Contemporary Carnivals:

A Bakhtinian Approach to

Popular Humorous Children's Literature

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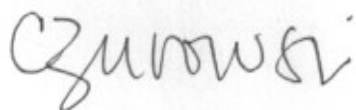Macquarie University

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis examines the recent emergence of humorous junior fiction which aims to engage newly independent readers through complex multimodal narrative forms. The popularity of these books means that many young readers are developing literacy skills and ideas about the world as they read them, but historically the genre has been marginalised within children's literary studies because of its popular-culture orientation. This thesis uses the Bakhtinian concept of carnival to examine two junior fiction series popular with young male readers: the American *Captain Underpants* series and the Australian *Treehouse* series. Central to the thesis is Bakhtin's notion of carnival as a temporary space away from official culture, and an analysis of how the visual and verbal discourses of these texts construct an active reader position within a space which resembles a kind of contemporary carnival. I argue that the nature of carnival laughter and the grotesque in the texts provide young readers with a suite of sophisticated critical literacy skills. However, the texts maintain a construction of masculinity that is, in contrast, conservative. I argue that there are both positive and negative implications of the popularity of these texts, much like the ambivalence inherent in Bakhtin's carnival.

Author's Statement

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Research at Macquarie University. I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and that I have given fully documented reference to the work of others. The thesis has not previously, in part or whole, been submitted for assessment in any formal course of study.

Signed,

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To Victoria Flanagan, who kept me on track and always believed that it was worthwhile studying that which others may wish to ignore.

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> 'Bakhtin describes carnival as a festive, temporary subversion of the prevalent order, in which everyone participates and which favours the grotesque.'

> (Malewski 46)

Introduction

This research project began with a sense of curiosity. Coming to the literary study of children's literature along a non-conventional path – engineering through motherhood to further study – it was curious to me that there seemed to be relatively little academic interest in the kinds of books that, based on my casual observations, children were actually reading. While there was much scholarship on the children's literature which adults considered 'worthwhile', there was little research about the books I saw children reading en masse and with apparent enthusiasm. These are not books carefully selected and passed on by adults to children. In fact, they are quite the opposite - and have acquired popularity despite adults sniffing their noses at them. The books I am referring to are the popular humorous literature that fills bookstore shelves and are dog-eared when found in public and private libraries. These books, aimed at newly emergent readers, rely heavily on a visual narrative and are often replete with scatological references. They create an initial impression of simplicity, but operate on quite sophisticated levels. The reliance on both a verbal and visual narrative represents a 'rich, hybrid sign system – the pictorial-verbal space-place' (Cecire 6) and the highly metafictive nature of these texts demands an active role for readers (McCallum 139). The books pivot on a fundamental sense of playfulness, generated by a series of demands placed on novice readers who are often approaching texts alone for the first time. As part of popular childhood culture, these fictions have the 'potentially powerful capacity for shaping audience attitudes' (Stephens *Language* 3) and are actively involved in creating the next generation of adults. These contemporary humorous texts are ubiquitous and if we believe that children learn about the world

through literature then it seemed to me that it was important to study not just the books we think children ought to read, but those books they actually do.

In her exploration of the nexus between satire and children's literature, Jackie Stallcup suggests that the critical analysis of texts written for children, and particularly humorous literature, 'may be viewed with suspicion: seen as precisely as lacking in depth and seriousness of purpose as the texts themselves' (191). Even within children's literary studies these popular texts seem marginalized and are often referred to as 'paraliterature' (Nikolajeva 126). Perhaps the content of these texts, often considered unsuitable and undesirable for children, deems them unworthy of further consideration (Stallcup 171). Their particular reliance on humour may add to this perceived lack of 'seriousness'. In his defence of the importance of comedy, Andrew Stott suggests 'by associating it [comedy] so clearly with plebeian culture, however, modern critical interest is guilty of retaining the elitist generic divisions that once denigrated comedy, keeping it as the working-class cousin of aristocratic tragedy and other 'serious' forms' (39). And yet, these reasons for *not* approaching certain texts critically: belonging particularly to childhood, their transgressive and humorous nature, may be *exactly* the reasons that they are so popular with children.

As I began my research, I found that as the new millennium commenced there was an emerging interest in addressing aspects of children's literature which had often been overlooked. Academics noted a shift in the manner and type of books children were consuming (Dresang, op de Beeck) particularly with 'words and pictures reaching new levels of synergy' (Dresang 96). There has also been an increasing number of academic publications focussing on previously marginalised areas of children's literary studies – boys and their reading (Newkirk 2002, Stephens 2002, Wannamaker 2008), humour (Cross 2011), serialised fictions (Reimer et al 2014), and junior and early readers (Miskec et al 2016). Alongside and embedded in these studies is an evolving notion of childhood, removed from an ideal of Romantic innocence, and an increasing confidence in the capacity of children to engage with literature in more sophisticated ways.

The aim of this thesis is to enter this discussion by exploring texts that fall into many of these previously marginalised categories, but at the same time appear to reject categorisation, to determine how these texts may be 'shaping' their young audience. The focus of my study is the type of serialised, humorous texts that are aimed primarily at, and

popular with, newly independent male readers. My primary corpus is made up of the twelve volumes of the *Captain Underpants* series (1997-2016), written and illustrated by American author Dav Pilkey, and the first five volumes in the *Treehouse* series (2011-2015), written by Australian author Andy Griffiths and illustrated by Terry Denton. The serial nature of the texts is an important attribute for consideration and I believe more will be gained by considering the series as a whole, as well as individual texts within the series, than in limiting the number of books within the corpus.

The multimodal, hybrid nature of these texts, which rely heavily on both a visual and verbal discourse, makes them difficult to categorise and they may be considered 'evolutionary branches that emerge from hybridization among picture books, chapter books, and cheap comic books' (op de Beeck 472). These series are premised on humour and are hugely popular with their target audience of primary school age children, and boys in particular, associating them clearly with a culture of childhood. In spite of this popularity, or possibly because of it, the books and their authors have been openly criticized, particularly regarding their engagement with subject matter considered 'gross' (Cross 50). Though one series is American and the other Australian, both are clearly situated within a Western, middle-class cultural context providing a common ground for a comparative analysis without having to negotiate significant cultural differences.

As a way of corralling these chaotic, hybrid texts I turned to Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of carnival. In Bakhtin, I found a similar interest in literature often ignored by others (Holquist xvi). In his seminal work, *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin was concerned the comic literature of Rabelais was in danger of being misunderstood, or worse still dismissed, by academic and 'official' culture. Bakhtin describes the medieval carnivals, which he contends are the popular source of Rabelais' work, as temporary liberations from the constraints of official culture; a time and place where hierarchies were reversed, and laughter and a deep appreciation for the grotesque were the basis of 'folk carnival humor' (4). Bakhtin's notion of carnival as representative of popular culture and the basis of Rabelais' comic literature provides a 'topos', or framework (Dentith 76), from which to consider the significance of popular humorous children's literature.

In her introduction to Bakhtin's readings, Pam Morris articulates the productive potential of applying Bakhtin's concept of carnival, particularly in situations involving the

kind of authoritarian control inherent in adult-child relationships with which children's literature is often concerned:

> 'What Bakhtin's analysis of carnival as a continuous and repeated tradition of oppositional meaning does positively affirm is the possibility of sustaining consciousness of an alternative social order even in the midst of authoritarian controls and repressive orthodoxy. At a much more specific level the notion of carnival has offered productive new insights into many literary texts.' (22)

Using Bakhtin's approach to the carnival as an overarching framework to examine popular humorous children's literature, I argue that as examples of popular culture, these series function as contemporary carnivals. They construct an 'alternative social order' for children in the midst of an 'official' culture that is controlled by adults. A critical examination will challenge dismissive assumptions about these particular texts.

Children's literature has long been associated with notions of the carnivalesque, both the mirroring of carnival elements and the interrogative function of carnival (Stephens *Language* 121). The subversive potential in particular has been explored using this framework (Wannamaker, Daniels, McGillis, James). As well as the carnivalesque nature of the texts, I am interested in considering how contemporary texts construct an active reader position through increased levels of interaction between text and reader (Dresang 114), and the implications of that. I am arguing that in the process of reading, children become participants in a carnival space, defined as 'a festive, temporary subversion of the prevalent order, in which everyone participates and which favours the grotesque' (Malewski 46).

Both the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series engage with words, images and readers in complex ways. My analysis draws largely from children's literary criticism, employing visual semiotics and narratology as a framework for examining how these texts create a sense of carnival and position readers as participants in the meaning-making process. A comparative analysis of two separate, but similar series will work to highlight the insights a carnival framework provides, not just for individual texts, but this kind of text more generally.

In my first chapter, 'Carnival Spaces: Come on Up!', I consider how the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series use a variety of narrative strategies to create a temporary space outside of official adult culture reflecting Bakhtin's 'two-world' concept of carnival.

I argue that readers are positioned to actively engage with the texts and this creates a sense of playful participation within a carnival space.

The second chapter, 'Carnival Humour: Lots-o-Laffs!', examines the humour which forms the basis of both series. I argue that this humour shares much in common with Bakhtin's concept of carnival laughter and plays a pivotal role in creating the storyworlds of the texts and their associated sense of carnival. Additionally, I determine that the sophistication of these forms of humour provides a pedagogical function in developing complex literacy skills in young readers.

The third chapter, 'Carnival Grotesque: Gross is Great!', examines how the excessive grotesque manifestations within the texts represent Bakhtin's positive, ambivalent notion of the grotesque. I argue that by reading these carnivalesque books and embracing the possibility of abjection in relation to "official culture", readers are simultaneously engaged in a process of defining their own subject positions in opposition to this culture and as part of a community of child readers.

Having argued that Bakhtin's concept of carnival provides a model for understanding how these texts create a space where readers may benefit from the pedagogical and social functions of carnival, the final chapter, 'Gender at the Carnival: Bakhtin's Boys', considers how this model influences explorations of gender, and masculinity more particularly. I argue that these series adhere to a masculine schema at both a story and discourse level, which limits the subversive potential of carnival to genuinely interrogate concepts of gender.

The texts examined in this thesis are examples of a larger body of popular humorous literature often dismissed as valuable merely for its ability to engage reluctant male readers by appealing to their baser instincts. In his study of the ideological implications of Bakhtin's work, Michael Gardiner argues that the carnival described by Bakhtin may have diminished over time but that qualities of this medieval manifestation of popular culture have survived:

> 'Carnival was severed from its folk basis and from its communal performance in the carnival square, and its characteristic symbols, gestures and speech-genres became merely decorative or narrowly farcical. Yet despite the emasculation of carnival since the Renaissance, Bakhtin argues that popular-festive culture remains 'indestructible', and it continues to celebrate invention, human creativity, and the liberation of human

consciousness from the dictates of official truth in a manner which encourages a 'completely new order of things'.' (Gardiner 58)

My hope is that this thesis provides a critical examination of popular humorous children's literature - frequently dismissed as 'merely decorative or narrowly farcical' - and determines that these texts are worthy of consideration. In applying a Bakhtinian lens to examples of this literature, I suggest that these texts are 21st century examples of the 'indestructibility' of the medieval popular-festive culture of carnival. These texts represent contemporary carnivals. They celebrate a communal notion of childhood, reflect inventive and creative new ways of engaging with literature, and provide an escape for children from the constraints of adult culture. However, as well as the potential to encourage a 'new order', there is also the possibility of reinscribing the old.

> 'Bakhtin argues that popular festivals and rituals carved out a 'second life' for the people within the womb of the old society, a world where the normal rules of social conduct were (at least temporarily) suspended and life was 'shaped according to a certain pattern of play'.'
>
> (Gardiner 51)

Carnival Spaces: Come on Up!

In his study of Rabelais' work, Mikhail Bakhtin contends that the medieval celebrations of carnival provide the popular source of Rabelais' comic literature (2). One of the key attributes of these medieval celebrations, according to Bakhtin, was that they represented a 'second life' for the people of the time, a 'social space' where 'the people' were able to come together and experience a temporary liberation from official culture, separate from, yet tolerated by that same official culture (Gardiner 45). Bakhtin has been criticised for being too idealistic in his representation of medieval 'folk' and less than historically accurate in his depiction of medieval carnivals (Dentith 68, Holquist xix, Morris 22). Despite this, it has been argued that his concept of carnival offers a coherent and versatile model (Bristol 23), which has provided a useful critical approach to literary studies. Bakhtin's 'two-world condition' (6) describes where folk culture is celebrated in medieval carnivals alongside and sanctioned by official culture, while also clearly distinct from and often in opposition to it. This is evident in the world of children's literature which is 'invariably written and produced by adults' (Stephens *Language* 125) and particularly in those popular texts considered outside 'acceptable' or 'worthwhile' literature for children. This chapter considers how both the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series use a variety of narrative strategies to create a temporary space outside of official culture and position readers to interact with the texts, constructing a carnival space for young readers to play.

For Bakhtin, the second festive life of the people was most apparent when it was opposed to the serious nature of the official feasts of the time, and 'had to be tolerated and even legalized outside the official sphere and had to be turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace' (9). The marketplace represents 'that place where virtually anything can, and often does, happen' (Danow 20). What seems important about the marketplace is that it provides a public place where the people are able to come together in a way that defines

them as a culture outside of the requirements of the official culture. This idea of a separate cultural space is also important when considering texts for children. In their introduction to *Space and Place in Children's Literature*, Cecire et al argue that children's literature provides 'opportunities for negotiation in the physical and socially constructed spaces between adults and children' (6). Can children's books represent a manifestation of this public marketplace?

As well as the metaphorical space between two cultures (either Bakhtin's folk and official cultures or the child and adult cultures) Bakhtin is also concerned with the temporal space of the carnival where 'the unofficial folk culture of the Middle Ages and even of the Renaissance had its own territory and its own particular time, the time of fairs and feasts' (Bakhtin 154). In particular, 'the marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official order and official ideology, it always remained "with the people"' (154). In the introduction to his exploration of the carnivalesque in magical realism and Holocaust novels, David Danow differentiates between what he calls these 'concrete cultural manifestations' of carnival and the carnivalesque, which he argues is the spirit, or 'mirror of carnival' (4), which may permeate works of literature. I would like to consider not only how popular contemporary children's texts reflect the spirit of carnival in the carnivalesque nature of the texts but also operate as carnival spaces themselves. In effect, this means that 'children's literature's spaces may signify power relations while also serving as locations of play' (Cecire 7).

In her study of the carnivalesque behaviour of children in early childhood settings, Elizabeth White suggests 'the potential for carnivalesque to make forbidden social commentary, to exceed social boundaries and convention in order to stand in opposition to authorial positioning' (899). She argues that this can be recognised in 'a centre underlife in which peer collaborations form in reaction to institutional rules' (906) and that this play is 'an important ideological space that deliberately creates distance from the authoritative culture' (908), essential for children in developing a sense of themselves. I would like to argue that popular children's literature has the potential to operate in a similar way, constructing a space for young readers away from the adult world where they are able to play in a way which subverts the conventions and challenges the power relations of the adult world.

Both Bakhtin's exploration of medieval carnivals, and White's study of children's behaviour suggest the idea of a carnival space, where 'space is the practice of a particular place' (Cecire 6). For White this is the 'practice' of carnivalesque play in the 'place' of an early childhood centre and for Bakhtin, the active participation of people in the marketplace during carnival time. In his study of the carnival in theatre, Bristol considers festivals and rites of passage as liminal spaces, where 'the liminary participants enter a peculiar and ambiguous social space' (30). He argues that this experience of liminality 'confers immunity' from social constraints but ultimately is 'governed by the impulse to return' to society, indicating the temporary nature of carnival space. David Rudd, in arguing for an approach to children's literature which incorporates the role of the child reader, considers 'the space in between', where child and author come together, 'as precisely where things happen' (*Child* 22). John Stephens' definition of children's carnivalesque texts focuses on the potential for these texts to 'create roles for child characters which interrogate the normal subject positions created for children within socially dominant ideological frames' (*Language* 120). Can this idea of the carnivalesque be extended beyond the potential for interrogation by characters within the narrative space to Rudd's 'space in between'? Do some texts also create liminal spaces where *readers* play and enjoy the carnival, immune from social expectations while ultimately returning to the real world of their lives?

