Studying Laughter
—Heather Snell

This issue marks the end of my five-year term as the lead editor of *Jeunesse*. I have been with the journal since its inception in 2008 and have, therefore, had an opportunity to see editors come and go over the years. I treasure dearly the time I have spent with them; they have all been amazing. I have taken great pride in the collaborative work we do at the journal and have continually been reminded of its value whenever someone tweets positively about an issue or when a *Jeunesse* article wins a prize. It is with a mixture of sadness and happiness that I now step away—sadness, because I loved the work and will miss it, and happiness, because I am at no loss as to how to fill the *Jeunesse*-shaped hole in my weekly schedule (*grin*). Sarah Olive, who joined the *Jeunesse* editorial board in 2020, is taking over the role of lead editor. Sarah comes to *Jeunesse* with considerable editorial and academic experience: she is the founding editor of *Teaching Shakespeare*, a magazine published by the British Shakespeare Association, and serves as an Editorial Advisory Panel member for Palgrave Communications. She has published research on Shakespeare, drama education, the British gothic, the young adult gothic, representations of disability, and university politics and communications. *Jeunesse* will no doubt move in exciting new directions under her leadership. I look forward to seeing an inevitably different dynamic and shifts in process and protocol that will allow the journal to continue to be responsive to a rapidly changing academic publishing market.

That the special issue on laughter is the one with which I end my term as lead editor seems especially fitting given the prominent role laughter has played on the editorial board as we have continually strived to keep up with the sea changes that have occurred in academic publishing over the last decade. Whether editorial board meetings are online or in person, they always involve laughter. Even when the journal was on the brink of financial disaster several years ago, we laughed, lending credence to the popular belief that laughter is a form of release during tough times. When things are not going well, sometimes the only thing to do is laugh; of course, one could choose to cry, but there is something about the

physical act of laughing that provides much-needed release. Laughing triggers transformation. It is almost magical in its ability to move us from despair and hopelessness to euphoria, even in our darkest moments. As an act frequently associated with children, laughter is an ideal topic for a special issue of *Jeunesse*. Why it has taken so long to launch a special issue on the topic can probably be explained—at least in part—by the lack of seriousness with which laughter tends to be approached and the feeling that studying laughter is somehow blasphemous. To study laughter is, according to many, tantamount to crushing the mirth right out of it.

Attesting to the difficulty of studying laughter, more scholars work on humour than laughter. In children's literary studies, for example, there has been considerable discussion about silliness and anarchy in nonsense verse—silliness has itself been described as anarchic—and the abundance of scatological imagery in children's picture books has sparked quite a bit of intellectual discussion. Both studies of nonsense and scatology in young people's texts and cultures tend to draw on the work of Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, whose study of the sixteenth-century French comic writer François Rabelais has been groundbreaking for anyone interested in laughter and the cultural forms that provoke it. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin argued that the festive spirit of medieval carnival permeates Renaissance literature. Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, published in five volumes between 1532 and 1564, is a case in point. The novels capture the folk culture of humour that was so prevalent in the Middle Ages. Such humour revives and renews through a temporary suspension of the norms and hierarchies that normally govern social life. Bakhtin often uses the term "second life" to describe the transformative potential of folk humour. He identifies three manifestations of folk culture: ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and billingsgate (5). Of these three manifestations, contemporary scholars tend to privilege the first, which includes carnival. Carnival festivities were an important facet of medieval life, even when they did not take place within carnivals proper, for there were many opportunities throughout the year to indulge in fairs, feasts, pageants, and processions:

> All these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition
> existed in all the countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious

official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year. (Bakhtin 5-6)

