

A COURSE IN NONSENSE

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*Your Pea-Green Guide to
Nonsense Literature*

TOM SWIFTY

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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. Traditionally the bodily functions are 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. 'Nonsense' will in this guide almost always be short for 'nonsense literature'. This literary 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 show that there is more to the English School of Nonsense than just 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 language and logic. Some nonsense was indeed meant 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 wide array of nonsense written in English. This is followed by a scan of the globe for further nonsensicalities. Nonsense can be heady stuff, so the chapters will be tactfully compact, but each chapter ends 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, though, 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 three 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.

Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland



*There is nothing that needs more fastidious care
than our choice of nonsense.*

G.K. Chesterton

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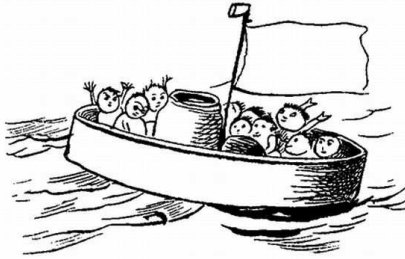
NONSENSE FOR BEGINNERS

Nonsense is the fourth dimension of literature.

Gelett Burgess

Our default mode, in life and literature, is to look for meaning. In nonsense literature we do not need to bother. *This* poetry and prose will never be slowed down by relevance or coherence. The genre may look like a quaint Victorian conceit, but today its attraction is undiminished. In the age of the Internet, when we are constantly being pestered by people making precious points, we may need the guaranteed point-free sanctuary of nonsense more than ever.

Reading nonsense literature is like being tipsy without the trouble of drinking first. One writer declared in so many words that this was indeed the effect he was going for. Nonsense poems, stories and plays boggle and blow the mind. They make 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. Nonsense is a welcome breather from the predictability of logic and the repetitiveness of reality. Above all it liberates us from the stifling hold of such pitiful notions as ‘purpose’ and ‘profit’. Another writer (more about these writers later) hailed nonsense literature as the ultimate freedom of spirit. Its style is certainly not cramped by the rules of logic or grammar, and least of all by the need to make some fatuous point. It shows how glorious 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 – as in this refrain by Edward Lear.



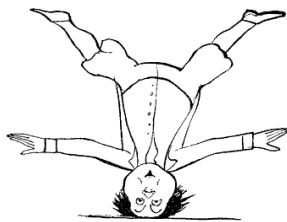
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

There is a world of difference between such a magical refrain 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 of course, but sometimes this thinly-veiled sense simply will not do. Sometimes we need to purge our soul with point-free fun. Then all we want to hear is the merry din of our brain short-circuiting in some pun or paradox. In such emergencies we turn to nonsense literature.

About now would be the time to come forward with a definition of the genre which actually *has* a point, but here is a bit of a conundrum. How to pinpoint a literary genre within rules if it grandly ignores every single one of them? There have been ingenious attempts at academic precision, but in this consumer's guide we keep things simple. We will keep our definition down to this little formula: nonsense is a parody of sense. Nonsense literature 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, paradox and parody. In slightly more academic terms, the nonsense repertoire will always favour inversion, imprecision, seriality, simultaneity and arbitrariness. However, no single type of joke is unique to the genre. It is the preposterous pointlessness that really sets it apart within humour. This pointlessness comes with surprising benefits and bonuses. Some experts suggest that precisely by not *making* any point, nonsense literature 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 a wide variety of shapes: nursery rhyme, limerick, quatrain, ballad, sonnet, riddle, proverb, list, catalogue, alphabet, rigmarole, tall tale, fable, fairy tale, sketch, short story, romance, novel, essay, review, report, letter, play and haiku. This book will be a parade of all of those. It will also demonstrate that nonsense literature can give a really fresh perspective on almost anything – even on cabbages and kings. But first in these three opening chapters a little 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. Here is a drawing by Edward Lear introducing the main event in nonsense.



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. In the sixteenth century, broadsides on the theme of the topsy-turvy world started to get published all over Europe. Some of these inversions had a social agenda, with a baron serving his butler tea, but others were purely nonsensical, with 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 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 literary 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 aim for some coherence and significance. We go for consistency, only to end up with clogged brains. Nonsense always limits meaning to a safe minimum.

*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 own chapter. First off in this chapter now 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 quite mundane. Here that most daunting of prospects, eternal nothingness, has been downplayed to a social event with a dress code. We feel almost reassured. The reverse, treating something ordinary as something quite special, is also a staple of nonsense, but the effect is then explosive rather than implosive. Here are some lines from a miniature by the American actor and writer Steve Martin. It is about a historic first. The narrator wakes up, lying in bed, wondering 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 miniature is called 'The Morning I Got Out Of Bed' and it makes us look with new eyes at a daily 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 a classic 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 very 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. This line of literature makes the rest of human endeavor look borderline neurotic. Nonsense literature can also deflate all moral sense. Here is a characteristic quote by the American 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 infanticide. As a play on timeless logic the genre tends to age quite well, but 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 an enterprise called The General Suicide Agency.

Thanks to technological progress the GSA is pleased to be able to announce to its clientele that it can now GUARANTEE AN INSTANTANEOUS DEATH. This service is bound to be of interest to those who until now have 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 dark prose miniature, written in 1925 by the French Dadaist Jacques Rigaut, used to be a little classic in black humour, but with the arrival of actual assisted suicide clinics in Switzerland it has lost some of its impact – even though these clinics offer far fewer options.

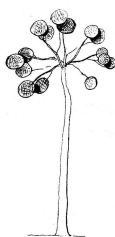
Meaning can also be limited by choosing an inane subject for your text. In sixteenth-century Europe, grandiloquent rhetoric was the fashion. This overblown rhetoric was soon deflated in

satirical and nonsensical treatises, for example in praise of folly. For best comic effect the subject should be as futile as possible, so the humble 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 of nonsense literature can be even more minute. Later we will come across a novel about a mere 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 some less than eye-opening lines from the poem 'Profoundly True Reflections On The Sea' (1937) by the English poet A.E. Housman.

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 a story 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*, at one point the little heroine picks up a bottle labeled ‘Drink me’. She indeed ventures to drink it and finds the contents very much to her taste.

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

This nonsense list, evocative of 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 about the hunting of a nonsense monster in *Through the Looking-Glass*. In this stanza the hero is emersed 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 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. There is something like perfect pitch in nonsense – and few writers have it. 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: learning to appreciate the difference between a random 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. However, appearances can be deceptive in nonsense. Later we will find that there is more to ‘uffish’ than perfectly poised piffle.

Big ideas and big emotions have a nasty habit of becoming overbearing. Then nonsense literature may help out. With such techniques as demonstrated in this chapter it takes things down a notch and reduces meaning to a cool minimum. The genre is like a reset button for the soul.