).

(Firstly, it is said that the child will not understand books with a strange or foreign background. Secondly, the opinion is expressed that translations "squeeze the life out of" the Afrikaans writer.)

Snyman (1983:76–77) concludes as follows about the two statements:

Albei hierdie argumente is uiters kortsigtig ... die feit dat die kind nie aan die historiese werklikheid gebonde is nie, is teoreties uitgewerk en prakties getoets. In die praktyk is dit verder 'n bekende feit dat die kinderliteratuur in 'n baie groot mate internasionaal is.

(Both these arguments are extremely short-sighted ... the fact that the child is not bound to historical realities has been theoretically developed and practically tested. Furthermore, in practice it is a well-known fact that children's literature is, to a very large extent, international.)

But despite all the good work the publishers did for our languages, they had very serious problems: first they had to tender to the former Department of Education

and Training, have the translations done and processed to the stage of an almost complete book. The manuscripts were then submitted to the Department who in turn submitted them to the various committees and language boards for their perusal and acceptance, and only then the publishers were informed to go ahead with the publication or the manuscripts were rejected. In an effort to cater for all publishers or give each one a slice of the cake, each publisher was allowed a certain quota of the books to publish.

With regard to the literacy of the author there is no question. But a question could be posed on the competence or training of authors. Here a lot is still to be done. Before a manuscript can finally be printed for example, it has to go through the hands of a few reviewers and finally an editor who at times almost has to rewrite the manuscript for the author. This process we may refer to a reshaping. Reshaping may also include texts produced by anonymous authors such as folktales, myths and legends, or texts collected by researchers by means of tape recordings or consulting archives.

Reshaping may be done in three ways. Jason (1988) states the following:

#### **(a) Upgrading**

Where works are improved so as to fit the need of a higher social class or modern trends. Today we have the radio and television which seem to have taken over the role of the old story tellers around the evening fires. For such stories to survive the modern onslaught, they ought to be upgraded and edited in such a way that they will be readily accepted by the audience they are meant for.

### **(b) Downgrading**

In downgrading works are retold in a simplified manner for a lower social class, semi-literates or children. Examples of such downgrading are found in the study guides for schools on some classical works such as those of Shakespeare and other well-known English authors. In the case of our folktales, downgrading may have a degrading effect on such tales because of over simplification and depriving them of their distinctive features which mark their peculiarities when matched against other types of literary works. Examples of such watered down tales are those of "Mabuya" and "Khati" in Zulu, and "Moilola" in Southern Sotho.

### **(c) Compiling**

Compiling an anthology from the various works is another way the author may employ to produce a work of literary art.

Compilation of such anthologies has the great advantage of giving the readers a bird's eye view of the literary gems found in a particular language. This forces the reader to want to know more about other works of the authors whose texts are contained in the anthology.

In conclusion, the diversity of the population groups holds a lot of good for all of us: we can learn a lot from the various languages and cultures which in turn will enrich us all spiritually and in our knowledge. In the new South Africa this can only bring happiness and satisfaction to everyone.

The notion that books by African authors in the vernaculars are written for school children, appears to be a myth and is not supported by the necessary research data. It is a mere public opinion.

We further referred with regret to the few unfortunate translations which filtered through into our libraries and hopefully the concerned institutions will look into the matter seriously and put the record straight.

Our gratitude goes to the publishers who have done meritorious work in the translation of the English and Afrikaans texts into our languages, and maintained the same standard throughout. We hope that the other publishers will follow their example.



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# Children's books in African languages:

translations, adaptations or new materials

denise diamond



How many African Language Children's Books, WRITTEN BY MOTHER-TONGUE SPEAKERS have you seen in the past 10 years? 100, 50, 10, five, one? I sound a bit like Abraham reasoning with God about the number of righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah BUT the fact is that you would probably have to answer five or even one. I have not been able to find even one actual Children's Book. Juta has published some anthologies at about Standard 5/6 (school year 7/8) level.

"But," you may say, "what about all the African Language titles one sees around? Where do they come from?" They are mostly direct translations of works originally written in English or Afrikaans with some retellings or adaptations.

Accurate research does not seem to be available (happily Jay Heale has started on this) but the following table will give you an idea of the situation.

## Current state of affairs

### *Estimated Figures*

Original works in African languages	5?
Direct translations of local materials	400? : 40 books in 9 or 10 languages
Adaptations of local materials.	150? : 15 books in 9 or 10 languages.
Translations/adaptations of overseas imports	200? : 20 books in 9 or 10 languages
Children's books in English written by African language mother-tongue speakers	20?