Eliza Dresang notes the increasing interactivity of children's books, which she contends has been influenced by and is competing with the online world (*Books* xvii). Rod McGillis argues that in the merging of books and technology, the 'assimilation of the book into dialogue with readers in virtual space is both a positive sign and a negative one' (63). I suggest that in today's society, where children may be spending more time in online virtual worlds, and their behaviour is much more likely to be under 'increased adult supervision and control' (Cross 78), that these contemporary humorous children's books represent 'low-tech' modern day market*places*. They are home to a contemporary carnival where the interaction of reader and book 'builds its own world versus the official world' (Bakhtin 88) – a carnival space.

By way of determining how particular children's texts move beyond reflecting the carnivalesque and may come to operate as contemporary carnivals, I would like to first determine how contemporary popular fictions, represented by Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* and Andy Griffiths' *Treehouse* series, use narratological strategies to designate

these books as *places* outside of official culture where readers are encouraged to participate and *play*. In creating these carnival spaces 'narrative is thus a form not only of representing but of constituting reality' (Stephens *Narratology* 60).

The Book as Marketplace

Both Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* and Griffiths' *Treehouse* novels are series that are overtly aimed at early independent readers, children who have recently mastered, or are in the process of mastering, the skill of reading to themselves in order to access fictional worlds. Rather than being read to or reading to adults, young readers enter the space of the book alone, unhindered and unmediated by adults. Like all children's literature, these books are produced, distributed and purchased by adults, which means they will always exist within the official order, but at the same time they seem to operate as a 'place' particularly for children. The popularity of these texts, driven largely by the reception and enthusiasm of children, rather than the adults around them, situates them as belonging 'with the people', much like Bakhtin's marketplaces.

Children's books are 'constitutively material objects that draw attention to their spatial contours, as well as to the spaces depicted within texts and image' (Cecire 6), and as such, represent a 'place' where children spend time. The conjunction of the materiality of the book and the practice of reading represents the 'book itself as space' (Cecire 183). This time spent reading is similar to Stephens' first type of carnivalesque texts 'which offer the characters 'time out' from the habitual constraints of society but incorporate a safe return to social normality' (*Language* 121). In this instance, I am suggesting that this time out is for readers, (and in fact we find that return is not available to the characters in the texts), somewhere to escape the 'habitual constraints of society' by experiencing instead the laughter of the novels. The books that constitute my primary corpus are 'sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political forms and ceremonials' (Bakhtin 5) that children (and adults) may normally associate with the official realms of books, school and libraries. In her discussion of the move to scatological humour in junior fiction, Julie Cross makes particular note of texts written by Pilkey and Griffiths, and the 'publicity and outrage that often surrounds such publications' (50). Such a response suggests that, while they may be consumed and located within official spaces, these texts are clearly situated in the 'popular sphere of the marketplace' and as such are differentiated from other 'good books' for children.

The periodic, or temporal nature of carnival and Bakhtin's association of the carnival with the recurring calendar of feast days and fairs of the medieval world (5) is also reflected in the serial nature of both sets of texts. These narrative series, 'characterised by a constant narrative presence, a common set of characters, the same or similar settings, recurring plot structures, and familiar themes' (Reimer 10), are comparable to 'the temporarily existing life-form that enables the carnival to take place' when 'folk culture appears periodically as a culture of laughter by means of an ensemble of rites and symbols' (Lachmann 123). This re-creation of a carnival world is evident in 'the capacity of serial fiction to develop spacious and meaningful textual worlds in which readers can find themselves at home' (Reimer 12). (These textual worlds will be addressed in more detail in the following chapter.) New instalments are eagerly awaited by readers and the ongoing popularity of both series points to this. Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* series has published additional 'epic novels' continuously since 1997, and Griffiths has released an extended version of his *Treehouse* books every year since 2011.

Visually, the books as objects engender a festive atmosphere with bright colourful covers and the use of a variety of fonts with visually-chaotic, low-modality pencil line drawings clearly distinguishing these books as belonging to childhood and working to set an expectation for what readers will find inside. These are not the 'serious' books of the official order that you may find adults reading. Bakhtin notes that the 'festive marketplace combined many genres and forms, all filled with the same unofficial spirit' (154) and this is evident in Griffiths' and Pilkey's texts. The bricolage of various visual and textual discourses, a combination of picture book, chapter book, and comic creates a hybrid text suggestive of the many genres and forms of Bakhtin's festive marketplaces as well as representing 'radical changes in books' of the 21st century (Dresang *Books* 19).

Playing in the Carnival

Central to both Danow and Bakhtin's concept of carnival is the participation of the people. How do these texts employ strategies to ensure that children do more than simply read these books, that they 'are not passively consumed; rather, they are lived, experienced, and transformed into life itself' (Gardiner 52)? Throughout both series, the authors work to create an active reading position for young readers, inviting them to engage with the text they are holding. The bimodal nature of the texts demands that young readers actively 'negotiate the gap between the verbal and visual components of the text'

(Painter 136) and 'require[s] greater intellectual engagement than ordinary linear text' (Dresang 19).
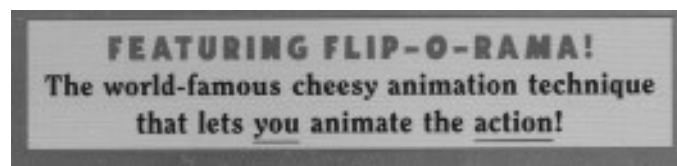
This expectation of participation is evident before readers enter the text proper, in the paratext of the books. On the back blurb of *The 13-Storey Treehouse*, readers are overtly invited to participate after a short description of 'the most amazing treehouse in the world':

'Well, what are you waiting for? Come on up!' (*13-Storey* back cover)

On the back cover of Pilkey's *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*, the first novel in that series, readers are asked:

'Have you read your UNDERPANTS today?' (*Adventures* back cover)

There is also a yellow highlighted text box, set out from the rest of the blurb, which introduces the concept of the 'FLIP-O-RAMA', inviting readers not only to read the book but to participate in the creation of the story.

FEATURING FLIP-O-RAMA!
The world-famous cheesy animation technique that lets you animate the action!

(*Adventures* back cover)

Readers are positioned to understand that this is an important aspect of the texts through the direct address and the visual differentiation of this 'feature' which uses a different font, uppercase lettering, exclamation marks and a bright yellow background. The underlining of the words 'you' and 'action' explicitly sets the expectation of an active engagement between reader and the text. These strategies are repeated verbatim on the back covers of every novel in both series, operating as cues for readers to approach 'the physical book as a game; and the text as a game' (Grieve 5). Such strategies function metafictively with 'a heightened sense of the status of fiction as an elaborate form of play' (McCallum 140). This direct reader engagement continues within the narratives of both series.

John Stephens argues that to understand how meaning is produced by texts it is important to consider narration and focalisation, narrative structure and organisation, and beginnings and endings (*Narratology* 55). Examining how these strategies are represented

in the opening chapters of these texts, which are replicated and become a framing element throughout both series, will help determine how the texts are working to position readers as active participants in a carnival space.

Stephens contends 'narration and focalization are the aspects of narration in which implicit authorial control of audience reading strategies is probably most powerful' (*Narratology* 58). In reference to dominant textual constructions of multicultural ideology in children's literature, Stephens notes that "perspective and focalization were usually located with a principal character from the dominant, or majority, culture' (Stephens *Schemas* 17). The same principle applies in these texts where the culture of childhood is privileged through the use of children as primary focalising characters. In both series, the minimalist simple line drawings may work to detach viewers (Painter 32) but also reinforce the culture of childhood, and distance an adult presence, by more closely resembling children's drawings than other more complex modes of illustration. Readers are positioned to understand that the fictional worlds of the texts are distinct from the 'real' world of official culture and more closely aligned with an alternative world where children are dominant. The texts use both textual and visual narrative strategies to position readers to 'play' in this space as a participant of this dominant culture.

The Treehouse series uses first person verbal narration and visual strategies to position readers in alignment with Andy, the character narrator. The use of direct address in both discourses works to further invite the reader into the world created by the text. The first page of *The 13-Storey Treehouse* is an illustration of a person (whose age is actually indeterminate – there are no real indications of whether this character is a young boy or a man) looking directly at the reader in what Kress and van Leeuwin term a 'demand' image (118) which requires 'some kind of participation by the viewer' (Painter 18). The character is holding a book with descriptors and arrows letting readers know that the person is 'Andy' and the item in his hand is 'Book'.
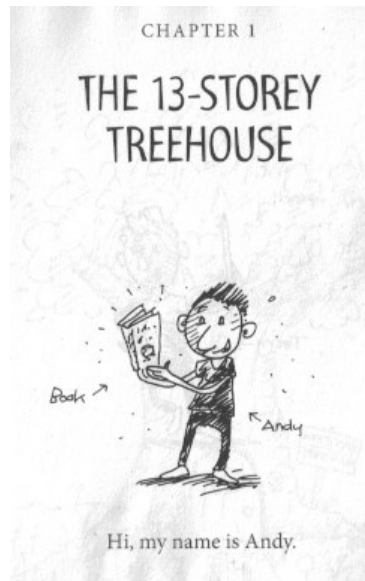
(*13-Storey* 1)

Below this illustration, the first line of the book is 'Hi, my name is Andy.' The use of informal language and a familiar introduction, suggests a peer relationship between reader, character and author. On the following page readers are introduced to Terry in a similar manner, where he is also looking directly at the reader but holding a pencil instead of a book. Over the next few pages a pattern is created that is repeated in the first chapter of each of the books in the series. Readers are introduced to the two main protagonists, whose names are the same as those of the author and illustrator of the book in hand. The visual clues of book and pencil also convey this connection, as does the peritext where the author and illustrator 'bios' on the first page include a drawn portrait, in the same style as the character depictions. Readers are then explicitly invited to join Andy and Terry in their treehouse:

> 'We live in a tree.
> Well, when I say 'tree', I mean treehouse. And when I say 'treehouse', I don't mean any old treehouse-I mean a 13-storey treehouse. [This is modified in subsequent books to reflect the 'current' status of the treehouse]
> So what are you waiting for? Come on up!'   (*13-Storey* 3-5)

The illustration accompanying the invitation to 'Come on up!' is an open door with a ladder leaning from the centre bottom of the page disappearing off the right top corner. This suggests that the way into the treehouse is via the ladder, and requires readers' eyes to

follow the diagonal vector running left to right and bottom to top. The empty space between the text and the ladder and the absence of any characters on the page suggest that this space is available for the reader to fill. This creates a visual point of view for readers, 'a viewpoint from which to interpret the story' (Stephens *Schemas* 55-6), as it represents them in a room ready to enter the treehouse – enter the storyworld. This is an example of what David Herman refers to as a 'deictic shift, whereby a storyteller prompts his or her interlocutors to relocate from the here and now of the current interaction to the alternative space-time coordinates of the storyworld' (270).
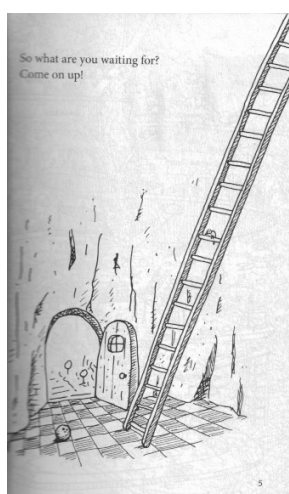
(13-Storey 5)

Readers 'climb the ladder', or turn the page, to a detailed double-page illustration of this storyworld - the 'inside' of the treehouse. There is no verbal narrative, only labelling of the different rooms and contents of the treehouse. The illustration acts as a topothesia, 'a visual and textual description of a fictitious or imaginary place' (Renaud 205). An updated version is repeated at the beginning of each novel in the series facilitating 'the mental visualizations that produce immersion' (Ryan 428). Readers have been invited to join the protagonists in their treehouse and the detailed nature of the 'map' also creates a 'non-linear reading experience' (Renaud 206) requiring that readers stop and spend some time exploring the treehouse through Denton's extremely detailed drawings. The unbound image, which extends to the page edge, adds to the chaotic sense of the text and positions readers in a space where 'characters are less constrained by their circumstances…and the storyworld is more opened up to the reader' (Painter 105).
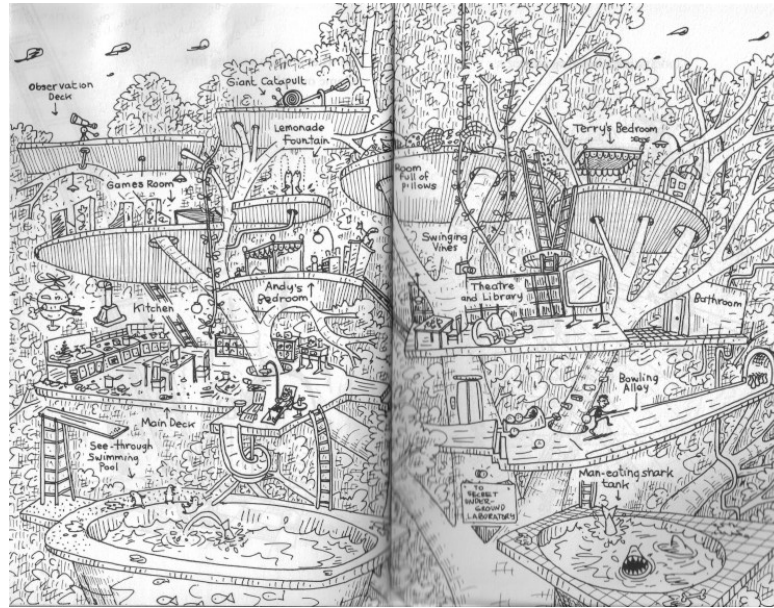
(*13-Storey* 6-7)

The simple verbal narrative and more detailed visual narrative is continued through the books in the *Treehouse* series. This multistranded narrative technique 'can work to efface or destabilize a reader's sense of a single authoritative narratorial position, and thereby situate readers in more active interpretive positions' (McCallum 148). Readers discover they must work with both pictures and words to make sense of the text.

Dav Pilkey uses a similarly repetitive structure in the first chapter of each of the volumes of the *Captain Underpants* series. He employs the same direct narratorial address as Griffiths but, rather than a character narrator, uses third person narration. The narrator is assumed to be Pilkey, as a knowing but sympathetic adult narrator. Like the *Treehouse* books, this is suggested in the 'About the Author' section on the final page of the novel, which describes Pilkey's experience in elementary school where 'he invented his most famous (or infamous) character, CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS!'. Chapter 1 of each novel is titled "George and Harold" and begins with a drawing of two young boys walking together and a version of the following text:

> 'Meet George Beard and Harold Hutchins. George is the kid on the left with the tie and the flat-top. Harold is the one on the right with the T-shirt and the bad haircut. Remember that now.'

(*Adventures* 1)

Visual discourses 'may harmonise with or counterpoint the focalisation provide[d] by the verbal narration' (Painter 18). In this instance, by referencing the drawing directly Pilkey demands that readers stop and engage with the illustration, and by instructing readers to remember what they have been told, and have seen, the discourses work together to ensure readers are 'overtly invited to participate in the story world, both verbally and visually' (Painter 20). There is also an example of counterpoint (and this happens in Denton's illustrations also) where activity not referenced in the verbal narration requires readers to engage with this separate discourse – providing an additional point of view for readers so that they have access to information only available in the visual narrative. In most of the books there is 'official' signage which George and Harold manipulate while the narrator is introducing them to readers, so that in the first novel the flower shop sign reading 'Pick your own roses!' on page one has been changed to 'Pick our noses!' on page two.

In addition to overtly inviting readers into the storyworlds of the books, the authors also employ strategies which provide opportunities for readers to interact with the books physically as material objects. In the final chapter of each of the *Treehouse* books, after the adventures of the narrative are resolved, Andy and Terry must submit their finished manuscript to their publisher, Mr Big Nose. In an example of mise-en-abyme, where a representation of the narrative is embedded within the narrative (McCallum 146), previous images from the text are replicated in 'miniaturised' double page spreads run over several pages (*13-Storey* 222-228). Readers are likely to disrupt their reading process to page back through the book to confirm that the illustrations and text are indeed replicas of the book they have just been reading.

