

A COURSE IN NONSENSE

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YOUR PEA-GREEN GUIDE
TO
NONSENSE LITERATURE

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GLORIOUS NONSENSE

The appeal of the correct and sensible is limited... Sometimes we want the broader picture. Nonsense fills the gap left by sense. Good sense is pertinent, competent and well-balanced, whereas nonsense makes a real effort to be pointless, inept and over the top. Nonsense also fills a gap within humour itself. The bodily functions have always been a major source of inspiration for humour (the primal joke probably involved a fart), but nonsense is more a play on the mechanics of the brain. The best expression of this kind of play is nonsense literature. The genre dreams up ideas and vistas very much outside the box. As the American nonsense poet Dr. Seuss put it, 'Oh, the thinks you can think!'

This book is a guide to such thinks. It is a reader's guide with a simple premise: if you like the works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, you may also like these other poems, stories and plays. These pages will prove that there is more to the English School of Nonsense than Lear and Carroll, and that there are more schools of nonsense than just the English one. The student of nonsense will find that the genre has one serious side effect: it can make you think. Here is Dr. Seuss again, 'I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells.' Much nonsense literature rather looks like philosophy at play, probing the limits of logic and language. Some nonsense was indeed intended as a shortcut to wisdom. Other nonsense, not so much.

This book is not an academic survey but an outreach from one nonsense buff to another. Like me, many fans of the genre will have become stuck after reading and rereading the classics by Lear and Carroll. What to read next? This guide offers a helping hand in finding fine nonsense, from a quietly perplexing poem to robust lunacy in prose. The book's main part is a celebration of a surprisingly wide array of nonsense written in English. This is followed by a scan of the globe for any further nonsensicalities. Nonsense can be heady stuff, so the chapters will be tactfully compact, but each chapter will end with tips for essential reading. It will be a limited selection of in total a hundred or so titles (you only need so much nonsense in your life), but each title has something special to add.

First of all, however, there will be a crash course in nonsense. Learning how to make sense is a standard part of our education, but when it comes to making nonsense we are autodidacts. In the first chapters you can catch up. You too can be pointless!

Apart from Dr. Seuss two more Doctors of Nonsense were inspirational for this guide: Wim Tigges and Michael Heyman.



*Pussy said to the Owl, 'You elegant fowl!
How charmingly sweet you sing!'*

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NONSENSE FOR BEGINNERS

Nonsense is the fourth dimension of literature.

Gelett Burgess

Reading nonsense literature is being tipsy without the bother of drinking first. One writer declared in so many words that this was indeed the effect he was going for. Nonsense poems and stories boggle and blow the mind. Ordinary humorous literature makes fun of some social or literary convention, but nonsense makes fun of every rule in the book – even the rules of humour. The genre is in fact not so much about the routine of making jokes as about rollicking invention. Often it will be exhilarating rather than hilarious. Another writer described nonsense as the ultimate freedom of spirit. Its style is certainly not cramped by logic or grammar, and least of all by the need to make some fatuous point. It shows how imaginative humour can be without the distraction of meaning. Free from the burden of a moral or a message, humour can spread its wings and take us to out-of-the-way places.

Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumbles live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

There is a world of difference between such a magical refrain by Edward Lear and ordinary humour. Ordinary humour is humour-coated sense. It is observational humour, a sideways look at life which can be spot-on. Or it is mockery and satire, a strong opinion in a clown's wig which can be the height of common sense. All very worthwhile, but sometimes this thinly-veiled sense

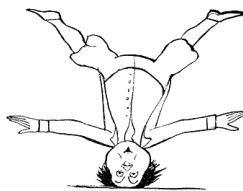
simply will not do. Sometimes we need to purge our soul with senseless fun. Then all we want to hear is the merry din of our brain short-circuiting in a pun or paradox. In such emergencies we turn to nonsense literature.

About now would perhaps be the time to come forward with a definition of nonsense literature which actually *has* a point, but here is a bit of a conundrum. How to pinpoint a genre within rules if it grandly ignores every single one of them? There have been some ingenious attempts at academic precision, but in this consumer's guide we will keep things simple. We will keep our definition down to this little formula: nonsense is a parody of sense. The genre sends up the humdrum rules of reason by being buoyantly out of bounds. It is a play on our dull demand that everything should have a point, from verse to Universe. It is our brain making fun of its own curious habits and limitations. Nonsense literature is a self-parody of our mind.

The genre is nonsensical both in the sense of illogical and pointless. It is quite partial to some of humour's special effects, like pun, parody and paradox, but no single type of joke is unique to it. It is the glorious pointlessness that really sets it apart as a genre. This pointlessness comes with many benefits and bonuses. Some experts feel that precisely by *not* having a point, nonsense may in the end actually *have* one – but we will save that finer point for later.