The temporary suspension of norms and hierarchies exemplified by medieval carnival permeate not just Renaissance literature but children's nonsense verse and the scatological imagery that seasons many picture books. Michelle Ann Abate argues that nonsense "opens up the possibility for unconventional artistic forms, innovative aesthetic styles, and irreverent—often subversive—cultural interpretations" (591). For this reason, Abate elaborates, Bakhtinian carnival offers a productive theoretical frame for interpreting nonsense: "[N]onsense often evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's notion, discussed in *Rabelais and His World*, of the carnivalesque for the way that it defies the dominant social order and upends hegemonic authority, control, and power" (591). John McKenzie finds Bakhtin's work useful for analyzing the "bums, poos and wees" of children's literature, arguing that in the scatalogically loaded spaces of laughter, "the child experiences the freedom of the imagination to escape the rule-boundedness (of nature or nurture) and to think the unthinkable" (84). As these examples suggest, scholarly studies of laughter frequently focus on the forms that provoke laughter rather than laughter itself: unorthodox and in many cases profoundly experimental forms and styles are the stuff of laughter and can even be said to preserve a special place for it. These are extremely important studies, and they change how we interpret the important work that children's literary texts do. Whether or not readers actually laugh in response to such innovative aesthetics, and how their laugh might help to shape the community around them, requires ethnography, a research method rarely employed by children's literary scholars.

The application of Bakhtinian carnival to youth culture is, however, not confined to the texts designed for and marketed to them but extends to phenomena such as binge drinking. In a study that comes closest to actually studying laughter as opposed to merely the forms that provoke it, eighty-nine young adults of varying gender, class, and ethnicity and hailing from

three different geographical locations in the United Kingdom participated in interviews and focus groups about binge drinking. During the focus groups, participants relayed hilarious stories about their binge-drinking escapades, provoking much mirth and laughter in their peers. Chris Hackley and his colleagues note that

> [t]he stories often retold events which were dangerous, reckless, irresponsible, or potentially highly incriminating for the subject's reputation for controlled or responsible behaviour. Yet they were invariably greeted with warm, affirmative, and collegiate laughter which, we felt, had an element of Bakhtin's . . . folk and carnival humour which stands in opposition to the official conventions and mores of the day. (934)

The young adults took great pleasure in reminiscing about having broken the law, transgressed rules of propriety, and upended hierarchies. Binge drinking among them amounted to an unofficial carnival in which they could, at least temporarily, suspend any prejudice or preconceptions they might harbour toward members of different ethnic, gendered, and classed groups. The grotesque played a prominent role in the participants' stories, making Bakhtinian carnival even more apt as a theoretical lens through which to discuss their binge drinking. The study concluded that this cultural phenomenon is poorly understood by policy-makers and that a more complex view of it could lead to less negative moralistic judgments of "aberrant drinking" among young adults and more socially responsible regulation of the alcohol industry (Hackley et al. 944). One imagines what insights might arise should more ethnographic studies of laughter in young people's texts and cultures be conducted, especially in relation to children's and YA texts, which are almost always written by adults with preconceived ideas about what children find funny. The truth is, we do not often know what children find funny, or why they find certain kinds of humour funny while others fail to provoke any laughter at all. Children themselves cannot always identify what they find funny. Complicating matters further, just because something is funny does not mean one will laugh. Hackley and his colleagues found that it was not the stories that necessarily provoked laughter but a sense of camaraderie among the participants: the cause of laughter could be found in

the space between the young interlocutors. Laughter, then, seems to belong to the collective more than to the individual.