The *Captain Underpants* series also has a recurring feature which demands that readers engage directly with the book-as-object, and in doing so positions readers as co-creators of the narrative. The 'FLIP-O-RAMA' chapter of the texts, presented as part of the narrative, provides readers with specific instructions on how to flip pages back and forth and 'create' an animation. The significantly different visual layout of this chapter, from a more narrative to instructional format, breaks the linear reading of the text and overtly demands that readers interact with the book by physically moving the pages.
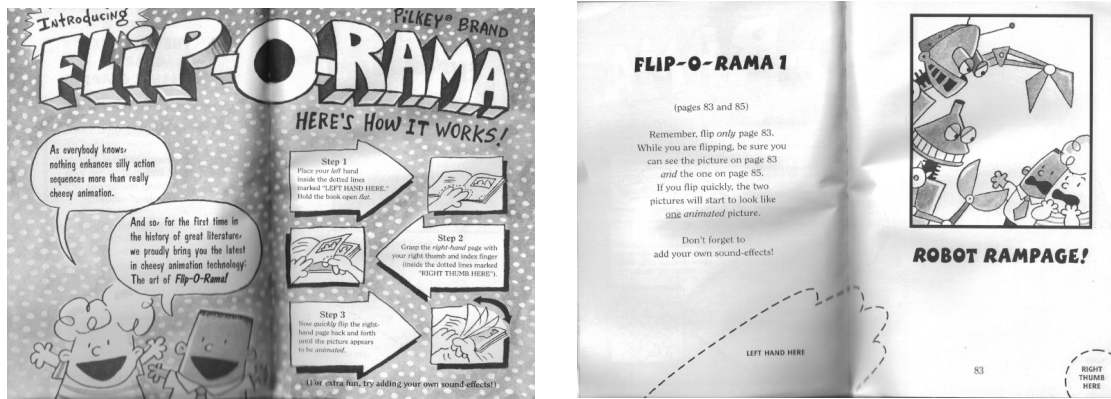
These are examples of metalepsis, where the boundaries between reality and fiction, and hierarchies of author, reader, narrator and character are overtly transgressed across both textual and visual discourses (McCallum 144 Pantaleo 329). In the *Captain Underpants* example, readers are directed by characters, visually depicted by the speech bubbles and George and Harold's direct gaze, to create the 'violent' action in the text and are reminded by the narrator to 'add your own sound effects'. This demands readers stop reading the text and engage interactively with the books. The outlined spaces for the reader's left hand and right thumb position readers in a way similar to when an image depicts 'just the part of the body that could be seen by the focalising character' (Painter 21). In this case, the reader, rather than a character, is positioned physically within the storyworld.

The *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series use a variety of narrative strategies to construct a temporary space for young readers which reflects Bakhtin's 'two world' concept of carnival in the 'tension between the adult who directs the child's reading and the idealised child who reads playfully in a spirit of imaginative exploration' (Cecire 15). These texts create spaces for young readers in the conjunction of reader, book and author where the narrative ensures that readers are actively participating in the texts and that space is defined as belonging particularly to children. In reading these texts, children spend time in a place/space outside of, yet produced by, official culture, where they may come to play and then return to their 'real' world, like the 'folk' attending the carnival in the marketplaces of Rabelais' time.

David Herman, in his examination of the role of space in narrative, argues that '*all* storyworlds cue their audiences to transport themselves from the spatiotemporal

parameters of the current interaction to those defining the storyworld' (271). The framework of the carnival allows us to see how these popular texts create a carnival space for readers in the liminal space defined by this storyworld. In the next chapter I consider how the humour in these texts reflect Bakhtin's carnival in these storyworlds.

'A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations
opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and
feudal culture. In rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants,
dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody –
all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one
culture of folk carnival humor.'

(Bakhtin 4)

Carnival Humour: Lots-o-Laffs!

Bakhtin argues that the 'carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter' (8). Andrew Stott, in his examination of Bakhtin's contribution to studies of comedy, notes that 'the world of the marketplace operates according to what is essentially a comic logic, one that runs parallel to official, serious, improving culture, laughing at it, and sometimes violently humiliating it' (33). This comic logic is also reflected in junior texts where 'carnival in children's literature is grounded in a playfulness which situates itself in positions of nonconformity' (Stephens *Language* 121). In the storyworlds created by these contemporary texts, like the feasts and carnivals described by Bakhtin, laughter is the basis of a 'world' outside of official culture where 'this laughter was absolutely unofficial but nevertheless legalized' (8). In this chapter, I demonstrate that humour is pivotal in creating the storyworlds of the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series and shares much in common with Bakhtin's concept of carnival humour. Additionally, I argue that the sophistication of this humour provides a pedagogical function in developing literacy skills in young readers.

A literary approach to these fictional worlds may be considered within another Bakhtinian concept, the chronotope. In a recent volume addressing the current 'state of art' of the literary chronotope, Bemong and Borghart state that:

'Bakhtin's basic assumption is the idea that narrative texts are not only composed
of a sequence of diegetic events and speech acts, but also – and perhaps even more
primarily – of the construction of a particular fictional world or chronotope' (4).

They go on to suggest that dominant chronotopes may be recognised when a narrative text 'leaves the reader with an overarching impression' (7) and that the narrative may be categorised on the basis of a 'sufficient number of textual strategies' (10) representative of a particular chronotope. Maria Nikolajeva suggests the study of chronotopes as an approach to genres in children's literature and more particularly that 'every genre and every type of children's text has its own, unique form of chronotope' (122). Is there such a thing as a carnival chronotope to which these texts may belong? In an article considering Bakhtin's study of carnival as a counter cultural narrative of his own time, Lachmann et al propose the concept of a 'carnival chronotope', created by folk culture 'in the ludistic conjunction of carnival space (the public marketplace) and carnival time' (132). In *The Bakhtin Reader*, Pam Morris suggests 'the notion of carnival is properly chronotopic in that it offers a spatial and temporal envisioning of human existence in the world' (21). In the previous chapter, I argued that the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series create a temporary space away from official culture in the conjunction of books and reading, where young readers were encouraged to play. Do these texts ensure that that space can be categorised as carnival?

The carnivalesque, or 'spirit of carnival' (Danow 4), has long been evident in children's fiction. In his exploration of the interrogative potential of these texts, John Stephens suggests carnival is 'often manifested as parody of prevailing literary forms and genres, or as literature in non-canonical forms' (Stephens *Language* 121-2). What I am interested in considering is whether, in addition to the interrogative potential of the carnivalesque, these contemporary humorous texts employ particular narrative strategies in the creation of a distinctly carnival storyworld.

Bakhtin contends that the manifestations of carnival and its associated laughter can be seen in three distinct but interwoven forms: ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions and various genres of billingsgate (5). Lachmann includes these as part of Bakhtin's 'inventory or lexicon of symbols [that] contains the schemata for all concretely realised laugh rituals' (137). I contend that evidence of these festivities, parodies, and colloquial use of language within the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* books support the construction of a carnival world by the texts. In fact, even a cursory examination of Pilkey's or Griffiths' oeuvre suggests an excess of such carnival manifestations in their work, highlighting the common strategy in junior fiction of instantiating 'a core schema by accumulating a mix of essential and optional components of the schema across the extent

of the text' (Stephens *Schema* 26). Examining particular examples of each of these forms will show how they contribute towards a 'single humorous aspect of the world' (Bakhtin 5), the 'overarching impression' characteristic of a carnival chronotope.

In addition to creating a carnival storyworld, these forms of carnival humour, with their emphasis on language, represent what Cross considers 'new compounds of seemingly paradoxical high and low forms of humour' (19). She argues that this kind of humour in contemporary junior texts demands a more active and sophisticated reader and presents 'positive opportunities for young readers to play with ambiguous, multilevel ideas, helping them embrace the complexities and contradictions of contemporary life' (14). The metafictive nature of these texts is evident in the use of intertextuality and parody (McCallum 142) and the 'linguistic construction of texts and the world' (McCallum 147). These metafictive techniques highlight the fictional nature of the texts while positioning readers as interactive participants, and also function to foreground the carnival as a temporary space outside the 'real' world. The storyworld, or chronotope, of the books may be a perpetual carnival for the characters in the texts, but readers must return to the real world when their reading is complete. While playing and laughing in this space, defined by the carnival humour of the texts, children also develop and practice critical literacy skills which they use to navigate their world outside of the texts.

Ritual Spectacles

In medieval times, comic and ritual spectacles were recognised alongside the traditional feasts and celebrations of the Church. It is interesting to note that even today in a largely secular Western world, it is children's rituals that mark the few liturgical celebrations still celebrated: Santa Claus at Christmas, the Easter Bunny at Easter and the celebrations of birthday parties on what were once celebrations associated with the name days of saints. In each of these we see forms 'systematically placed outside the church and religiosity. They belong to an entirely different sphere' (Bakhtin 7). Bakhtin's spectacles are often represented as a world in travesty or a world upside down, and the chaos associated with these are evident in the storyworlds of the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series.

The character of Captain Underpants himself may be the ultimate example of the uncrowned authority, or the clown who serves as temporary regent during the feast, albeit in this instance, in the role of superhero. In the first novel in the series, he is introduced as

a character in a comic book created by George and Harold. Later in the novel, the boys hypnotise Mr Krupp, the principal of their school, so that he becomes the 'real-life' version of Captain Underpants. In all the subsequent novels in the series the transformation continues, mostly under the boys' control. Mr Krupp is changed from 'the meanest, sourest old principal in the whole history of Jerome Horwitz Elementary School' (18) into Captain Underpants, the world's greatest superhero fighting 'for Truth, Justice and all that is Pre-Shrunk and Cottony' (65). This uncrowning or undressing, is evident in the visual contrast of Mr Krupp in his toupee and tie, and the bald, pot-bellied superhero in his white briefs and red cape. He represents not only Bakhtin's clowns and fools but also the feast as a 'temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers' (Bakhtin 10) where the child protagonists assume control of the authorities under whom they are normally subjugated.

In the *Treehouse* series, each novel begins with a 'tour' of the new treehouse highlighting to readers the 'utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience' (Bakhtin 10). The concept of a treehouse as an iconic child's hideaway is merged with the extraordinary excess of the multi-storied treehouse in the text. Across the series each treehouse builds upon a diverse range of feasts and spectacles including, but not limited to: a games room (*13-Storey*), a mud-fighting arena (*26-Storey*), 'a disco with a light-up dance floor and giant mirror ball' (*39-Storey*), 'a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week, non-stop Punch and Judy show' (*52-Storey*), 'a Disguise-o-Matic 5000, which has a disguise for every occasion' (*52-Storey*), and 'a birthday room (where it's always your birthday, even when it's not)' (*65-Storey*). The visual representations of these spectacles include cues to indicate celebration in the inclusion of food, bunting, lights etc. A helpful synopsis of activities mid-way through *The 13-Storey Treehouse* serves as an example of the excess of chaotic festivities typically occurring in the books:

> 'We rode the elevator back up to the main deck. This was really it. No more distractions. No more excuses. No more flying cats, giant banana attacks, barking dogs, pretend mermaids, evil sea monsters, popcorn parties, lemonade guzzling, burp-gas-filled bubblegum bubbles or marshmallow trampolines.'

(*13-Storey* 140)

Bakhtin's ritual spectacles are also home to a variety of monstrous creatures (345) and both series present a seemingly unending supply of such participants: Pilkey's Purple Potty People (*Potty People*), Radioactive Robo-Boxers (*Robo-Boxers*), Bionic Booger Boy (*Booger Boy1*), Ridiculous Robo-Boogers (*Booger Boy2*), Zombie Nerds (*Invasion*), Talking Toilets (*Talking Toilets*), Wicked Wedgie Woman (*Wedgie Woman*); and Griffiths' sea monster Mermaidia *(13-Storey),* Captain Woodenhead the pirate (*26-Storey*), Gorganzola the greediest and most disgusting fish in the ocean (*26-Storey*), Trunkinator the boxing elephant (*39-Storey*), the frogpotamus (*52-Storey*), and Bignoseasaur (*65-Storey*) to name only a handful. The visual depictions of these characters often embrace Bakhtin's grotesque imagery, particularly in their hybridity, scatological references and often gigantic dimensions. The use of alliteration, hybridisation and parody in the comic play associated with the naming of these festive monstrosities are evidence of Bakhtin's next manifestation of carnival - comic verbal compositions, 'parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular' (5).

Comic Verbal Compositions

Bakhtin suggests that during Rabelais' time, the body of comic literature was often a parody of scholarly, scientific and liturgical literature, deemed to be part of the 'official culture', and the associated laughter was 'linked to carnivalesque forms and symbols' (15). This mixture of high (parody) and low (carnivalesque) is what Cross refers to as compounded forms of humour, which she contends are increasingly found in junior children's literature (19). These kinds of intertextual parodies abound in both the textual and visual discourses of Pilkey's and Griffiths' texts where adult culture is parodied, and thereby interrogated. On the cover of each book, Pilkey overtly proclaims each new instalment as an 'epic novel' and the continued adventures of Captain Underpants acts as both a visual and textual parody of superhero comics and epic adventure stories. Griffiths includes a wide range of intertextual references in his series. *The 65-Storey Treehouse* has an excellent, and sustained, example of a parody of adult culture in one of the newest additions to the treehouse, the 'TREE-NN (Treehouse News Network): a 24-hour TV news centre, featuring regular updates on all the latest treehouse news, current events and gossip' (14). The news studio is illustrated on a double page spread in the first chapter.
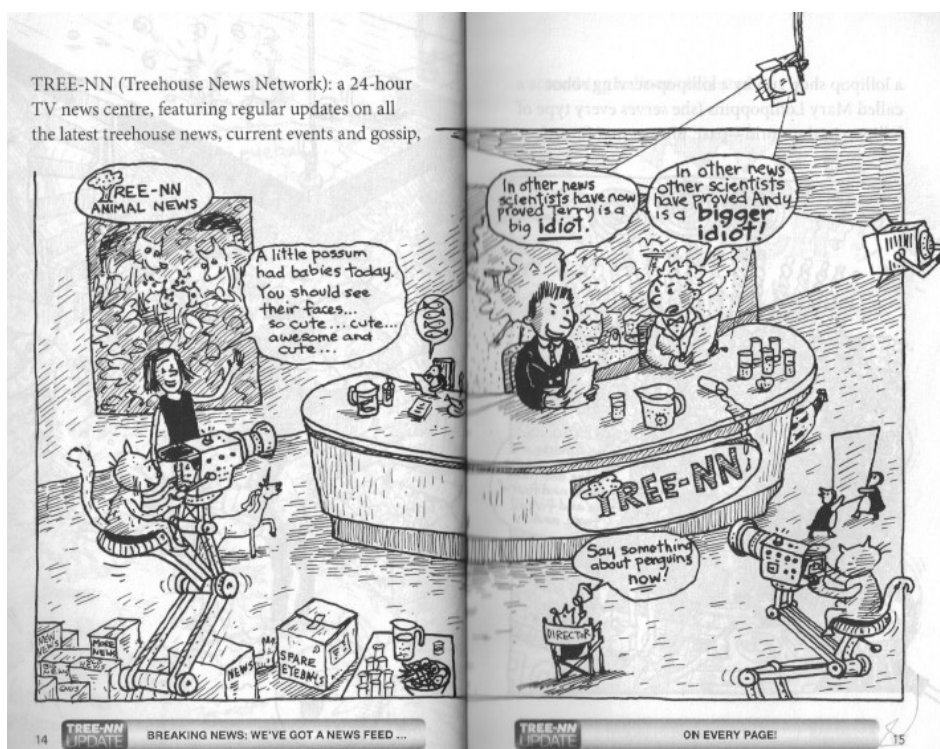
(*65- Storey* 14-15)

In this parody of the news network CNN, which one suspects readers may be aware of, Andy and Terry are seated at the news desk, cats operate the cameras, penguins act as co-host and producer, and a random unicorn watches on. The reader's perspective seems to be from a slightly elevated positon – possibly behind a camera, like the cats on either side. This situates readers both at a distance but also potentially as part of the action. The Tree-NN Update news feed, which runs along the bottom of the page for the rest of the book, uses a different font and framing in a style similar to news feeds children may be familiar with from television viewing. This commentary acts as an additional discourse outside the main narrative with 'breaking news' on every page including self-reflexive references such as 'BOOK NEWS: YOU HAVE JUST REACHED PAGE 184!' (184). This simultaneously distances readers from the storyworld by interrupting, and commenting upon, their reading of the main narrative while also increasing their engagement with the text.

