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You Anything: Postmodernism, Self-

Referentiality, and The Stinky Cheese Man.


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 **"If You Read This Last Sentence, It Won't Tell You Anything": Postmodernism, Self-Referentiality, and *The Stinky Cheese Man***

Deborah Stevenson

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"If You Read This Last Sentence, It Won't Tell You Anything":
Postmodernism, Self-Referentiality, and *The Stinky*

Cheese Man

Deborah Stevenson (bio)

Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992) is the classic postmodern picture book. Its self-referential irony, in both text and illustration, descends from visual as well as written traditions; the multivalence of its meanings is enhanced by the multiplicity of levels required of children's literature. It exemplifies the picture book as genuine literary innovator while remaining attuned to its child audience.

Traditions of self-referentiality occur, of course, prior to postmodernism, *Tristram Shandy* being the obvious early example. Authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Donald Barthelme, and William Gass, among others, have made this technique into a defining norm of postmodern literature. But while *The Stinky Cheese Man* shares many of the characteristics of adult postmodern literature, such as its parodic and playful text, its embrace of the random and arbitrary, and its questioning of ultimate meaning, these elements appear not because of Jon Scieszka's dedicated study of adult literature but because of the prevalence of these impulses in postmodern culture, particularly popular culture, generally. Literarily, in fact, *The Stinky Cheese Man* owes more to comic pastiches such as *The Monty Python Papperbok*, with its printed fingerprint smudges on the cover, and its ilk than to postmodern adult writers. While Nabokov's *Pale Fire* shares *The Stinky Cheese Man's* attitude to texts, Monty Python shares its attitude to books.

The Stinky Cheese Man places itself more obviously in a tradition by choosing folklore as its playground. Fairy tales have a long history of bearing more than their own weight, as with George Cruikshank's temperance Cinderella and James Thurber's gun-toting Red Riding Hood. The strongest examples of manipulation and irony in children's literature have been folktale variants, including, as Marilyn Fain Apseoff has observed, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by A. Wolf (1989), Scieszka

and Smith's previous book (135-37).

There are several reasons for this use: fairy tales are both legally and emotionally in the public domain, and their history of variance provides an opportunity to make that variation expected and acceptable as well as an implicit subject for every new version. Some of the better-known Grimm and Perrault tales would seem to belong to what John Barth called, in his 1967 article of the same name, "The Literature of Exhaustion," stories whose nonparodic possibilities may be used up. This possibility is supported by the trend in the last few years for major publishers to bring out greater numbers of folklore picture books that treat lesser-known and non-European tales, rather than another nonparodic edition of, say, Snow White. The indisputable vigor of folklore narrative under pressure and manipulation adds to its usefulness; the audience is likely to recognize or at least follow the structure despite substantial alteration. This durability has enabled such tales not only to form the core of editions and retellings aimed at children but also to prompt works for adults ranging from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* to Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*.

Rather than elevating such fairy-tale creatures to the mythic, *The Stinky Cheese Man* reduces them to chess-pieces falling randomly about a previously apparently orderly board. There is no character development—why should there be? Characters might walk off at any moment, as Little Red Running Shorts does, or have their stories crowded out of the book, as happens to The Boy Who Cried Cow Patty. And if, as Jerry Aline Flieger suggests, "the postmodern comic text often adopts the task of exposing all the possible versions or meanings underlying a single narrative, all the while demonstrating the failure of such an exhaustive project," then folktales, with their versions upon versions, are the perfect source material (51). The title of this article, "If you read this last sentence, it won't tell you anything," comes from the last sentence of *The Stinky Cheese Man*'s introduction. None of the book "tells you anything"; at least this sentence in the introduction is candid enough to say...

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by Deborah Stevenson

Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith's *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1992) is the classic postmodern picture book. Its self-referential irony, in both text and illustration, descends from visual as well as written traditions; the multiplicity of its meanings is enhanced by the multiplicity of levels required of children's literature. It extrapolates the picture book as genuine literary innovation while remaining attuned to its child audience.