Laughter's inextricability from community constitutes one of the many obstacles to productive critical engagements with it. One of the first steps in conducting research is defining the object of analysis, but is it possible, or even desirable, to define laughter in isolation from the cultures in which it flourishes? If one does define it in context, then it is necessarily in flux. How one defines laughter depends largely on what one hopes to gain by pinning it down. Definitions that focus on it as a corporeal act are amenable to studies that attempt to find out if laughter is beneficial to one's health. Defining it as a social cue, on the other hand, allows one to study it from more of a sociological or cultural perspective, with special attention, no doubt, to laughter's victims as well as its beneficiaries. In psychology, laughter is typically defined as a physiological act related to (usually) positive feelings (Bryant et al. 1516), while neuroscientists tend to define it as a "multifaceted social signal" that can function variously, as "a social rejection cue," for example, or "a reflexive behaviour to somatosensory stimulation" (Ethofer et al. 353). Laughter as a reflexive behaviour—tickling laughter is one example—occurs among non-human primates and children (Ethofer et al. 353). In media studies, laughter is defined not just as an act in and of itself but in terms of how it is framed. The framing of laughter is determined by the medium as well as the culture in which it is rooted. In the introduction to *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*—the outcome of a three-year Canadian-German research project entitled "Gender – Laughter – Media"—Gaby Pailer points out that "media . . . are not just 'vehicles' to transport funny contents, but provide a specific frame for the production of the comic itself" (9), and Stefan Horlacher notes that laughter is part of "'the symbolic systems of representations'—that is 'culture as first, second and higher order systems of signs'" (18). Horlacher explains that laughter can be defined as "a bodily reflex that exceeds sense and can only be converted into meaning *a posteriori*" (42). Along similar lines, postcolonial cultural studies scholars Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein argue that "[w]hether we read laughter or humour in a particular text as subversive or not, in fact, whether we identify it as laughter or humour in the first place, is largely a consequence of the way we read" (12). Laughter is a

matter of interpretation, and this goes for identifying it in the first place as well as figuring out what it means—whether it is ironic or joyful or dark, and so on.

To illustrate the complexities of studying laughter, I draw on an example from TikTok in which a donkey begins to bray in response to a dog getting zapped by an electric fence ("Donkey Laughs"). The caption for the video as well as the comments indicate that most TikTokkers interpret the donkey's bray as a laugh; this was no doubt confirmed by their interpretation of the dog's misfortune as (darkly) funny. But was the donkey really laughing? What, precisely, is funny in this video? Is it the dog getting zapped by the electric fence? Is it the sight (or sound) of a donkey laughing, or human interpretations of the donkey as laughing? Is the idea of a donkey laughing funny? Do we feel joy when we imagine that a barrier has come down, in this case the barrier that separates humans from non-humans? Do we laugh *at* the dog and laugh *with* the donkey? Do we laugh because others are laughing, including the donkey? The laughing response of the human holding the camera, and the laughing responses of the humans in the scene, arguably cue us to laugh. Would the video be funny if neither the camera operator nor the humans represented were laughing? On TikTok, it is not necessarily the content that is funny, but the presence of laughers. Representations of laughers offer rich opportunities to laugh *with*, and this kind of laughter may be crucial at this moment, especially as we find ourselves isolated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sometimes we may laugh just to laugh; any old excuse will do. In the end, it probably does not matter if the donkey is laughing or not; our willful interpretation of the donkey as a laughing subject is enough to trigger the laugh we already know we want to let out. As media scholars make clear, it is not so much laughter that requires definition, but all the complex stuff swirling around laughter—that is, its framing and context—that demands nuanced interpretation. As a culturally determined cue or response whose identification and interpretation are never predictable, even among members of the culture in question, laughter itself is notoriously difficult to pin down.

What almost all scholars, regardless of discipline, seem to agree on is the two-faced character of laughter. That is, laughter can heal, but it can also hurt. There is tickling laughter, and then there is "taunting laughter," which "aims at humiliating and socially excluding the recipient from a group" (Ethofer et al. 353-54). Yet even tickling laughter is not purely