While this is an example of sustained parody in a single text, Pilkey employs a game of comic verbal composition across all the books in his series. In the opening chapter of each book, and often again within the text, readers are presented in the visual field with some kind of signage or message board, belonging to local businesses, or often Jerome

Horwitz Elementary, the school attended by George and Harold. These boards are initially depicted with an 'official' message but in subsequent illustrations, readers can observe George and Harold rearranging the lettering on the boards to create carnivalesque messages, often with a bodily reference. There is no mention of this activity in the verbal narrative. By way of example, in the seventh novel, the 'National Fine Arts Academy' becomes, rather unsurprisingly, 'The National Fart Academy', and in the third novel, the lunch menu board goes from serving 'New Tasty Cheese and Lentil Pot-Pies' to 'Nasty Toilet Pee-Pee Sandwiches'. While not strictly parody, these examples represent literal word play within the visual discourse. The 're-arrangement' of official language by the boys with 'the frequent use of vernacular terms and alternative swear words is both an example of carnival's taboo and playful use of language' (James *Subversion* 371).


(*Invasion* 13, 16)

In the visual images, the unused letters remain on the ground so readers may engage with the additional game of attempting to determine whether these are really the letters from the board (they are). The contrasting reactions of Mr. Krupp's shock and the boys' laughter, their positions on opposite sides of the page and the visual cue of the boys rapidly exiting off the page away from Mr Krupp, reinforce the opposition of adult and childhood cultures. Readers are likely to share the boys' reaction and find the message funny, precisely because Mr Krupp does not.

Bakhtin contends that parodies composed in Latin and those referencing academic and liturgical works 'demanded from their authors a certain degree of learning, sometimes at a high level' (14) and the same may be true for some of the parodies and intertextual references presented in these texts. This can be problematic in texts for young readers,

where authors cannot be certain that their readers will have acquired the requisite level of knowledge to appreciate the parody. In *The 65-Storey Treehouse*, the boys have travelled back through time and Terry is teaching cave people to paint. There are six pages almost entirely illustrated with 'cave art' while the Tree-NN ticker informs readers these are: ROCK-ART REMBRANDTS! VINCENT VAN PALEOS! CAVE MEN KANDINSKYS! CAVE WOMEN KAHLOS! PREHISTORIC PICASSOS! [and] WAYBACK WARHOLS! (*65-Storey* 172-177).
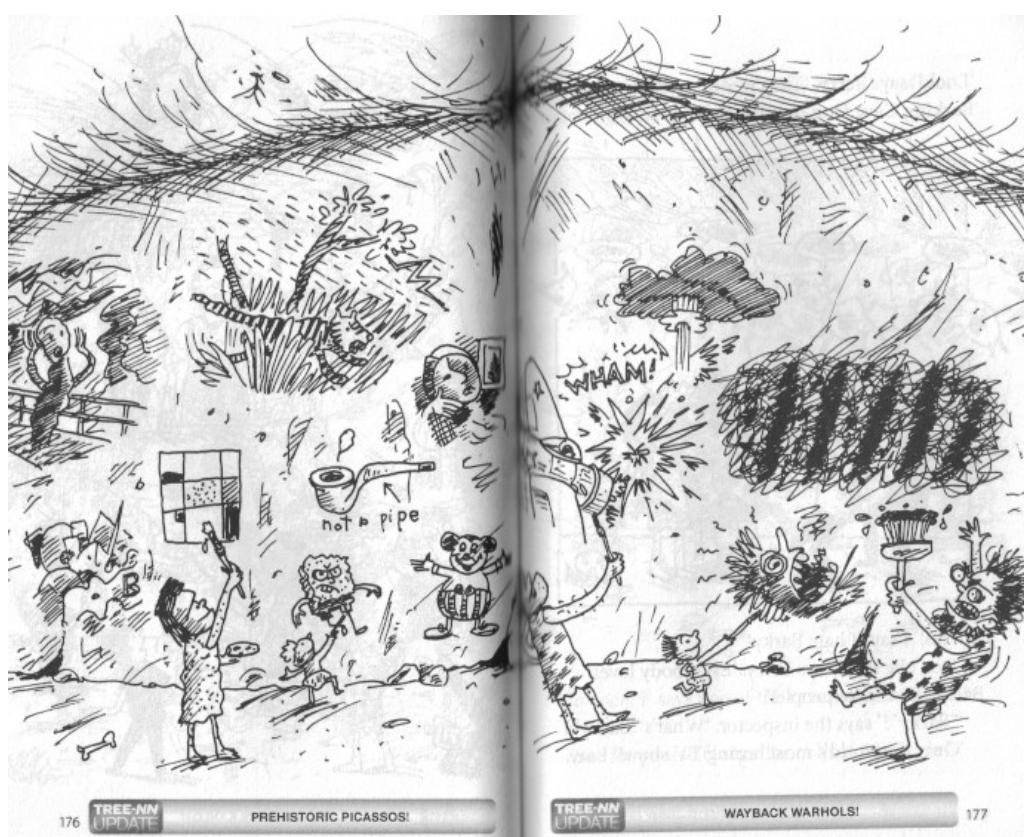
(65-Storey 176-177)

Included in the illustrations are visual parodies of, or references to, a multitude of famous artworks which are probably not familiar to young readers and which are not necessarily referenced in the verbal discourse (which is not in the narrative 'proper' but only in the tickertape). As an example, on the page labelled 'PREHISTORIC PICASSOS' there is a drawing of a pipe with the lettering 'not a pipe' and an arrow pointing to it which is a clear intertextual reference to Magritte's 'The Treachery of Images'. This work is often referenced in children's metafictive picturebooks, though it is unlikely readers will have

knowledge of the original. There are also more contemporary references such as SpongeBob Squarepants and Mickey Mouse. Readers are likely to appreciate the juxtaposition of famous artworks in the context of 'cave art' even if they cannot identify specific works.

Pilkey parodies scientific language throughout his novels, mixing vernacular and nonsense terms with legitimate scientific vocabulary. He uses words and language which might normally be considered outside the vocabulary of his readership, particularly early readers. In the sixth novel, Melvin Sneedly, George and Harold's nerdy nemesis, has built a robot:

> '…which has three sets of interchangeable laser eyeballs, Macro-Hydraulic Jump-A-Tronic legs, Super-Somgobulating Automo-Arms, and an extendable Octo-Claw ribcage, and was powered by three separate Twin Turbo-9000 SP5 Kung-Fu Titanium/Lithium Alloy Processors, which were all built into a virtually indestructible Flexo-Growmonic endoskeleton that had the power to punch through cinder block, crush steel in its vise-like grasp, and plow mercilessly through poorly written run-on sentences.'
>
> > (*Booger Boy1* 74)

In the excessive description, construction of 'new' hybrid words and the self-referential comment relating to run-on sentences, this example illustrates how this form of carnival humour highlights 'the cultural processes involved in the construction of language and meaning' (James *Subversion* 371). This play with words and language can also be found in Bakhtin's third form of carnival laughter, various genres of billingsgate, the 'peculiar verbal forms of the marketplace' (17), which are evident in profanities and abuse.

Genres of Billingsgate

During carnival, the language of the people considered unacceptable, vulgar or abusive outside the marketplace becomes ambivalent, and 'there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life' (Bakhtin 15). In the marketplace, 'verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed and indecent words and expressions may be used' (Bakhtin 16). There seems ample evidence of this in Pilkey's and Griffiths' texts and a few examples (by no means exhaustive) should serve for the purposes of establishing that this form of carnival laughter is evident in the worlds created by the texts.

The titles of the novels in the *Captain Underpants* series make excessive scatological references. This language would normally be considered unsuitable for cultural items such as books and particularly undesirable for those aimed at readers expanding their vocabulary. Some truncated highlights include: *The Bionic Booger Boy, The Nasty Nostril Nuggets, The Purple Potty People, Tippy Tinkletrousers* and *Professor Poopypants*. This scatological naming is pervasive in the fourth novel featuring Professor Poopypants as the villain who creates the Name Change-o-Chart 2000 and demands everyone changes their names, with a litany of 'indecent' results:

> 'Stephanie Yarkoff became "Snotty Gorillabreath." Robbie Staenberg became "Loopy Pizzapants," and poor little Janet Warwich became "Poopsie Chucklebutt".
> "This may be the most horrible moment in all of human history," said the local news reporter to her audience. "It seems that everyone on Earth must now change his or her name to avoid getting shrunk! Good luck to you all!
> "This is Chim-Chim Diaperbrains reporting for Eyewitness News. Now, back to you, Booger."'
>
> (*Poopypants* 92)

Readers are also likely to use the accompanying chart to 'change' their own names to a scatological equivalent (e.g. Buttercup Stinkerlips) in a further example of how the texts are inviting readers to become interactive participants by including a game within the visual discourse.
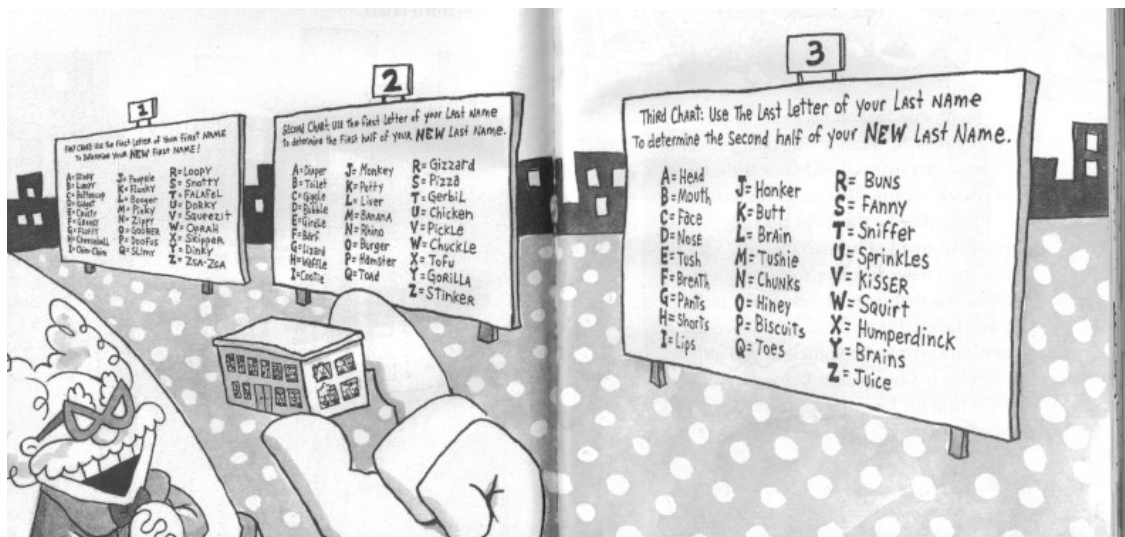
(*Poopypants* 90-91)

In an example of metalepsis, the chaos of the name changing breaks beyond the story narrative into the title page of the novel. On this illustrated page, the name of Dav Pilkey, listed as author, has been crossed out (by the character Professor Poopypants) and replaced with 'Gidget Hamsterbrains'.

The ambivalent abuse between people at the marketplace is played out in the storyworld of the *Treehouse* series in the abuse between Andy and Terry, who continuously refer to each other as idiots. An example of a typical exchange occurs at the Tree-NN news desk illustration in *The 65-Storey Treehouse* discussed previously. The visual discourse shows an exchange between the two boys where the incongruity between the language of a newsreader and the abusive terms adds to the humour. The use of underlining and a bold font draws attention to the abusive terms:

Andy: 'In other news scientists have now proved Terry is a big **idiot**!'
Terry: 'In other news other scientists have proved Andy is a **bigger idiot**!'
(*65-Storey* 15)

Another example of an exchange of insults between the two protagonists occurs in *The 13-Storey Treehouse*, where the narrative overtly recognises that this type of language may be considered undesirable in everyday life, further acknowledging the carnival nature of the texts and their position as being outside 'acceptable' behaviour.

''Don't be silly, Andy,' said Terry, laughing. 'There aren't twenty-four hours in a day!'
'YES THERE ARE!' I shouted. 'And if you think I'm going to let you waste any more time on these stupid sea-monkeys, then you're out of your tiny, pea-brained, numbskull-sized mind!'
'Watch your language, Andy,' said Terry. 'There might be children reading.''
(*13-Storey* 87-88)

There is an illustration on the same page, where Terry, as illustrator, has drawn a diagram entitled 'BRAINS: A SIMPLE GUIDE', with a labelled cross-section of Terry and his 'large pea-sized brain', contradicting the verbal narrative suggestion that his brain may be 'tiny'. In contrast, Andy is drawn with a much smaller 'atom size-brain (tiny)' alongside a gnat and a bird, both with brains smaller than Terry's but larger than Andy's. Terry's position in the upper-left corner, looking down on Andy in the bottom right furthers a visual insistence of superiority. This is a rather complex abusive interaction

between the protagonists across the discourses of the text which demands a level of sophistication from readers to appreciate.
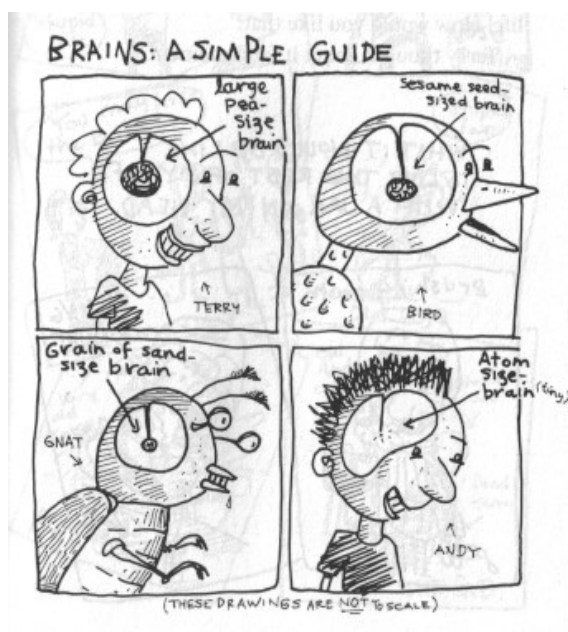

(*13-Storey* 87)

Both Pilkey and Griffiths employ another, similar strategy for representing the language of the people, or children, in the visual discourse of the texts. Central to both series is the fact that the boys are involved in creating their own stories in various forms. In an example of mise-en-abyme, these stories are embedded as illustrations within the narratives. There are spelling and grammatical errors in keeping with the assumed age of the creators (and readers), which mark them as distinct from the narrative proper. The mode of illustration is also simpler than in the main narrative, signifying a kind of visual billingsgate. In the *13-Storey Treehouse*, Andy and Terry are struggling in their attempt to write a book. There is a four-page spread with a border meant to resemble Andy's notebook where a single word is written on each page, reading across the pages: 'Once upom [sic] a time' (64-67). The style and size of the font replicates 'real' handwriting,
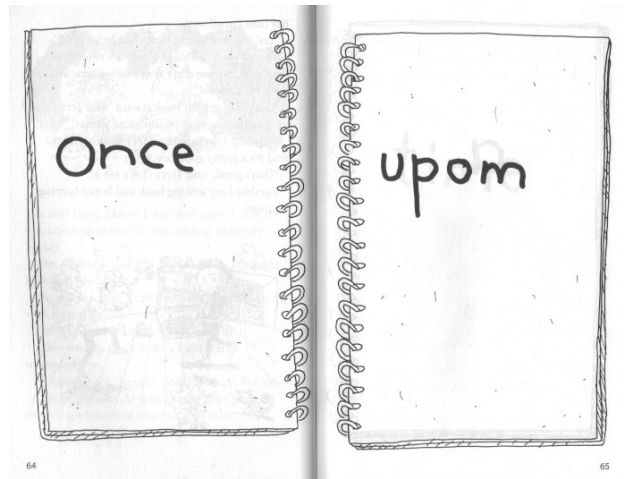
(*13-Storey* 64-65)