Bona fide idiocy is much rarer in literature than you might think, but it comes in many forms: nursery rhyme, limerick, quatrain, haiku, ballad, sonnet, alphabet, riddle, proverb, list, catalogue, tall tale, fable, fairy tale, story, sketch, romance, novel, essay, review, report, letter and play. This book will be a parade of all of those. It will also demonstrate that nonsense can give a really fresh perspective on scientific disciplines like linguistics and cosmology, as well as on religion and on spirituality in general. But first now in these opening chapters an outline of the basics, a 'Nonsense for Dummies' if you will. We will home in on those three great resources of nonsense: futility, uselessness and excess.

As babies, one of our earliest and most memorable experiences of hilarity is being held upside-down. Inversion is the mother of nonsense. Through time mankind really had its fun with turning things upside-down.



Drawing by Edward Lear

In the sixteenth century amusing broadsides on the theme of the topsy-turvy world were starting to get published all over Europe. Some of the inversions had a social agenda, with a baron serving his butler tea, but others were purely nonsensical, showing a chair making itself comfortable on top of a struggling lady. This topsy-turvy world, this escape from the clichés of reality, is the central theme of nonsense. One nonsense classic is a trip to a quite literally reversed world, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carroll. Here are some illustrative lines from another famous example, the poem ‘Topsy-Turvy World’ by ‘the laureate of the nursery’ William Brighty Rands (1823-1882).

If the pony rode his master,
If buttercups ate the cows,
If the cat had the dire disaster
To be worried, sir, by the mouse;
If mama, sir, sold the baby
To the gipsy for half a crown;
If a gentleman, sir, was a lady –
The world would be Upside-Down!

A gentleman turning out to be a lady may have become less of a shock, but if there is one constant in this unruly genre it is inversion. Today nonsense writer and film director Woody Allen is so addicted to it that friends call him ‘Allen Woody’. The genre as a whole could indeed be called the flip side of literature. Normally our poems and stories will strive after some sort of significance and coherence. We go for consistency, and end up with clogged brains. Nonsense literature always limits meaning to a safe minimum. The perpetual motion of analytic thought in our head and the whirligig of emotions in our heart are brought to a brisk and beneficial halt. The genre is a reset button for the soul.

*Quadruplicity drinks procrastination.

*Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

It is not so easy to write a decent bit of nonsense. These awkward efforts by two amateurs, the philosopher Bertrand Russell and the linguist Noam Chomsky, make that abundantly clear. How to be perfectly pointless? Three tantalising options present themselves. We can minimise meaning by deflating it, by making a mess of it, or by inflating it to grotesque proportions. Each of these options will have its chapter. First off now in this chapter some pointers for the deflation of meaning. Here is Allen Woody.

Eternal nothingness is O.K. if you’re dressed for it.

The simplest way to deflate meaning is to treat something extraordinary as something ordinary. Here that most daunting of prospects, eternal nothingness, has been downplayed to an event with a dress code. We feel almost reassured. The reverse, treating something mundane as something quite special, is also a staple of nonsense, but the effect is then explosive rather than implosive. Here are the opening lines of a nonsense miniature by the American actor and writer Steve Martin. It is about a historic first.

It seemed just another morning. I woke and thought, ‘What to do, what to do.’ Then, and I don’t know why this struck me, but I thought, ‘Perhaps I’ll get out of bed.’ I know it *seems* crazy now, but then I was just in that particular mood where anything seemed reasonable.

The story is called ‘The Morning I Got Out Of Bed’ and it makes us look with new eyes at a simple morning routine. Like all great art, nonsense literature makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Another key device in nonsense literature is incongruity, a mismatch of things. Emblematic for the genre is the nonsense list, a very motley series of items. Here is an example from *Through the Looking-Glass* (to use its more usual shortened title).

‘The time has come,’ the Walrus said,
‘To talk of many things:
Of shoes – and ships – and sealing-wax –
Of cabbages – and kings –’

Such a list is a relaxed rummage in our vocabulary. As the list goes on any danger of sense fades away. If the talk is of such disparate things as cabbages and kings, it is unlikely to end up making a valid point. The list captures in a nutshell the utter nonchalance of nonsense about the order and hierarchy of things. It is this total indifference about differences that gives the genre its mellow feel, its unfussy grandeur. Nonsense literature makes all the rest of human endeavor look borderline neurotic. Here is a characteristic quote by the American nonsense writer Edward Gorey.

Over the next two years they killed three more children,
but it was never as exhilarating as the first one had been.