affirmative: there is "a 'tipping point' with a reported change of experience from pleasantness to unpleasantness or even social aversion" (Ethofer et al. 354). Many of us have been subject to tickling that tips us over into unpleasantness, either because it physically hurts—the tickler who tickles too hard—or because it violates our personal space. Tickling can trigger a trauma response that may nevertheless manifest in laughter, more specifically, a type of laughter designed to cover up one's discomfort. In other words, laughter is not necessarily joyous. Just as humour can be confused with laughter, laughter can be confused with crying or other reflexive behaviours. Horlacher remarks that there is a fine line between laughing and crying and, correlatively, pleasure and pain. "In the final analysis," he argues, "full laughter implies the possible loss of balance, tears of laughter, the merging of laughing and crying, of pleasure and pain, and distantly evokes Lacan's notion of *jouissance*" (43). In the sciences and social sciences, the ambiguity of laughter emerges in a tendency to distinguish between simulated and spontaneous laughter. Surprisingly, given the privileging of authenticity over "fakeness" in many cultures, studies that measure the potential health benefits of the physiological act of laughing find either that is there is little to no difference between the two or that simulated laughter elicits a slightly stronger cardiovascular response than spontaneous laughter (Law, Broadbent, and Sollers 108). This discovery has led to several initiatives designed to reap the potential health benefits of simulated laughter. One example of simulated-laughter therapy is Laughter Yoga. Founded by Dr. Madan Kataria in 1995, Laughter Yoga involves simulated laughter in groups: "[S]imple rhymes such as *hee-hee-ha-ha-ha* [are] paired with body movement such as hands-clapping" (Cheung and Leung 289). The idea is that laughing need not be motivated by a joke or some such other comic mode, but rather, it can be indulged in for no reason at all. During a Laughter Yoga class, it becomes virtually impossible to tell whose laughing is simulated and whose is spontaneous, suggesting that the sorting of laughter into these two categories is irrelevant when it comes to reaping the physical and psychological health benefits of laughing.

Some scholars avoid the simulated-spontaneous binary altogether, identifying several different kinds of laughter instead. In an article about laughter in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Christine Nicholls identifies no less than five different kinds of laughter: laughter

that originates in feelings of superiority, as with Schadenfreude; laughter that emerges from incongruity, as with Black or Gallows Humour; laughter that constitutes a release, as in Dark Humour; laughter that is rooted in existential crisis; and, finally, laughter that occurs during play. Nicholls locates COVID-19–related humour in the fifth category because it represents "a dimension of anarchic silliness, which acts as a salve, albeit temporarily" (279). The characterization of Coronavirus Humour as a salve suggests that far from being discrete, the five categories into which Nicholls sorts laughter overlap. Moreover, they represent not just different types of laughter but different types of humour, suggesting once again that distinguishing between humour and laughter is difficult.

In addition to classifying laughter in terms of where and when it emerges, it is possible to classify it in accordance with the sounds people make when laughing (the donkey comes to mind here). Terry Eagleton lists several words designed to describe such sounds, including "cackling, chortling, snickering, guffawing, giggling, sniggering, chuckling, and roaring" (qtd. in Nicholls 281). The sounds of laughter are especially important when one considers laughter as a social cue: successfully navigating the social field requires some ability to tell the difference between mocking laughter and celebratory laughter, or joyful laughter and sarcastic laughter. That said, psychological studies of perceptions of laughter tend to conclude that there is "high perceptual sensitivity to this ubiquitous and ancient behavior" (Bryant et al. 1516). The popularity of the phrase "are you laughing?" suggests that identifying laughter is itself a challenge. Correctly interpreting its meaning is another matter altogether. The most cultured among us can misinterpret laughing-*at* as laughing-*with*.

That laughter can mean so many different things points to its inherently political nature. Reichl and Stein go far as to argue that "laughter seems to thrive in a situation of power imbalance and even oppression" (12). This helps to explain why laughter is a privileged register in texts hailing from the former European colonies; much research has been conducted, for example, on the "postcolonial excremental" as it appears in comic literary works such as Epeli Hau'ofa's novel *Kisses in the Nederends* and Rohinton Mistry's short story "Squatter." Among many Indigenous peoples in North America, laughter functions as medicine, enabling survival during difficult times. In the face of continuing settler colonialism, for example, laughter can

be a rich resource. Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg writer-activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson asserts that the humour among her people is a signifier of their resilience: "One of the ways they kept up their spirit was with humor" (169). Dakota health expert Cynthia Lindquist asserts that Indigenous humour can also "open our eyes to the stereotypes, historical trauma, and major issues confronting . . . communities." Significantly, however, humour is not necessarily unequivocally good; "Teasing someone," Lindquist explains, "is a way to point out that they might not be in step with tribal opinion or cultural norms." Laughter can lift one up, help with the difficult task of engaging difficult knowledge, and soften the blow of social criticism, to name just three of its social functions.