Similarly, but in a more detailed example, in the first of the *Captain Underpants* novels readers are introduced to George and Harold and discover that they like to spend their free time creating their own comic books. Chapter 3 is an embedded version of one of their homemade comics, which also introduces the character of Captain Underpants.
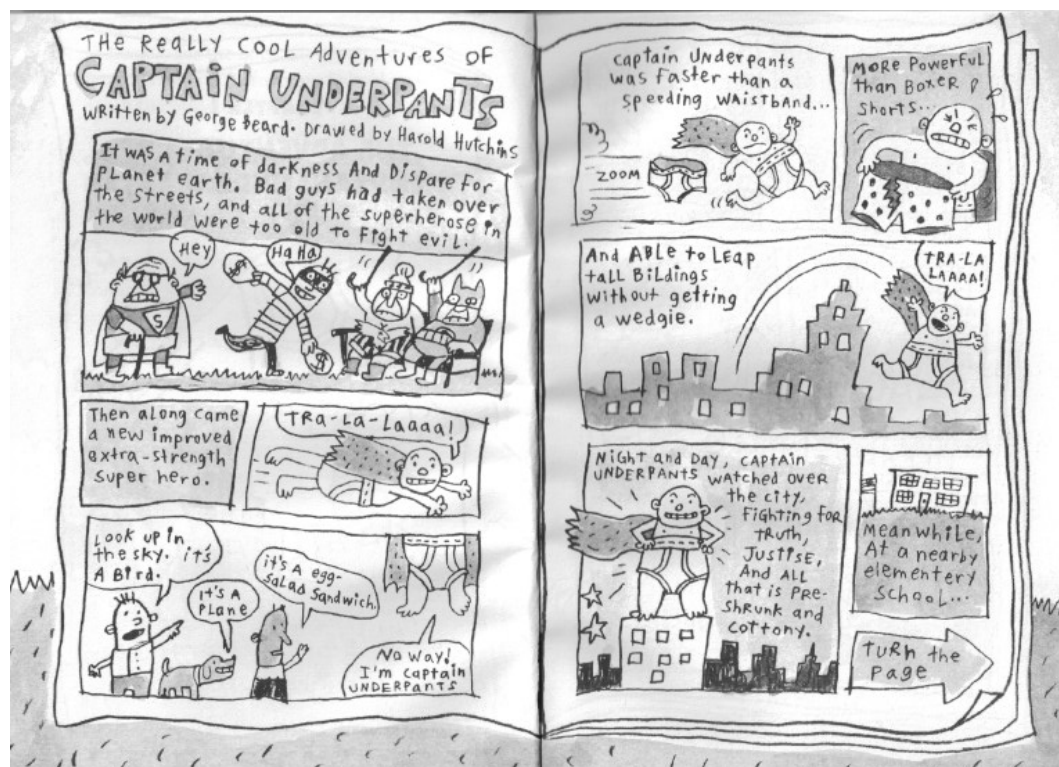
(*Adventures* 10-11)

Readers will recognise the familiar layout of a comic book, which is different from the main narrative, with drawings that are similar to, but much cruder than, those in the rest of the text. The verbal narrative within the illustration uses a font designed to replicate the boys' handwriting and includes misspellings, grammatical errors and misuse of capital letters as an example of visual billingsgate. Versions of the boys' comic books are repeatedly used throughout the series, including as a 'prologue' to future instalments. They represent a kind of 'homage' parody of the comic book form as well as a way of incorporating billingsgate into both the textual and visual discourses.

These examples of mise-en-abyme in both series, where the pages of the novel are 'replaced' with texts created by characters, work in several ways. In addition to representing the billingsgate of the carnival, they immerse readers inside the storyworld by presenting the texts directly to readers as part of their world (Painter 17), draw attention to the constructed nature of the narratives, and align readers to the protagonists as they may recognise those texts as closer to ones they themselves may create.

These contemporary humorous series create a space for children where they are encouraged to play and engage with the storyworld created by the texts. The consistent application of carnival humour across the series acts to instantiate the worlds of these series as carnivals where 'sustained mapping of a schema throughout a text is a key element in drawing out the significance from the story world' (Stephens *Schema* 15). Stephens suggests 'once readers recognize and mentally instantiate the schema, the recurrence or addition of further components enables the schema to be modified for socially transformative purposes' (Stephens *Schema* 15). In this case of 'successive series' where there is little change or development of narrative elements across a series (Reimer 2), readers will come to expect a similar experience on subsequent readings. Rather than modify this schema, once instantiated in the first installation, the schema is built upon (much like the treehouse) and provides a way for readers to approach the texts. This repetition may then function pedagogically as 'repetition is central to most pedagogical methods, invoked as a demonstrable effective practice in establishing and confirming desired attitudes and behaviour in learning subjects' (Reimer 8).

These texts, aimed at early readers who are in the midst of developing literary skills, play with ideas and examples of language and in doing so encourage readers to become

more sophisticated when analysing and interpreting texts. The parody and intertextuality inherent in Bakhtin's carnival humour combined with the complexity of bimodal texts where 'there is more than one meaning system at play' (Painter 134), demand that readers negotiate these more cognitive forms of humour in making sense of the texts. Referring to picture books, Stephens maintains that texts 'can never be said to exist without either a socialising or educational intention, or else without a specific orientation towards the reality constructed by the society that produces them' (*Language* 158). In her research of humorous writing for children, Kathryn James finds 'humorous literature can be: a form of play, a cognitive challenge, pure delight, a release from inhibitions, an antidote to anxiety, and a means of vicariously acquiring power' (*Subversion* 368). In the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series we see examples of Dresang's new interactive, multimodal narratives which exhibit both a socialising and educational 'intention'. These texts use humour to construct an alternative carnival world where in playing, children learn not only about 'the society that produces them' but develop skills which will assist them in understanding and negotiating their place in that society.

'In short, Bakhtin's carnival is a temporary but potentially permanent, festive but potentially sombre, subversion of the prevalent order by a community, rather than an individual with a tendency towards the grotesque, that is the sensuous, overflowing and incomplete.'

(Malewski 47)

Carnival Grotesque: Gross is Great!

Central to Bakhtin's concept of carnival is the deeply positive and ambivalent nature of the grotesque body which is 'unfinished, outgrows itself, [and] transgresses its own limits' (26). John Stephens suggests ideas of the grotesque are culturally derived and that which 'deviates from such perceptions and hence transgresses rather than expresses norms may be deemed grotesque' (*Grotesque* 186). In children's texts these transgressions are often the focus of criticism or concern provoking 'an adult condemnation of literature that strays too far into the comic grotesque and/or scatological' (Cross 115), while at the same time are deeply appealing to children (Daniels 168). This chapter examines how the grotesque depicted in the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series form part of a larger carnival experience. I argue that an appreciation of, rather than an aversion to, the transgressive nature of the grotesque fulfils a socialising function for readers, reflecting '*both* a social and anti-social tendency' (Bristol 25) inherent in carnival.

The tension between the negative and positive reactions to the grotesque is evident in critical approaches where meaning may slip between 'that which is horrifying or disgusting, and the other, to that which is merely joyful and gay' (Heyman 165). Dieter Petzold delineates these two forms as Kayser's dark grotesque and Bakhtin's lighter carnivalesque, and suggests that 'when dealing with the grotesque in children's culture, it is tempting to subscribe to the Bakhtinian view; but the disturbing aspect of the grotesque is by no means absent in children's books' (186, see also Cross 173). Petzold also suggests that children may perceive the grotesque differently from adults. The conflation of different aspects of the grotesque or the differing perceptions of adult and child readers result in varying degrees of aversion or appreciation towards the grotesque in children's

literature. Given that adults may dismiss texts based on assumptions about the perceived quality of content, how such texts contextualize the grotesque is worth considering. Bakhtin maintains that it was the isolation of the grotesque from the culture of carnival which 'ignores the deep ambivalence of the grotesque and sees it merely as a negation' (304). In the construction of a carnival space, do these texts reflect this ambivalence so that readers consider the grotesque both disgusting and appealing?

In his entry in *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*, John Stephens notes the potential for the grotesque to be either uncanny or carnivalesque and asserts that the grotesque 'has a socially transformative purpose: it is transgressive because it challenges normative forms of representation and behaviour, and it disturbs boundaries by giving the abject social recognition' (187). This suggests a common understanding of how boundaries are defined and that ideas of what constitutes the 'gross' or abject are socially constructed – and may be dependent on where you stand in relation to that boundary. Carolyn Daniels argues that 'for children, carnival-grotesque material can reveal what adults are trying to suppress and it makes a move towards deconstructing sociocultural systems and laying bare their values' (166). In their study of transgression and the carnivalesque, Stallybrass and White suggest that the appreciation or disgust of the grotesque differentiated 'high' from 'low'. That which is seen as 'Other' became constitutive of identity (191), so that 'the carnivalesque was marked out as an intensely powerful semiotic realm precisely because bourgeois culture constructed its self-identity by rejecting it' (202). A carnivalesque reversal of Stallybrass' logic begs the question: do children constitute an identity in opposition to the dominant social norms by embracing and appreciating that which is 'socially disgusting', or abject? That which is appropriate (and highly valued) in the carnival domain - the grotesque - becomes a marker for delineation from the adult world where such a form of appreciation is seen as transgressive (Stallybrass 198). In the construction of a carnival world within the texts readers recognise these transgressions, as 'carnivalesque texts, by breaching boundaries, explore where they properly lie' (Stephens *Language* 135-6), yet are able to enjoy the grotesque without the fear of abjection that might occur in the real world. In her work examining the types of confectionary selected and consumed by children, often viewed as disgusting by adults, Alison James suggests:

> 'By confusing the adult order children create for themselves considerable room for movement within the limits imposed upon them by adult society. This deflection of adult perception is crucial for both the maintenance and continuation of the child's culture and for the growth of the concept of the self for the individual child.' (394-395)

In a similar way, the popularity of these 'anti-social' texts where some children will like them 'simply because fellow children say they like them' (Rudd *Child* 28) supports the recognition of an alternative social grouping defined in opposition to adult culture - childhood.

A 'renewed vitality' (24) in the positive, ambivalent nature of the grotesque that Bakhtin argued had been lost can be recognised in the increasing popularity of the comic grotesque in contemporary children's literature 'in which taboo subjects, such as the openly scatological, are now commonly utilised in humorous literature for junior readers, contrary to the accepted rules of 'polite', ordered society, in which such 'rudeness' is usually curbed' (Cross 123). McGillis too recognises the possibility of 'a return to the grotesque body and its appeal to both child and adult, or at least that adult who does not take prissy niceties too seriously' (*Humour* 64). This may be the case, though there are those who take a less enthusiastic position. Annette Wannamaker suggests that 'Dav Pilkey's wildly popular, gross, and irreverent Captain Underpants books are partially about taking pleasure in reading about abjection' (85). For Bakhtin, however, it is important that the grotesque 'is not an isolated commonplace obscenity of our modern times but an organic part of a large and complex world of popular marketplace forms. Only if torn away from this world and seen per se in the modern sense will these images appear vulgar and dirty' (380). The grotesque may be perceived as abject when isolated from the carnival, but within the carnivals created by these texts, these 'obscenities' are viewed positively and embraced rather than rejected by readers.

The previous chapters of this thesis have worked to illustrate how narrative strategies employed in both the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series reflect this carnival spirit and situate readers within a carnival space. I am arguing that situating the grotesque within a larger carnival context mitigates negative associations of the grotesque for readers. Simon Dentith argues that 'many carnival-like degradations clearly functioned to reinforce communal and hierarchal norms' (71). David Rudd contends that the child reader 'has both a socio-cultural and an embodied sense of its location in society, from which vantage point it will respond, dialogically, to the various fictions proffered, liking some and rejecting others' (*Child* 28). This chapter will consider how the grotesque element of carnival in the texts, and in particular Bakhtin's notions of the material bodily principle and the bodily lower stratum, create a sense of community based upon a shared appreciation of the transgression of norms imposed by adult society.

Too Much is Never Enough

In his consideration of both the light and dark side of the carnivalesque grotesque, Danow argues, reiterating Bakhtin (303), that the concept of the grotesque includes 'within its vast domain a fundamental sense of exaggeration, hyperbolism, and excessiveness' (35). These more general traits of the grotesque are abundantly evident across both series which are premised on an exaggerated excess of the hyperbolic and as such overtly embrace the notion of transgression as positive. The endlessly increasing additions to Andy and Terry's treehouse - from a 'modest' 13-storeys through to 65-storeys certainly violate any known building codes. Each extension brings more ludicrous attractions including, but certainly not limited to: a man-eating shark tank, a mud fighting arena, a chocolate waterfall, a life-size snakes and ladders game (with real snakes), and a cloning machine. The *Captain Underpants* series demonstrates this transgressive spirit in the titles of the series. The 'first epic novel' (itself a possibly exaggerated description) is simply called *The Adventures of Captain Underpants.* By the third instalment in the series, *Captain Underpants and the Invasion of the Incredibly Naughty Cafeteria Ladies From Outer Space (and the Subsequent Assault of the Equally Evil Lunchroom Zombie Nerds)* is presented as a suitable title for a children's book. The excessive length and abundance of adjectives suggest there is no such thing as 'too much'. This humorous aspect of the grotesque is further exaggerated by the 'coupling' (Painter 143) of the visual and verbal elements of the texts, which operates to amplify the transgressions of the carnivalesque. The covers of the books provide an excellent example at the visual level, where the 'choice of 'breaching' the margin provides an iconic way of suggesting that the depicted character has too much energy or presence to be entirely contained by the boundaries of the image' (Painter 106). In this case, the stories are barely bound by the materiality of the books as the treehouse details wrap themselves around the front, spine, back and inside covers and Captain Underpants appears to be flying out from the confines of the book.
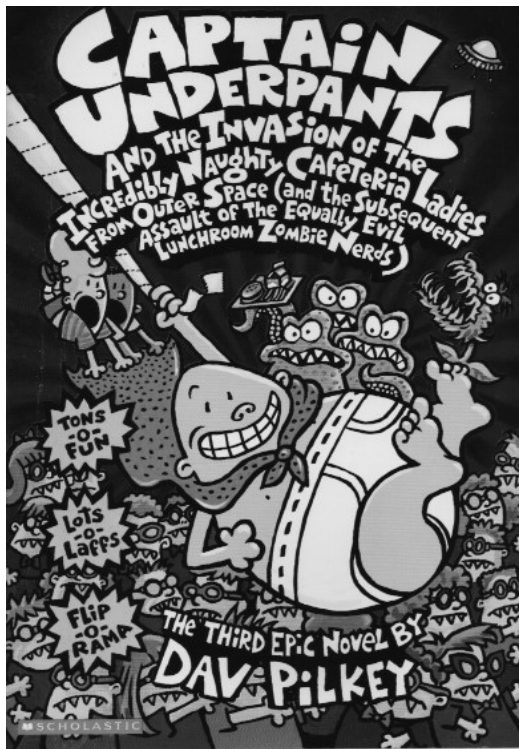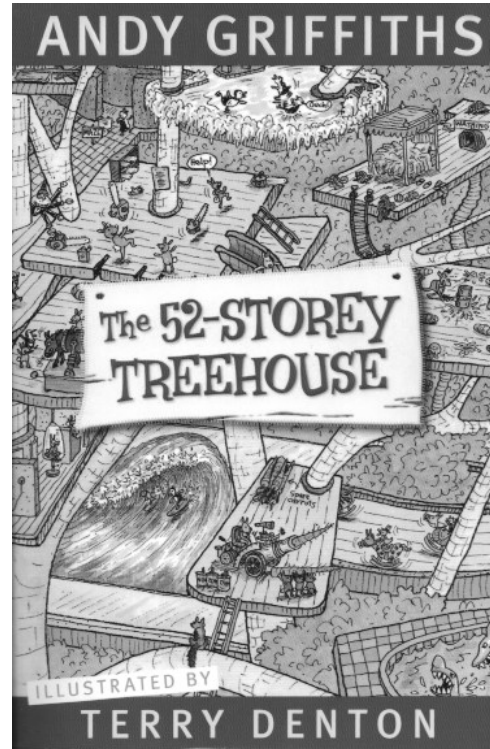
(*Invasion* cover)   (*52-Storey* cover)

This breaching, or lack of containment, is also evident at a narrative level in recurring time travel episodes of both series, where the protagonists travel back in time, usually in order to rectify a mistake they have made. In his discussion of narrative structure and organisation, Stephens suggests that though readers generally reconstruct story events according to a linear timeline, narratives often use 'flashbacks' and 'flashforwards' to inform readers, producing more sophisticated readings of texts (*Narratology* 58). In addition to demanding a more sophisticated reading, the unbridled contravening of chronological ordering in these series, where there is not merely travel back and forth in time (and dimensions) but also across books in the series, also contributes to a sense of indeterminacy and chaos associated with the carnival by disrupting and transgressing reader (and character) expectations. As a simple example, in *The 39-Storey Treehouse* a character who had died in a previous book reappears:

> ''But we thought you were dead,' says Terry.
> Bill grins. 'So did I when I read *The 26-Storey Treehouse* and saw that picture of a skeleton wearing my postman's cap. I was very sad for a while until I realized that if I was feeling sad, then I must still be alive – so it couldn't have been me in the picture after all!'' (55)

In another example of coupling, the accompanying illustration entitled 'THE TIME WE SAW BILL'S SKELETON IN THE MAZE OF DOOM' includes an embedded image replicating page 300 of *The 26-Storey Treehouse*. The overt self-reflexive intertextuality, both in the verbal and visual discourse, and the extraneous labelling to include 'frame', 'words', 'paper' and 'MAZE OF DOOM' three times contribute to a sense of unnecessary excess.
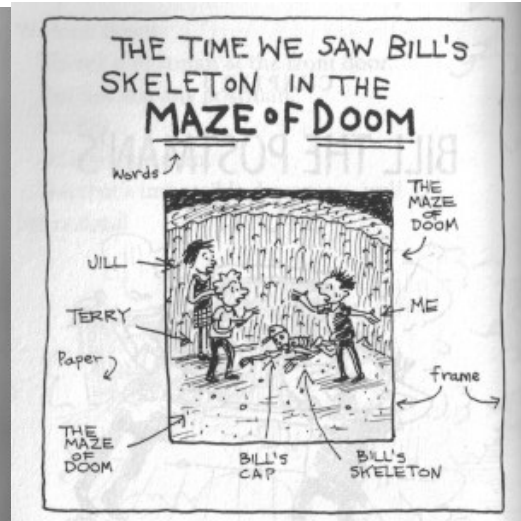
(*26-Storey* 300)   (*39-Storey* 52)

In the *Captain Underpants* series there is an example of an even more complex timeline, where a particular episode is revisited across different books in the series in order to rectify complications which arise. The visual perspective of each iteration is modified slightly in each book, as seen in the following illustrations, while the verbal text is replicated verbatim as characters and readers 'return' to that moment.