Traditions of self-referentiality occur, of course, prior to postmodernism, *Thruwart Shandy* being the obvious early example. Authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Donald Barthelme, and William S. Burroughs, among others, have made this technique into a defining norm of postmodern literature. But while *The Stinky Cheese Man* shares many of the characteristics of adult postmodern literature, such as its parodic and playful text, its embrace of the random and arbitrary, and its questioning of ultimate meaning, these elements appear not because of Jon Scieszka's dedicated study of adult literature but because of the prevalence of these impulses in postmodern culture, particularly popular culture, generally. Literally, in fact, *The Stinky Cheese Man* owes more to comic pastiches such as *The Monty Python Paperback*, with its printed fingerprint smudges on the cover, and its ilk than to postmodern adult writers. While Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* shares *The Stinky Cheese Man's* attitude to texts, Monty Python shares its attitude to books.

The Stinky Cheese Man places itself more obviously in a tradition by choosing folklore as its playground. Fairy tales have a long history of bearing more than their own weight, as with George Cruikshank's temperance *Cinderella* and James Thurber's gun-toting Red Riding Hood. The strongest examples of manipulation and irony in children's literature have been folk tale variants, including, as Marilyn Fain Appeloff has observed, *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf* (1989). Scieszka and Smith's previous book (135-37).

There are several reasons for this use: fairy tales are both legible and amenable to the public domain, and their history of variance provides an opportunity to make that variation expected and acceptable as well as an implicit subject for every new version. Some of the better-known Grimm and Perrault tales would seem to belong to what John Bank called, in his 1967 article of the same name, "The Literature of Exhaustion," stories whose nonparodic possibilities may be used up. This possibility is supported by the trend in the last few years for major publishers to bring out greater numbers of folk tale picture books that treat lesser-known and non-European tales, rather than another nonparodic edition of, say, *Snow White*. The indisputable vigor of folk tale narrative, under pressure and manipulation adds to its usefulness: the audience is likely to recognize or at least follow the structure despite substantial alteration. This durability has enabled such tales not only to form the core of editions and retellings aimed at children but also to prompt works for adults ranging from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* to Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*.

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The real antecedents of *The Stinky Cheese Man* are entertainment. Postmodernism is steeped in popular art, the visual most strongly of all. The TV generation is creating picture books now; we learned our fairy tales not from yellow-bound collections of Grimm but from *The Bullwinkle Show's* "Fractured Fairy Tales" and Bugs Bunny's high-speed performances. For us, fairy tales are narrative clay, made to be played with and reshaped, with no definitive version possible. Rather than extracting morals, they float the very idea.

Reflexive irony is the hallmark of much contemporary film and television. *The Stinky Cheese Man's* contemporary artistic cousins are *Wayne's World* and *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. In addition to the folk tale variants of Bugs and Bullwinkle, one sees camp and parody in film and television generally, where they appeal not only to older viewers, whose cultural understanding presumably permits an awareness of the parodic point, but also to that postmodern creation, world-weary preteens. Like *The Stinky Cheese Man*, *Mystery Science Theater* and *Wayne's World* draw attention to their own making and artifice, lose their humor not only on the parodied but also the parody, and prove, by the youth of their audiences, that postmodernism is not only an adult phenomenon.

Popular art influences easily into picture books, and perhaps it is the populist nature of postmodernism that has allowed it to affect children's literature so quickly. Television, film, and music videos, far more than books, are the messengers of postmodern culture to young people. It is in this sense that "postmodern" fits a book such as *The Stinky Cheese Man* in that it comes from a tradition of media, such as television, that were born after literature and to a certain extent replace it. Like Jerry Kosinski's *Chance the Gardener* from *Being There*, we like to watch; we do not so much care to read. *The Stinky Cheese Man* puts the watching back into reading.

These "post literate" media have in common with postmodern fiction and children's literature: in general a multi-



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