Nonsense is a holiday from our daily scruples. All is fair, even violence and murder. As a play on timeless logic the genre tends to age quite well. However, black nonsense like Gorey’s is a play on ethics and this can prove to be more time-bound. Here is a

passage from a ‘prospectus’ of a commercial enterprise called The General Suicide Agency.

As a result of technological advances, the GSA is pleased to announce to its clients that it can now *GUARANTEE THEM AN INSTANTANEOUS DEATH*. This service cannot fail to be of interest to those who have previously been deterred from committing suicide for fear of ‘making a mess of it’.

The prospectus offers a range of options, from Electrocution, Revolver, Hanging and Poison to Drowning. This prose miniature was written in 1925 by the French Dadaist Jacques Rigaut. It used to be a little classic in black humour, but since the arrival of actual assisted suicide clinics in Switzerland it has lost some of its dark impact.

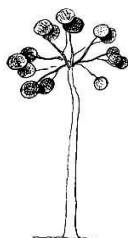
Meaning can also be limited by choosing an inane subject for your text. In sixteenth-century Europe, grandiloquent rhetoric was the fashion. Soon this overblown rhetoric was deflated in satirical and nonsensical treatises, for instance in praise of folly. For best comic effect the subject should be as futile as possible, and the flea was a popular choice. This quasi-pompous ‘Flea Literature’ discussed in some detail all kinds of urgent issues. Owns a man the fleas he finds on his wife? May he catch the fleas on another man’s wife? But the subject can be even more minute. Later we will come across a novel about a simple dot – you cannot get much more futile than that.

Sometimes the subject of a text is big enough, only the point it makes seems negligible. Here are two rather less than eye-opening stanzas from the poem ‘Profoundly True Reflections On The Sea’ (1937) by the English poet A.E. Housman.

No object I have met
Is more profoundly wet.

Methinks ’twere vain to try,
O sea, to wipe thee dry.

The bleeding obvious as a fine art. Nonsense likes to educate the reader with blatant truisms. We are already down to a whisper of sense; time now for the full-blown futility of the tautology. The tautology is logical correctness gone mad. In a series of 'Nonsense Trees' Edward Lear described this attractive variety.



THE BISCUIT TREE

This remarkable vegetable production has never yet been described or delineated. As it never grows near rivers, nor near the sea, nor near mountains, or vallies, or houses, — its native place is wholly uncertain. When the flowers fall off, and the tree breaks out in biscuits, the effect is by no means disagreeable, especially to the hungry. — If the Biscuits grow in pairs, they do not grow single, and if they ever fall off, they cannot be said to remain on. —

The pursuit of futility can also take the form of being ludicrously unspecific. This is the beginning of the story 'Do Something' by the English writer Richard Mallett. It is about old Aunt Tabitha, reminiscing about her time as a working girl in Central London...

'When I was working as a lumberjack, bar-tender and telephone linesman in Old Bond Street, W1' said my Aunt Tabitha, knocking her pipe out on the cat, 'many of the girls used to bring me their little problems, and the advice I always used to give them was this: Do something. I have never regretted it.'

The opposite, a ludicrous degree of precision, is also common practice. In that other classic by Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the heroine picks up a little bottle labeled 'Drink me'. She indeed ventures to drink it, and finds the contents very much to her liking.

[...] it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast [...]

This nonsense list, not unlike the jargon of wine connoisseurs, apparently sums up the preferred diet of the little girl who was the original of Alice.

Finally in this little line-up of insipidity there is the very pinnacle of pointlessness, gibberish. It may look like the easiest nonsense to write, but it is actually precision work. A classic example is 'Jabberwocky', the ballad in *Through the Looking-Glass* about the hunting of a nonsense monster called the Jabberwock. This stanza shows the hero emerged in 'uffish thought', with the monster approaching.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

The great English nonsense connoisseur G.K. Chesterton was quite adamant about that 'uffish'. He wrote, 'If the printer had printed it "affish" I doubt if the first edition would have sold.' In nonsense it is crucial that you pick exactly the wrong word. The many unsuccessful imitations of 'Jabberwocky' make this painfully clear. There is a fine line between the numbing randomness of these imitations and the inspired nonsense of the original. This is in fact one of the most intriguing aspects of reading nonsense literature: learning to appreciate the difference between a tiresome pile-up of language, with all the charm of a train wreck, and a

surprise meeting of words which together burst into song. This guide will have examples of both.

These are all trusted techniques to limit meaning to a cool minimum. However, appearances can be deceptive in nonsense. Later we will find that there is more to ‘uffish’ than perfectly poised piffle.