In a recognition of the complexity and ambivalence of humour and laughter, Sigmund Freud argued that repressed desires and fantasies can slip out under the guise of a joke. The now-popular phrase "Freudian slippage" implies that joking in this sense is not within the control of the joker. In his analysis of Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Tobias Döring explains that interpreted through a Freudian psychoanalytic lens, laughter is fundamentally a social as well as psychological phenomenon: "[T]he symptom of laughter always hides as much as it reveals: it shields the whole economy of secret pleasures from the censoring power of our consciousness and, instead, reveals them only in the substitute form of compressions or omission—as they become manifest in the linguistic forms of jokes" (qtd. in Horlacher 33-34). There is a tension in Freud, however, between accidental eruptions of unconscious material and deliberate use of jokes as a means of mocking, taunting, or hurting others. He argues that "[t]he joke will allow us to turn to good account those ridiculous features in our enemy that the presence of opposing obstacles would not let us utter aloud or consciously; again, that is, it will *get around restrictions and open up sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible*" (Freud 98). By "inaccessible," Freud means inappropriate: it would be inappropriate to express certain ideas or opinions seriously. In other words, the joke offers an alibi for racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and other offensive discourses, meaning that they can be used intentionally as cover for expressions of ideas that would otherwise be viewed as inappropriate. Freud's treatment of jokes indicates that neither humour nor laughter are innocent. Indeed, this is why it is so important to consider not just the character of laughter

but the dynamics—its social situation. As with Freud, Horlacher draws attention to the triangular relationship of laughter, which includes the laughter-maker, the butt of the laughter, and the laughers. Where one finds oneself in this triangle depends largely on one's position in the social hierarchy. In this way, Horlacher argues, "[l]aughter . . . functions as an indicator of the tensions and contradictions existing in a given society and enables us to critically analyze social situations and mechanisms" (25). Uneven power relations between a joker who laughs at the expense of others and an audience of laughers that includes members of the group denigrated constitute a crucial register of analysis in studies of humour and laughter. Uneven power relations are especially salient in relationships between adults and children, further underlining the need to study laughter in the context of young people's texts and cultures. Not only do many texts designed for and marketed to children revel in anarchic silliness, nonsense, and the scatological, but they also depict children in various positions within the laughter triangle. These depictions reflect the real experiences of children, who may exert agency as laughter-makers, experience distress at being the butt of laughter, or reap the benefits of shared cultural codes by being part of a laughing audience.

In this special issue, we include nine articles that engage laughter and its discontents in young people's texts and cultures. In "An Analysis of Humorous Devices in Picturebooks: A Pictorial Article," Elys Dolan explores the different types of humour employed in children's picture books. Rather than merely describing them, Dolan performs them: as the subtitle of the piece suggests, the form in which Dolan explores the capability of picture books to provoke laughter is the picture book itself. This approach works well to highlight why and how particular features in text and illustration produce humour, which in turn have the potential to produce laughter. Targeting the same kind of dual child-adult audience as picture books, the piece launches a critique of academia under the cover of cheeky comedy. In this way, the reader is drawn into the drama and invited to look at themselves critically while also not taking themselves too seriously. Taking oneself too seriously is, after all, a great weakness among academics.

Nene Diop highlights the ability of humour to function as a vehicle for serious critique in "L'humour dans *Les nouveaux contes d'Amadou Koumba* de Birago Diop et *La belle histoire de Leuk-le-lièvre* de Léopold S. Senghor et Abdoulaye Sadji," which considers the central role

that humour plays in Senegalese tales. The provocation of laughter through humour can help to promote cultural heritage and, as many scholars of laughter have noted, teach difficult knowledge. Through analysis of two collections of Senegalese tales published during the peak of the Négritude movement, Diop shows how humour can be activist in its orientation, contributing to decolonization struggles. In the Senegalese context, humour can be instrumental in legitimizing cultural rites, values, beliefs, traditions, and philosophies that were under attack during the French colonial period. One could argue that laughing itself is a form of collective remembrance.