What about the rest of Africa? I quote Chinua Achebe: "Let me make a plea to every serious writer in Africa to make a commitment to African children of at least two stories." I have not been able to ascertain whether he stuck to his commitment to write in African Languages but was happy to see at this conference that Tanzania has a Children's Book Project in kiSwahili. They are aiming to publish 220 children's books by the end of 1996.

The books are simply produced – certainly not the glossy, high cost titles we consider to be children's books BUT they are there and can be utilised by children, teachers, librarians and parents. Funding was obtained from organisations like DANIDA and SIDA and this avenue must be investigated by Southern African publishers.

Let us look at translations and adaptations. As a publisher I can assure you that there is no such thing as a simple translation or even a direct translation. There

are many pitfalls in producing translations and most of these apply to adaptations as well.

1. The lack of suitably qualified people: They are expected to not only know both the relevant languages BUT they must keep the level of the translation or adaptation consistent with the original.
2. It is imperative that the idiom of the original language is understood by the translator/adapter. I always think of the lovely Afrikaans idioms used to describe a person who has had too much to drink: hy loop twee rye spore; hy is hoog in die takke (literal English translations: he walks two rows of tracks; he is high in the branches) – imagine what direct translations of such idioms would produce. The reverse also applies, the African Languages have wonderful idioms but the meaning could be totally lost in the translation process.
3. Translations/adaptations should be accompanied by the artwork to avoid problems.

In the past materials have been produced mainly by white women. Is this necessarily wrong? I am not saying that. In fact, as an example, the author of more than 15 South African children's books which were translated into African Languages, Rosalie Liguori-Reynolds grew up on a farm near Ladybrand in the Free State and speaks Southern Sotho fluently. If she writes about dinosaur prints in the Malutis, you can go and check – they will be there. Bronwyn Jones of Itemba Publishers, goes to the area where her stories take place and takes the illustrator with her, sometimes for three weeks, in order to obtain authenticity.

But, are mother-tongue speakers writing children's book materials at all, and if they are, why are they not being published? Well, Damaria Senne submitted a title in Setswana to us and it received very good reviewer's reports but when it came to costing the title, we realised that it would not be viable. In fact, the only way in which we could make such a project work would be to have it translated into English and then retold in three or four other African languages and run them all together with black plate changes. Even then, one would merely break even or possibly show a small profit. It is, however, imperative that these authors be published which will encourage other mother-tongue speakers to attempt children's books in their own languages.

Amanda Steyn of Van Schaik's tells me they are publishing a Venda Children's Book BUT it is a speculative "trial".

An additional avenue of new material, is the bilingual and multilingual route. The first few attempts were not very good but of late I have seen some very promising materials in this field.

The illustrators of a children's book can make or break it and it is heartening to see that more and more black artists are illustrating books often lending ingenious nuances to complement the texts.

In line with the Conference theme "Other Worlds, Other Lives" we need to ask: "What about the marvellous children's books which are produced overseas? Are we going to deprive our children of such books because of bias? Is the reading of such books not exactly how one learns about the wide world?" I have some

examples here – our children would surely love the pop-up or “window” books. This could also encourage reading, which is a separate issue.

This example: *On the move* sells for R9.95. If we were to do adaptations, they would sell for R15 but if we were to produce a similar book from scratch, it would probably sell at R35. There is the question of whether South African printers can produce books requiring dye-cutting and other techniques but “where there’s a will, there’s a way”.

The following is an example of costs involved in producing local titles versus imported titles.

**Comparison of pre-press costs**

		<i>Artwork</i>	<i>Cover</i>	
Imported title	32 page	Colour	Limp	R5 940
Local title	32 page	Black & White	Hard	R15 818

You will note that the prepress costs on the imported title are quite low. One would probably be paying a 17 percent licensing fee but this would almost be offset by the author’s royalties.

Translations, adaptations or new materials? I am sure there is room for all three cases as outlined in the following table.

## Ways forward

Direct translations of local materials	Rarely – maybe dictionaries
Direct translations of overseas titles	Yes – dictionaries
Adaptations of local materials	Yes – cost effective to run 11 languages with plate changes
Adaptations of overseas materials	Yes – access to marvellous books
New works	To be encouraged – using local artists – publishers to find cost effective ways

Whichever option is chosen, it is essential that we keep publishing children's books while trying to ensure that they will be not only educationally sound, but provide a lot of fun.

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