(*Potty People* 171)   (*Tinkletrousers* 15)   (*Robo-Boxers* 40)

Unsurprisingly, the 're-do' creates more complications than solutions as characters begin to accumulate with each episode so that several permutations (or mutations) of the same character begin to appear together. This excess of narrative transgressions - plot, character, structure, focalisation - is evident in the following extract from *Captain Underpants and the Revolting Revenge of the Radioactive Robo-Boxers*, where three versions of Tippy Tinkletrousers (who was once Professor Poopypants) are pursuing George and Harold, and even the characters have become confused. The use of alliteration, the repetition and accumulation of names – Big Tippy, Tiny Tippy, Slightly Younger Tiny Tippy – and repeated reference to the 'last epic novel' all contribute to a sense of excess.

> '"I was just thinking the same thing!" said Slightly Younger Tiny Tippy. "But unfortunately, we stored the Goosy-Grow 4000 in the top half of our Robo-Suit, and Captain Underpants destroyed it back in chapter eight of our last epic novel!"
> "Hey," cried Tiny Tippy, "why don't we go back – er, I mean forward in time to chapter eight of our last epic novel? We could grab that Goosy-Grow 4000 and make ourselves GIGANTIC!"
> "I like the way you think, me!" said Slightly Younger Tiny Tippy.
> So while Big Tippy chased everybody through the treacherous jungles of the Cretaceous period, the two Tiny Tippys set their Tinkle-Time Travelometers for the night of the big battle from chapter 8 of our last epic novel.' (64-65)

In these two examples, the immoderate temporal discontinuity is evidence of the exaggerated excess of the hyperbolic which contributes to the grotesque spirit of the books. Transgressions occur not only in the linear timeline of the stories, but through metafictive references to other books in the series, and the complex metaleptic breaching in both the visual and verbal discourse (Bhadury 302). These narrative transgressions work to create a larger sense of carnival where 'the depth, variety and power of separate grotesque themes can be understood' (Bakhtin 51). Bakhtin's concern that 'the new canon is completely alien to hyperbolization' (322) seems to have been reversed in these examples of contemporary children's literature.

Embracing Grotesque Bodies

In Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism 'all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable' (19) and is considered positive. Bakhtin argues that only when isolated from the carnival do the negative connotations of the grotesque body become vulgar (39). This suggests that transgressions associated with the material body may be

central to the grotesque realism of carnival but also require the carnival spirit to be in place in order for them to be viewed positively rather than negatively. Bakhtin's concern was that what was once a 'boundless ocean of grotesque bodily imagery… has become a tiny island' (319). It can be argued that these books, by presenting what could be described as a 'boundless ocean' of gross bodily references are viewed positively within the context of the broader humorous carnivalesque and spirit of the grotesque that the texts have created.

The 'typical grotesque forms of exaggerated body parts' (328) Bakhtin finds in Rabelais' work are widely represented in these texts, and this excess adds to the humorous effect. Rod McGillis suggests that the body has always been a source of humour in children's literature, particularly as a description of defiant behaviour, and 'for children, size matters' (*Humour* 259). This can be seen in the previous *Captain Underpants* extract through the various version of Tippy - from pocket-sizes to SUPA MEGA TIPPY (70) - and the images of the enormous Robo-suit bottom with Big Tippy peeking out through the fly. These examples of dismemberment and exaggerated body parts feature heavily in the *Treehouse* series. In the bowling alley in *The 13-Storey Treehouse* heads are used as bowling balls (8), an oversized finger features as a superhero (143), and the recurring character of Mr Big Nose, whose nose gets bigger and redder as his anger increases, are a sampling of the many situations where the visual discourse in the books is used to amplify the grotesque in exaggerated physical dimensions.

The room of exploding eyeballs in *The 65-Storey Treehouse* (12-13) provides an example. The double-page unframed illustration is filled with boxes of various sized eyeballs and the splattering of exploded eyeballs, including those of the protagonists, Terry and Andy. This illustrates 'typical grotesque forms of exaggerated body parts that completely hide the normal members of the body…. separate areas of the body enlarged to gigantic dimensions' (328).
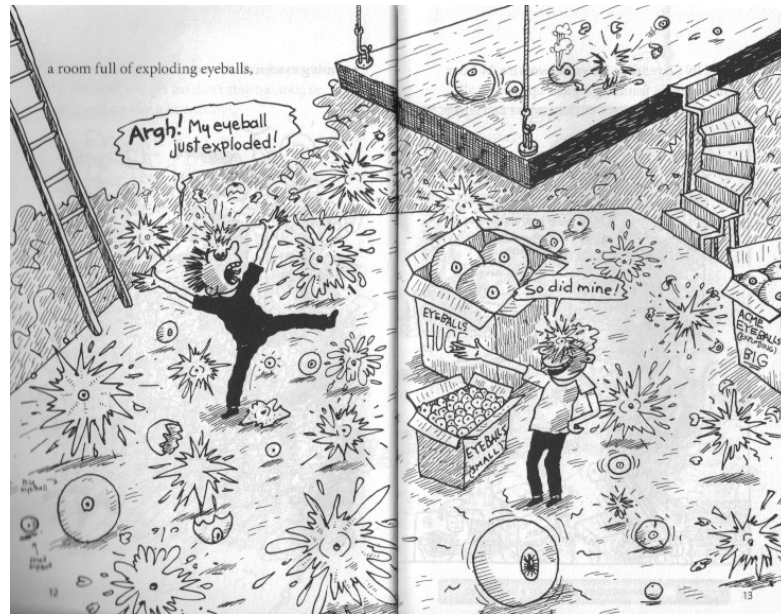
(*65-Storey* 12-13)

The comic excess and the minimalist style of the drawings in these series ensures that grotesque realism is not necessarily realistic, distancing the carnival from the real world (Painter 32). This mode of illustration ensures the grotesque imagery can be viewed as ambivalent, as both disgusting and humorous.

Violent manifestations associated with the body are also a key aspect of Bakhtin's carnival in the 'rituals of travesties, uncrownings, and thrashings' (198) where the lower bodily stratum is revealed in 'the downward movement in fights, beating and blows' (370). This comic ambivalence towards bodily violence evident in the dismemberment in the *Treehouse* episodes, is also expressed quite overtly in the recurring 'Flip-O-Rama' feature of the *Captain Underpants* series, often entitled 'The Incredibly Graphic Violence Chapter'. In the third novel of the series, where readers 'animate' George and Harold 'bonking' bad guys with rolling pins and frying pans, the chapter begins with a warning to readers:

'WARNING:
The following chapter contains
terribly inappropriate scenes that
certainly do not belong in a
children's book....'

(*Invasion* 75)

(*Invasion* 89)

The visually depicted bodily violence in the associated illustrations is an example where the 'humour is often broad and focused on that which is potentially subversive, unacceptable, against the grain, less than decorous and difficult to miss' (McGillis *Humour* 264). Certainly for most readers of these series, and one suspects the adults in their lives, incredibly graphic violence would not be considered acceptable as is acknowledged in the 'warning', and it represents a clear transgression of social norms. The overt embrace of this kind of comic violence is evident in the smiles of the boys faces and the use of this as a resolution to the storyline. Readers are also actively participating and enjoying this normally taboo activity as they 'create the action'.

The material bodily principle is concerned with 'devouring and swallowing' (Bakhtin 331), the 'grotesque-utopian banquet' (337) and the 'images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation and sexual life', particularly in 'an extremely exaggerated form' (18). These carnivalesque 'hyperbolic forms of gluttony' (Stephens *Language* 122) are commonly seen in children's literature in the depiction of meals and feasts. McGillis contends that in children's humour 'eating can provide opportunity for fun' (*Humour* 261) and this is certainly the case in these texts. Food and its excessive consumption features throughout the series, especially foods that may normally be considered suitable only for limited consumption and controlled by adults. In the third novel in the *Captain Underpants* series, George and Harold are required to eat lunch with Mr Krupp, who represents 'official culture', as both adult and in his position of authority as principal of the school.

'The next day George and Harold brought their own sandwiches to Mr Krupp's office for lunch.

"I'll trade you half of my peanut-butter-and-gummy-worm sandwich," said George, "for half of your tuna-salad-with-chocolate-chips-and-miniature-marshmallows sandwich."

"Sure," said Harold. "Y'want some barbecue sauce on that?"

"You kids are DISGUSTING!" Mr Krupp shouted.

Soon George and Harold were munching on potato chips with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles. Mr Krupp was turning green.

"What's for dessert?" asked Harold.

"Hard-boiled eggs dipped in hot fudge and Skittles!" said George.

"AAAUGH!" screamed Mr Krupp. "*I can't stand it anymore!*" He got up and stumbled out the door for some fresh air.' (57-58)

The reaction of Mr Krupp is in contrast to those of the boys, who do not react to Mr Krupp's increasing distress at their 'lunch'. This highlights the distinction between what may be considered 'acceptable' by adults and children. Readers will recognise the transgressive nature of the food the boys are consuming, particularly in the unorthodox and unappealing combinations of 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' items such as eggs and hot fudge. The boys are sharing and enjoying that which has been rejected by official culture and declared 'DISGUSTING' by Mr Krupp.

In *The 13-Storey Treehouse*, there is an episode where the boys decide to break from the work of writing their book to have a snack of popcorn in the treehouse. Popcorn is likely to be considered a desirable food by readers, but in this episode the grotesque is addressed in the volume and nature of the 'feast'.

'We ran around and caught as much of it in our mouths as we could until we couldn't eat any more.

'That was a great idea, Andy!' said Terry. 'But now I'm *really* thirsty.'

'Some lemonade will fix that,' I said. 'I'll start the fountain.'

Did I mention that we have a lemonade fountain? Well, we do. It's just like a regular fountain but instead of water has lemonade. Any flavour you want as long as it's red, orange, lemon, cola or tutti-frutti (which is all the flavours mixed together).

We sat in the lemonade fountain for a long time. And when I say a 'a long time', I mean probably a lot longer that we really should have.' (124-126)

Readers are directly addressed in Andy's description of the fountain, bringing them into the story. The transgressive nature of this consumption is recognised in the mixing of flavours and colour, where 'red' is considered a flavour like 'orange'; the fact that the boys

are sitting in the fountain; and the acknowledgment that they consume more than they 'should have'.

The material bodily grotesque continues through the rest of the chapter as the boys begin burping as a result of the amount of lemonade consumed. Terry then chews an excessive amount of bubble gum and blows a bubble with his burps until 'He was inside his own burp-gas-filled bubblegum bubble' (131). Bakhtin's image of the grotesque (325) is evident in the accompanying illustrations with the boys gaping mouths, distended bellies and pages of the boys burping - where the 'BURP' becomes so enormous it pushes the boys out of the way.
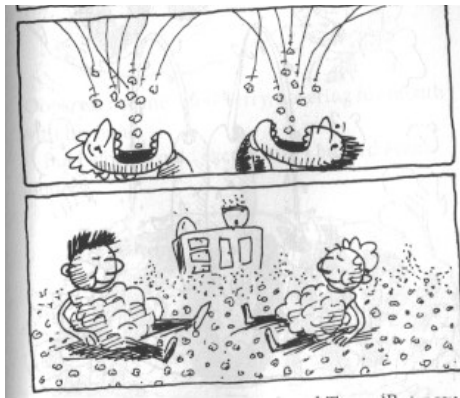
(*13-Storey* 125)   (*13-Storey* 127)

These examples work to situate the grotesque in opposition to adult culture in the predominance of food associated with childhood, the overt disgust of Mr Krupp and the immoderate consumption in both variety and volume of food. The overt transgression of social norms which are typically policed by adults suggests a way in which children may exercise some agency. Readers are positioned to see as positive that which transgresses social norms as the basis of an alternative social order, one where Mr Krupp can be driven from his own office and there are no limitations placed upon 'feasting' (or burping).

The burping in the *Treehouse* example suggests the association of ingestion and elimination, the carnivalesque idea that 'food and waste are intimately connected' (McGillis *Humour* 262). The associated laughter is also linked to Bakhtin's concept of grotesque realism and its connection to 'the bodily lower stratum' (20), or as McGillis succinctly states, 'the fun in poop appears to have staying power' (*Humour* 262).

Images and associations with the scatological are ubiquitous in these series and are often the point at which these kind of texts are assumed to most overtly transgress social norms. The texts embrace this downward slide, where 'debasement is the fundamental artistic principle of grotesque realism: all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum or else combined and mixed with its images' (370). The 'bottoms up' in folk humour' (411) is evident in the character of Captain Underpants whose superpowers are associated with the 'wedgie' power of his underpants and Terry's emergency self-inflating underpants in *The 26-Storey Treehouse* which save the protagonists from pirates when they 'inflate so quickly and with such force that the pirates holding us are thrown backward onto the sand' (242). These are examples of objects 'reborn in the light of the use made of them… renewed in the sphere of their debasement' (Bakhtin 374). Bakhtin's ambivalent, positive sense of the grotesque contends that 'the essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation' (19) but also assumes an associated rebirth or regeneration (21). This triumphant nature of the material bodily principle is evident in several episodes in the books where the gross literally 'saves the day'.

In *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*, in an attempt to stop Dr. Diaper, who is about to blow up the moon and destroy the world, George and Harold resort to the use of … poop.

> '"Only one thing can help us now," said George.
> "What?" asked Harold.
> "Rubber doggy doo-doo," said George.' (75)

Dr Diaper is distracted by the 'doo-doo' that lands near his diapered bottom. A distinctive visual 'PLOP' and an iconic dark curly image adds to the excess signification. A few pages later, Captain Underpants completes the restoration of the world in the destruction of Dr Diaper.

> 'Captain Underpants quickly stretched a pair of underwear and shot it at Dr. Diaper. The underwear landed right on the evil doctor's head.
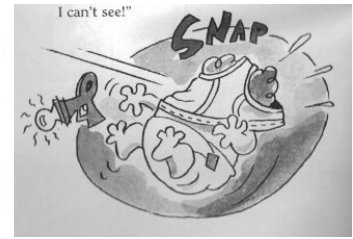> "Help!" cried Dr. Diaper. "I can't see! I can't see!"' (102)

(*Adventures* 77)   (*Adventures* 102)   (*Adventures* 102)

In the accompanying illustrations, Bakhtin's movement from top to bottom (343) is depicted visually as Dr Diaper is now wearing the underpants on his head.

In *The 39-Storey Treehouse*, the concept of the grotesque and its restorative abilities is addressed most explicitly in the episode where the universe is 'un-invented' by the villain Professor Stupido. In a particularly metafictional incident, Terry decides that he will be able to re-draw the universe as a way of restoring order to the world and the text, which has become a series of blank pages with Terry and Andy floating around after Professor Stupido's 'un-invention'. First Terry must retrieve his pencil, which he has stored up his nose. He sneezes in order to dislodge the pencil and Andy's face is covered in snot as a result.