John Patrick Pazdziora and Eric Pazdziora similarly underline the relationship between humour and culture in "The Anxious Laughter of Silly Songs." While work on humour in the field of children's literature has tended to focus on the anarchic silliness of nonsense verse and scatological imagery, the authors of this piece draw attention to silly songs whose primary purpose is to trigger laughter. They remark on the extent to which this subfield of silliness has been understudied and redress this gap in research by teasing out the implications of inversion, incongruity, and transgression. The liberating spaces created by silly songs encourage physical and psychological transformations, in turn helping to ease anxiety and soften the expectations associated with what may seem an overly rigid adulthood from the point of view of a child. Silly songs enculturate while simultaneously subverting propriety.

In "The Social and Historical Effects of Laughter in Revolutionary Ireland: The Case of *Our Boys*," Elena Ogliari similarly examines the enculturating function of laughter through analysis of the juvenile periodical *Our Boys*. Founded in 1802 and edited by the Congregation of Christian Brothers, this periodical mobilized humour to encourage young people to adopt a form of Irish nationalism fuelled by anti-British sentiment. The effects of such humour were more widespread than it may at first appear, because many girls read the periodical in addition to its target audience of boys. Moreover, the distribution of the periodical to Irish girls and boys in the United Kingdom, Australia, India, and the United States—countries to which many Irish emigrated—helped to cultivate a robust anti-British Irish nationalism outside of Ireland. The shared codes of laughter can cultivate national imaginaries in addition to propriety. Even as it offers the illusion of transgressing boundaries, laughter reinforces them.

Kodjo Attikpoé's "Le rire: forms et fonctions du comique dans la fiction africaine pour la jeunesse" explores the didactic and aesthetic qualities of laughter in four fictional African works for young people. Attikpoé reiterates the subjective dimension of comedy, noting that whether or not it provokes laughter depends on interpretation, and that interpretation in turn depends on the reader. A reader's background, literacy level, familiarity with shared cultural codes, and ability to tease out the shared codes of other cultures, help to determine their response to humorous modes. Laughter itself can be blissful or malignant, exacerbating the problem posed by interpretation. Attikpoé studies the role that derisive laughter in particular plays in fiction, concluding that it can provide a productive vehicle of critique.

In "'Laugh! I Thought I Should've Died': British Music Hall Humour and the Subversion of Childhood on *The Muppet Show*," Liam Maloy acknowledges the productive uses of humour, but argues that it can reinforce rather than challenge dominant ideologies. Its embedding of humour in bawdy British music hall enabled *The Muppet Show* to launch powerful critiques of normative constructions of childhood. That it did so by appealing to an intergenerational audience was important, because watching the show with adults provided opportunities for children to interpret it in ways they might not were they to watch it only with other children. Watching funny shows together affords opportunities to witness laughter in response to material that may or may not be funny to all; this witnessing can influence how we approach new texts. Not surprisingly, much of *The Muppet Show*'s complexity and controversy stems from its dual-audience orientation. As with other scholars included in this special issue, Maloy highlights the ability of humour to tackle difficult knowledge. At the same time, however, he warns that the dual-audience address may also be the show's Achilles heel as it strives to embed adult-oriented humour in relation to issues of race and ethnicity. While *The Muppet Show* has been interpreted by some scholars as transgressive in a good sense, Maloy suggests that the family format introduces tensions we may want to pay more attention to in studies of laughter.

Isabelle Montésinos-Gelet, Rachel DeRoy-Ringuette, and Marie Dupin de Saint-André share the conclusions of an ethnographic study of laughter involving primary school children. The context for the study is a graduate course in the Faculté des sciences de l'éducation

at the Université de Montréal about humorous modes. In part because it is so difficult to pinpoint what is funny and why, this study set out to classify modes of humour with the aim of facilitating the teaching of reading, writing, and literary study. Subjecting humour to incisive analysis may seem antithetical to its aims, but it remains an important step in cultivating critical thinking skills. In addition to analysis of diction and syntax, attention is given to the relationship between text and image, and between different images. Because the space in between can be one of connection or disjunction, their juxtaposition affords great opportunities for humour. This piece is an excellent companion to Dolan's graphic treatment of humour in picture books.