> ''Oh gross, Terry!' I say. 'You sneezed right in my face! That's the grossest thing you've ever done!'
> 'I don't think so,' says Terry. 'I'd say it's more like the third-grossest.'
> I think for a moment. 'Yeah,' I say, 'you're probably right.'' (291)

Andy's pragmatic response is confirmed with the illustration on the following page of a hand holding a notebook open to a page listing 'The Top five Grossest things Terry has ever done' (292) which includes: eaten a live slug, washed his underpants in the shark tank, sneezed all over Andy's face, kissed an ugly sea monster, and eaten chewing gum off the road. All which have occurred in the books up until that point, and rather succinctly provide a sampling of some of the grotesque episodes associated with the material body. After extracting his pencil, Terry is able to redraw the world. In a literal example of the restorative nature of grotesque realism the third grossest thing Terry has ever done has allowed him to re-create the world.

In these texts, the grotesque body is presented as part of a larger grotesque revelry. The excess accumulation of the grotesque, both in the discourse and story elements – renders it universal within the carnival. In this context, the grotesque is able to be celebrated in the positive spirit of the carnival, not rejected in isolation.

In celebrating overt transgressions of socially constructed norms associated with official adult culture that may be considered grotesque, readers are situated outside the 'norm'. Rosemary Johnston, in her examination of the carnival in children's theatre, suggests 'the intrinsic power of the spirit of carnival is community, connection to others. Carnival is a performative event of belonging' (138). By positioning readers as willing and active participants in the alternative world of the text defined in part by their opposition to adult culture, the restorative, positive nature of the carnival laughter associated with the grotesque works not only toward the degradation of adult culture but the restoration of an alternative social grouping – childhood. Inside the carnival created by these texts, 'grotesque realism still fulfilled its unifying, degrading, uncrowning and simultaneously regenerating functions' (Bakhtin 23) and the laughter is of all 'the people', universal and ambivalent (11). In the carnival, and these texts, GROSS IS GREAT!

'There is still the potential for something to go awry, or askew, in the common slippage from theory to practice. So the carnival attitude promises joyous renewal but may well deliver something less desirable as well…In those works pervaded by a presumed 'carnival spirit', in other words, there may also be evident a correspondingly sober perspective that likewise deserves attention because of inherent juxtapositions within a given work as well as for the message delivered.'

(Danow 34)

Gender at the Carnival: Bakhtin's Boys

The *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series are works of junior fiction that are commonly assumed to be 'boys' books'. They centre around male characters, the narratives tend to be action-oriented rather than character-driven, and each features illustrations that resemble comicbooks and as such are considered easy to read – an important aspect of both series, which implicitly engage with the idea that boys are typically reluctant readers. In his exploration of representations of masculinity in junior fiction, John Stephens argues 'when boys are depicted as participants in fictions written for the youngest readers (say, ages six to ten), children's literature is already deeply imbricated in constructions of masculinity' (Stephens *Masculinity* 38). The popularity of these series, particularly with young male readers, means that, intentionally or otherwise, these texts contribute towards the cultural construction of masculinity. In the previous chapter, I have argued that participation in the carnival functions to socialise young readers in embracing that which may be seen to transgress social norms in the form of the grotesque, and in doing so creates a sense of community - in this instance one that belongs to childhood but is also heavily gendered as masculine. In this chapter, I examine how these carnival texts adhere to a masculine schema then consider whether this limits the subversive potential of carnival to interrogate concepts of gender.

An increased scholarly interest in the representations of masculinity within children's literature (and popular culture) has coincided with the growing popularity of these contemporary humorous texts (see Newkirk, Stephens *Male*, Wannamaker *Boys*). These studies explore how masculinity is represented in children's literature and how boys may (or may not) be reading this literature. Both Newkirk and Wannamaker specifically address

what is seen as 'the crisis in boyhood', and debates around the 'dangers' faced by boys in contemporary America. They are both interested in examples of popular culture (including *Captain Underpants*) where '[t]exts that are read, viewed, or consumed by boys are currently under scrutiny because of this crisis, and as a result the ways our culture defines boyhood within these texts are also being scrutinized' (Wannamaker *Boys* 10). Newkirk argues for the inclusion of these popular texts within school-based literacy activities as a way of countering a feminised association with literacy and ensuring boys' engagement with reading and writing (170). Wannamaker argues that these books can be problematic in reifying normative gender identity, 'specifically masculine identity portrayed in opposition to a feminine abject' (*Boys* 96) in the engagement with the grotesque and consequent challenging and re-establishing of gendered bodily borders. While it may be desirable to engage young boys in literacy development and challenge a feminised notion of reading, it is also important to pay attention to the possibility of ideological 'slippage' (Danow 34) around gender which may eventuate in these 'boys' books'.

The exploration of masculinity within children's literature coincides with broader social interrogations of masculinity and gender over the past several decades (Connell 831). Kimberley Reynolds argues that one of the reasons masculinity 'is being debated and contested now is a consequence of the fact that society changes with increasing rapidity, and in many ways the dominant version of masculinity – and of gender in general – has fallen behind' (110). The fact that both the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series are popular with young boys makes it relevant to consider how masculinity is being represented to the next generation of men.

Ideas of gender are inherently relational. so it is difficult to discuss masculinity without also discussing its relationship to femininity. Connell argues 'research on hegemonic masculinity now needs to give much closer attention to the practices of women and to the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities' (848). Boys' books are one half of an 'increasingly segregated literature for young children' (Cross 134) and in considering this segregation it is important to also examine how the 'other' is represented. Both Annette Wannamaker (*Boys* 96, *Food* 253) and Carolyn Daniels (166) suggest that there are misogynistic tendencies in carnivalesque children's literature. Jackie Stallcup, in her article in defence of *Captain Underpants* as a form of satire, agrees with Wannamaker's suggestion that while *Captain Underpants* 'might be subversive of adult-child relationships, at the level of gender relationships, the books can be read as culturally

conservative' (178). Part of the reason for this cultural conservativeness may be in the 'tendency for traditional stories and genres to devolve always back into patriarchal discourse' (Stephens *Gender* 20), and this may be even more likely in clearly gendered narratives. Through the overt and implicit process of gendering the carnival space, where boys are more likely to 'play' than girls, new masculinities may be explored *and* more conservative binary opposition of the feminine and masculine may also be reinscribed. This is problematic as by limiting, or excluding, the active participation of girls within the carnival space, the masculine gendering of the carnival is further inculcated in a truly circular carnival logic, and results in 'the possibility that carnival, for all its rambunctious energy, may ultimately yield the same figure as before only with a new face (or a new mask)' (Danow 52).

If these books are the books that boys are choosing, or being encouraged to read, how are they then engaged in this debate? Does the carnival nature of the texts offer 'the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things' (34) as Bakhtin contends, or instead, as Stephens suggests in his discussions of carnivalesque texts, 'turn out to be ideologically conservative' (*Language* 125)? I would argue that there is evidence of both in these texts. As Connell notes when considering gender hierarchy, 'in practice, both incorporation and oppression can occur together' (848).

To understand how representations of masculinity are explored in these texts, it is important to 'pay close attention to discoursal representations, as well as to elements of story' (Stephens *Gender* 29) and first consider how these narratives are gendered. How are they recognised as 'boys' books'? This will then allow an examination of what is constructed as normative, what is interrogated (and how) and what is ignored (or marginalised) within the boys' worlds created by the texts.

It's a Boys' World

The *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series are unapologetically books about boys. The stories revolve around the adventures of two sets of boys who openly transgress notions of what 'good boys' are, or do. They seem to resist the portrayal often found in recent children's literature, particularly those interested in challenging patriarchal discourse, 'of boys that mothers might most easily love – good, safe, nonrowdy boys who do not break rules and cause maternal anxiety' (Nodelman 11). The narrative strategies

used in the books work to both overtly and implicitly instantiate a masculine schema based upon a 'long standing dichotomous model of gender' (Cross 134), ensuring that the spaces created are recognised as worlds where boys are dominant. The appeal of this kind of boy's world may be a reflection of Perry Nodelman's assertion that 'when it comes to what it means to be a man, boys are less likely to listen to their mothers and librarians than to other boys and older male figures' (12). These series situate themselves outside of the world of mothers and librarians and instead create a space which is recognised as belonging to boys. By examining how these narratives privilege boys over girls, body over mind, and action over contemplation we can see how the texts conform to a dichotomous cultural schema for masculinity (Stephens *Gender* 18).

The most overt indication that these texts are for boys is in the use of male characters as the focalisers of the text, and the lack of female focalisation. In George and Harold, and Terry and Andy, we see that 'the boys who are praised tend to be the lawless outsiders, not the law-abiding plodders' (Nodelman 11). This is explicitly recognised through the narration in both texts, where Pilkey and Griffiths as authors and narrators represent the 'other boys and older male figures' that Nodelman suggests boy readers may be inclined to listen to. When readers ask 'what kind of boys are these?' (Stephens *Masculinity* 43) as a way of exploring ideas about desirable masculinities, they are told by Pilkey that:

> 'You see, George and Harold weren't really bad kids. They were actually very bright, good-natured boys. Their only problem was that they were bored in school. So they took it upon themselves to "liven things up" for everybody. Wasn't that thoughtful of them?'
>
> (*Poopypants* 14-15)

and by Griffiths that these are boys who live outside of society in a utopian treehouse of their own making:

> 'We live in a tree.
> Well, when I say 'tree', I mean treehouse. And when I say 'treehouse', I don't mean any old treehouse – I mean a *13-storey* treehouse!'
> (*13 Storey* 3-4)

Both texts employ a gendered 'adventure' motif in the story structure of each instalment: crisis – adventure – save the world – repeat. The various adventures in which the characters participate across the series incorporate other genres and elements traditionally considered as belonging to boys including: dinosaurs, space, pirates,

superheroes, detective stories, science, horror, and violence. The worlds of the texts are constructed for boys by boys – this is implied not only in the male authors creating stories about boys incorporating masculine elements, but also metafictively, as the series are framed by the boys being the creators of the texts.

The carnival humour of the texts with its heavy reliance on transgressive, bodily manifestations associated with the grotesque is considered a masculine form of humour. Thomas Newkirk claims 'male humor in particular deals with the body in ways that are designed to make adults uncomfortable' (145). In her consideration of gendered humour in contemporary junior fiction, Julie Cross suggests that humour intended for a young male readership is generally less cognitively focussed than that intended for girls and incorporates 'humorous poor spelling, visual, cartoon-like, action-oriented humor, character wit, and knowing narration, as well as the comic grotesque and amusement at the scatological' (150); rather comprehensively describing both the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series. This bodily focus is presented both in the grotesque and in the 'forms of visual, action-oriented humor' (Cross 154).

The heavy reliance on action as an element of the adventure story, humour and a requirement that readers be actively engaged (discussed earlier) further instantiates a masculine schema. A lack of access to the interiority of the characters' thoughts through the limited narration increases the importance of the actions of the characters as a way for readers to make sense of the texts. The bimodal nature of the texts, where much of the action is delivered via detailed and complex visual narratives accompanied by a relatively simple verbal narrative, further privileges action over words or thoughts, and supports Cross' argument that 'cartoon-like, visual style humour may be offered to boys due to cultural assumptions about boy's predilection for 'unthinking', even aggressive humor' (Cross 154).

As these masculine schemata are repeated through the series, masculine norms become instantiated as a desirable model. The masculinity performed by the boys, and by association, readers who participate in the carnival is normalised and, as Cross argues, the perception of anti-conformity and self-sufficiency 'is actually an attempt at admission in 'group masculinity'' (151). Rather than exploring masculinity through individual variations, or subjective agency, which may occur in other children's fictions (Stephens

Masculinity 38)*, the lack of development of individual characters, a feature of this type of series fiction, contributes to the sense of a communal masculinity.

Versions of Masculinity

These texts use the familiarity of a masculine space to engage young male readers. There may be the subversive potential inherent in the carnival for these 'boys' books' to be part of the process of dismantling gender categories in a way which 'involves representing masculinity to the next generation in ways that will encourage them to be less rigid in their thinking about how the world is classified' (Reynolds 103). I argue that this potential is limited to the interrogation of 'older' versions of masculinity rather than a more comprehensive dismantling of a patriarchal discourse. Having established a sense of group masculinity, and situated readers as part of that community, these texts engage more with versions of masculinity than with the concept of masculinity itself. Readers, as participants in the carnival, are aligned with the protagonists and are likely to favour the version of masculinity assigned to these boys, which will emerge naturally from 'the strategies of narration and visual representation' (Stephens *Male* xii). In the construction of a boy's world what particular version of masculinity is favoured?

'Masculinities are configurations of practice that are constructed, unfold and change through time' (Connell 852) and these texts seem to reflect a 'new' masculinity 'as asserted against hegemonic masculinity' (Stephens *Male* xi). According to Bakhtin, one of the key principles of carnival is the degradation of that which is considered to be part of 'official culture', to bring down that which is esteemed (19). Examining whether hegemonic masculinity, which may be considered as an official masculine culture, is interrogated in the texts will allow us to see whether the 'positive regenerating power of laughter' (Bakhtin 45) associated with the carnival is evident.

Stephens suggests that there are three main schemas for masculinity in junior fiction – the Old Age Boy, New Age Boy and Mommy's Boy (*Masculinity* 44). In true carnival spirit, the protagonists of *Captain Underpants* and the *Treehouse* series appear to be a hybrid version of these, representing a more contemporary version of boyhood which challenges notions of both the New Age Boy and more traditional hegemonic masculinity. They are presented as naughty, creative and smart. While their adventurous and anti-establishment nature may initially be considered as Old Age Boys, generally the 'naughty boys' of fiction, their creative undertakings associated with reading and writing which

frame both the series places them clearly in New Age territory. It is interesting to note that it is the activity of the boys creating these narratives that is foregrounded rather than the reading of books. Even in the visual discourse, when the boys are 'quietly' with their books, it is the activity of making them rather than a more introspective reading of books which is highlighted.

There seems little evidence of embracing more feminine attributes such as sensitivity or concern which Stephens associates with the New Age Boy (52), or 'learning to be more sensitive or more loving' while 'more openly imaginative or literate' (11) as Nodelman suggests. In fact, the texts openly disdain such sensitive behaviour, particularly with regard to the creative attributes of storytelling. In both series, while there is no interior access to how characters may be feeling, any sense of morality or good sense is absolutely an aberration, and called out as such:

> '"Wow," said Harold "I think this is the first time one of our stories ever had a *moral*!"
> "Probably the last time, too" said George.
> "Let's hope so," said Harold.'
>
> <div align="right">(<i>Poopypants</i> 149)</div>

> ''Well done, Terry!' says Jill. 'That's the moral right there!'
> 'Ugh!' I say. 'That stupid machine put a moral in and I *hate* stories with a moral!''
>
> <div align="right">(<i>39-Storey</i> 329)</div>

The production of the comics and books created by the boys is also associated with commercial success in both series. George and Harold sell their comics on the playground, and Andy and Terry submit their books for publication, further imbricating this creative activity as masculine.

Though the characters do not undergo any subjective development through the narratives, both series do present a 'socially admired masculinity' (Connell 846) in the form of the men the boys may become. The indeterminate age of Terry and Andy works towards the idea that they may in fact be a kind of boy-man ideal – they are seemingly independent (they live alone) and work (they create the books which they submit to the publisher at the end of each story/storey), but do so in a utopian tree-house and via fantastic adventures. In what appears to be the final instalment of the *Captain Underpants*

series, *Captain Underpants and the Sensational Saga of Sir Stinks-A-Lot*, George and Harold travel through time to engage the assistance of their future selves - 'some adults we can REALLY trust' (99). They are thrilled to discover that the grown-up versions of themselves are the author and illustrator of graphic novels. The boys are introduced to their future families which includes Harold's husband and children. The fact that Harold is gay is accepted without comment by the boys, and is only implied in the introduction of their future families.

> 'Old George, his wife, and their kids, Meera and Nik, sat on the couch, while Old Harold, his husband, and their twins, Owen and Kei, plopped down in the giant beanbag chair.' (111)

111

This 'non event' works towards a normalisation of a gay masculinity (and marriage) and represents a small crack in 'the inherent tension between homosocial and homosexual relationships whereby the latter is culturally proscribed so that the former can be retained as a powerful determinant of dominant heterosexual masculinity' (Mallan 27). The visual narrative does ensure the men are still identified as overtly masculine with the inclusion of stubble on Old Harold's face, and his husband Billy's beard. This heteronormative family situation may also work to 'legitimise' or forgive the boys' transgressions and inscribe a more traditional notion of masculinity where 'the boys in such narratives can count on inheriting a position of privilege when they grow into men - their 'boys will be boys' antics are tolerated because we believe they will one day become safe, middle-class men who have learned self-control, and who have become respectable members of society' (Wannamaker *Food* 253).

In both series the boys are shown to work collaboratively, eschewing the focus of many children's books which show 'a solitary male bravely confronting danger and being deemed a hero as a result of it' (Nodelman 11). However, that collaboration, while not competitive in the way typical of hegemonic masculinity with its focus on the individual, is certainly not positioned as an entirely congenial affair either and remains within a masculine schema of violence and aggression. Terry and Andy in particular continually abuse each other throughout the series. This is often depicted in the visual narrative in quite bodily carnivalesque ways as evidenced in the examples below:
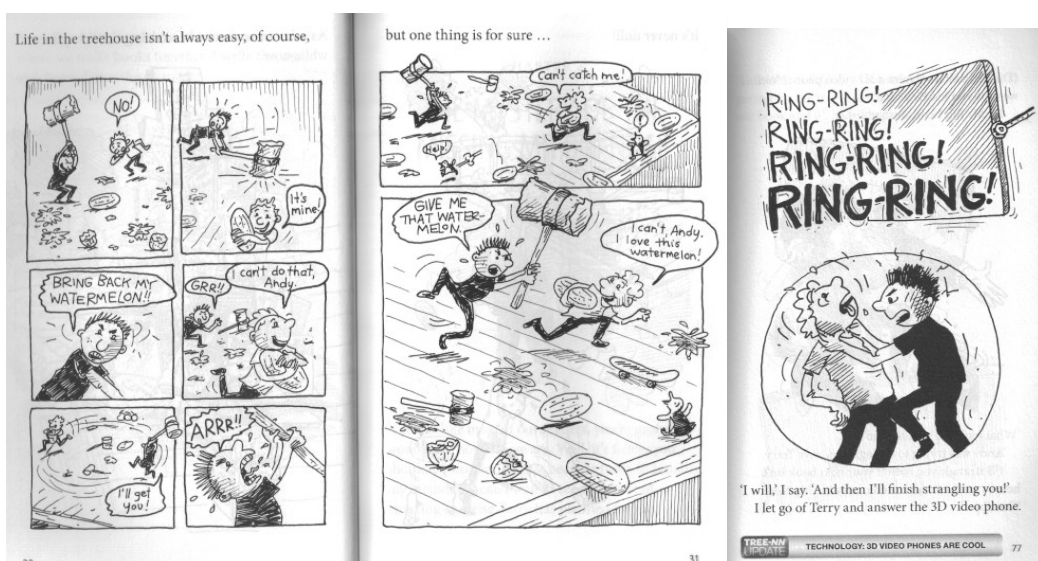
(*52-Storey* 30-31)   (*65-Storey* 77)

Stephens suggests that characters may 'have to contend with conservative forces within the culture which try to prevent them from exploring possible new identities or roles within sociality' (*Masculinity* 43). This is evident in the recurring characters of Mr Krupp, the principal in the *Captain Underpants* series and Mr Big Nose, the publisher of Andy and Terry's books in the *Treehouse* series. Both represent older, conservative, authoritarian male forces and are degraded in the carnival – in the grotesque visual depiction of Mr Big Nose's ever expanding and exploding nose, and the 'de-throning' of Mr Krupp into Captain Underpants (also representing a parodic handling of both the heroic ideal and the superhero code as a version of Old Age Boy schema (Stephens *Masculinity* 51)). In her discussion of picturebook representations of masculinity, Kerry Mallan suggests that diminished masculinity is represented in the 'diminutive, infantalized male' (25) which is visually depicted in the bald, underwear clad image of Captain Underpants. In the 'bringing down' of these figures the vulnerabilities, and undesirability, of this 'old' version

of masculinity (Mallan 21) are exposed and the masculinity represented by the boys is privileged.

'The marginalisation or delegitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities' (Connell 846) and this is evident in the degradation of more traditional ideals of masculinity as a way of privileging the version of masculinity represented by the boys. While the carnival may allow readers to explore different versions of masculinity, and work towards constructing a more contemporary version of masculinity in the 'delegitimation' of more conservative aspects of hegemonic masculinity, it does so within a heavily gendered space. We must consider if this limits an interrogation of the relational nature of gender, how masculinity may be represented in the texts 'in terms of how it is not femininity and how it is oppositional to femininity' (Nodelman 12).

No Girls Allowed

In her introduction to Bakhtin's work on the carnival, Sue Vice notes that 'for all Bakhtin's talk of dialogue, he ignores the most conspicuous instance of monologue in Rabelais' text: all the voices are men's' (Vice 179). Bakhtin himself notes that Rabelais belonged to the 'Gallic tradition', a medieval concept with 'a negative attitude toward woman[sic]' (239). In applying Bakhtin's notion of carnival to these contemporary texts it is important to consider whether the monologism Vice notes is reflected in these texts and how this may impact explorations of masculinity. 'Gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity' (Connell 848), so it is important to consider where the girls are in the carnival of the texts.

Stephens suggests 'any assumption that one particular version of gendered subjectivity is preferable to another will depend on the possibility of attributing agency to that subjectivity, because of the concomitant assumption that whatever lacks agency cannot be desired' (*Masculinity* 38-9). This idea of agency can be interpolated at its most basic to the mere visibility of a feminine subjectivity in the texts (Stephens *Gender* 19). While it is unsurprising to find a limited feminine representation in a masculine space, it becomes even more important to explore those limited instances of the female, or feminine in the text - 'in the contradictory presence and absence of a feminine element' (Mallan 22).

The different approaches to the feminine between the two series is highlighted in the overt suggestions of including 'Romance', a highly feminine genre, in the texts. On the cover of the fourth novel of the *Captain Underpants* series, the concept is rejected outright in the paratext. In visual 'stamps' on the cover, meant to suggest the content of the books, readers are promised 'Action', 'Laffs' but definitely no romance – 'Romance (Just Kidding)'.


(*Poopypants* cover)

Meanwhile, in *The 39-Storey Treehouse*, Terry has created a Once-Upon-A-Time Machine to write the boys' next book, which has a 'Romance' option. In this text, romance is at least considered, '[b]ut only a *little* bit' (81). These rejections of a feminine genre within the texts reflect the more general tendency regarding the inclusion of the feminine in these series.

In the *Captain Underpants* series, where there is a considerable lack of any female characters, and those who do feature are largely adults, Annette Wannamaker argues that 'anything that can remotely be considered feminine becomes that 'thing' one must vigilantly avoid being or seeming to be' (*Boys* 99). Wannamaker uses as a particular example the feminisation of George and Harold's nemesis Melvin Sneedly, who as 'the school brainiac' (*Booger Boy1* 25), fulfils Stephens' Mommy's Boy schema. Wannamaker suggests Melvin 'becomes a feminized other who can be safely ridiculed because he has been emasculated' (99). Melvin is transformed into Bionic Booger Boy, a 'greenish, glistening behemoth', a cross between a booger and a robot (*Booger Boy1* 90) as a particularly grotesque degradation of the feminine. While it is not *only* the feminine under

attack in this series, it is difficult to find any instance where notions of femininity are actively embraced.

While in the *Captain Underpants* series there is an absence of any significant female child characters, the *Treehouse* series is problematic in a different way. Although the series includes a female protagonist, Jill, her marginalisation throughout the books works to diminish her and privilege the boys, and therefore the masculine. Jill is described as 'our neighbour. She lives on the other side of the forest in a house full of animals' (*13-Storey* 27). Jill does not live in the treehouse but on her own, away from the boys, and is physically and metaphorically distanced from them. Rather than the negative abjection of the feminine other in the *Captain Underpants* series, the *Treehouse* series 'others' Jill, and therefore the feminine, through an association with a traditional, domestic version of femininity. Jill represents the 'tamed' girl (Cross 137) not only in her domesticated home but also in her ability to 'tame' and control animals (and the boys) throughout the series. This is illustrated effectively in an example from the *65-Storey Treehouse*, where Jill (after appearing in four books) is finally given a 'place' inside the treehouse, a pet-grooming salon.
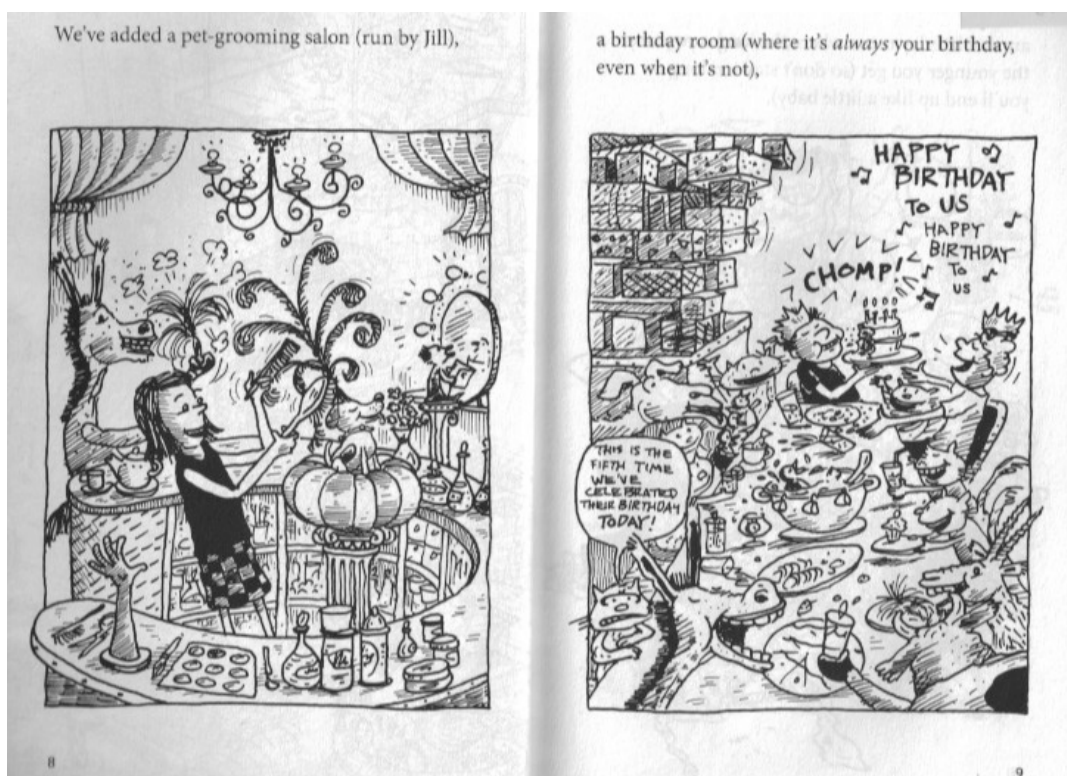
(*65-Storey* 8-9)

This 'separate-spheres' model of gender relations (Connell 837) is quite overt in the visual narrative in the distinct framing of the orderly, domesticated space where Jill is enclosed contrasted with the chaotic, wild carnivalesque room where the boys are celebrating. The opposition between the rounded, soft lines used in the illustration of Jill with the straight, hard lines in the boys' birthday room add to this (Mallan 17). The lack of text in the framed illustration suggests Jill's space is quiet and subdued as compared to the loud, noisy boys' space which includes musical notes and loud sounds suggested in the use of larger, capitalised font.

Through the instantiation of a masculine schema and the degradation or marginalisation of the feminine in these texts, the 'universal' notion of carnival is exposed as masculine – so that Bakhtin's 'folk' are assumed to be boys. The implied reader position for participation in the carnival is to be one of 'Bakhtin's Boys'. For young boy readers, ideas of masculinity continue to lack any positive inter-subjectivity with the feminine with 'no representation of empathetic gendered social relations between the characters and no dialogue about gender issues across the gender boundary' (Pennell 63). For young girls reading the text, 'the negotiation with the text becomes even more complex and treacherous because they must simultaneously identify with the masculine protagonist and with the feminized other' (Wannamaker *Boy*s 99).

While the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series may explore a more contemporary version of masculinity which challenges 'older' versions of masculinity, they lack representation of positive intersubjective relationships between masculine and feminine subjectivities. This is particularly concerning for books aimed at new readers who are beginning to independently approach fiction as a way of understanding their world. Creating a boys' world may encourage young boys to engage with the texts, but there is the danger that the interrogative potential of the carnival is limited in the process. In constructing a masculine space, binary notions of gender are reinscribed within the texts and the possibility of degendering social relations remains uncontested (Stephens *Male* xiv).

'The provocative, mirthful inversion of prevailing institutions and their hierarchy as staged in the carnival offers a permanent alternative to official culture – even if it ultimately leaves everything as it was before.'

(Lachmann 125)

Conclusion

This thesis has undertaken a critical examination of the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series by applying the Bakhtinian literary framework of the carnival in order to reveal how these examples of popular children's literature, aimed at newly independent readers, act as contemporary carnivals for their young audience. Bakhtin's carnivals are temporary festive subversions of the normal order where everyone participates, laughter is the basis, the grotesque is embraced and there is the potential to consider things in a new way. The contention of this thesis is that, like the medieval carnival, these complex multimodal junior fictions represent temporary spaces where children enjoy the laughter associated with the transgression of cultural norms. While interacting with these multimodal texts, children acquire critical literacy skills that better equip them to negotiate their world and place in society.

The first three chapters of the thesis examined the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series using key concepts of Bakhtin's notion of carnival: the 'two-world condition', humour and the grotesque. Reflecting the chaotic spirit of carnival, these concepts are not mutually exclusive and each manifestation is reliant on the others. The carnival worlds of the books are defined by laughter and grotesque imagery. The humour associated with these texts reflects a grotesque engagement with official culture. The grotesque is viewed as positive when transgressions of cultural norms are treated in comic excess. This interdependence is evident in the analysis of both the verbal and visual discourses which revealed the 'large and complex world' (Bakhtin 380) of the carnival in these texts.

My analysis considered how the books in these series are situated as belonging particularly to the culture of children and how narrative strategies ensure readers actively engage with the texts, creating a sense of participation inherent to carnival. The examination determines that in reading these texts, a temporary space is created outside of, yet sanctioned by, official culture where a sense of play supports both a pedagogical and

social function. The humour in the books exhibit Bakhtin's manifestations of carnival laughter: ritual spectacle, comic verbal compositions and genres of billingsgate. Both series use these forms of carnival humour to construct a storyworld where a sophisticated engagement with language and images contributes to the development of critical literacy skills. The excess comic representation of the grotesque body in the texts situates these transgressions within a larger carnival context. This reflects Bakhtin's positive, ambivalent nature of the grotesque and positions readers to identify with an alternative culture based upon a shared appreciation of, rather than aversion to, the breaching of cultural norms.

The final chapter considered what insights may be gained by critically examining the subversive potential of carnival with regard to gender norms. I determined that in constructing texts which appeal to young boys the interrogative potential of the carnival is limited in the process. In adhering to a masculine schema, versions of masculinity may be explored but the lack of positive engagement with femininity ultimately compromises the capacity for these texts to fully interrogate ideas of gender.

The aim of this research was to consider the question: 'Are these texts worthwhile?' and to determine whether an examination of popular humorous children's literature 'contributes to dialogue and thought and questioning' (McGillis *Hero* 69). My conclusion is that there are both positive and negative implications of these texts, much like the ambivalence inherent in Bakhtin's carnival. These books are both worthwhile and problematic. They construct a space outside of official culture where children may develop skills and interrogate cultural norms but, at the same time, may reinscribe more conservative aspects of official culture into that space. This project began with a curiosity about the lack of critical interest in the popular humorous literature being consumed by children. My hope is that the critical investigation of the *Captain Underpants* and *Treehouse* series undertaken in this thesis has demonstrated that Bakhtin's carnival provides a productive framework for approaching these texts. In looking more closely at texts which others may deem 'trivial or intellectually suspect' (op de Beeck 469) we may uncover much more sophistication than initially ascribed to them. These 'simple' books are, in reality, both rich and complex. Whether or not these texts themselves make a contribution to 'the prevailing culture and its patterns' (Lachmann 132) is yet to be seen, but I would argue that attempting to understand the manner in which these texts engage young readers is clearly worthwhile.

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