In "Young Banyumasan Street Traders as Shapeshifters of Modernity: Refreshment, Production, and the Pursuit of Pranks and Jokes in Jakarta," Traci Marie Sudana explores registers of laughter among a population of people frequently maligned for being less refined, namely, the Banyumasan Javanese people of Indonesia. The Banyumasan people comprise a subethnicity whose accent is frequently adopted by those who want to provoke laughter—their dialect, alongside their lower socio-economic status, mean that they are frequently stereotyped as funny. Sudana's ethnographic study of the jests, jokes, pranks, and laughs enjoyed by young Banyumasan street traders in Jakarta reveals how assumptions about laughter can uncover fault lines in society. In the Javanese context, assumptions about who is funny tell a story about inequality. Sudana's approach to analysis is intersectional and geared toward elaborating the value of humour among a group of young people whose place in society can be gauged through a careful reading of laughter.

Michael Dalebout analyzes the Netflix children's comedy special *John Mulaney and the Sack Lunch Bunch* in "'Which One of You Is the Twelve-Year-Old Boy?': Children's Humour, Wittgensteinian Jokes, and the *Sack Lunch Bunch*," arguing that it plays with the child-adult binary in innovative ways. Dalebout launches a grammatical investigation into the show to elaborate on its playful straddling of the fragile boundary that separates childhood from adulthood. The potential of comedy to become a pedagogical vehicle is reiterated here, as is the notion that it is difficult to pinpoint why something is funny. Individual interpretation, and the make-up of the audience, are also key points in this last piece of the special issue. Dalebout's reading of the show suggests that it troubles processes of enculturation and evicts

its audience from familiar grammars, thereby inviting a reorientation to the linear and overly rigid narrative of development. He concludes by suggesting that normative constructions of childhood and adulthood can ensnare, in turn blinding us to the possibilities for a life beyond the binary.

Attesting to the uniqueness of this special issue, we include two overviews of projects related to laughter in addition to our usual round of articles and reviews. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh introduces us to an initiative established by the Fadazione Tancredi di Barolo foundation: the Pop-Up against Coronavirus Project. Children were invited to create their own pop-up books using resources provided online. The results showed that pop-up books do not necessarily have to be funny; constructed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the children's pop-up books, which documented life in lockdown, conveyed a wide range of emotions. Reid-Walsh's contribution is a reminder of the importance of attending to what is not funny in addition to what is funny when studying laughter—although, as quite a few contributors to this issue point out, pinpointing what is funny and why is in and of itself a gargantuan task.

Beneath almost all analyses of laughter—and laughter-provoking humour—is an often-understated acknowledgment of its ambivalence. George F. Simon's overview of the *diversiSMILES* game is no exception to this rule. As an intercultural intervention, *diversiSMILES* struggles to produce humour that provokes laughter among diverse players, an almost impossible task when one considers the disparate codes that inform humour worldwide. As a game intended as a pedagogical vehicle, *diversiSMILES* nevertheless connects to many of the contributions in this issue that highlight the value of humour—and its desired response, laughter—as one way of engaging an intimidating social landscape. Both the Pop-Up against Coronavirus Project and *diversiSMILES* were online initiatives designed to bring some respite to young people whose worlds had necessarily become smaller as a result of social distancing.

We include five reviews in this issue. Stephanie Brown assesses three young adult novels that counter stereotypes of teens as anxious and depressed. All the characters in the novels, who also happen to be performers, use humour to navigate tricky social terrain and face their own inner conflicts head-on. Christina Fawcett places two video games for young people in the larger context of moral panics about gaming. These panics were only amplified by the

pandemic. She argues that the creative and collaborative play the games invite help to cultivate agency, critical thinking skills, and intergenerational relationships. Wanderley Anchieta discusses five books that use colour to forge and remark upon human relationships with nature. While none of the books reviewed engage laughter, they explore the ability of colour to trigger a wide range of emotions, reiterating Reid-Walsh's point that studying the unfunny in formats assumed to be funny is an important facet of laughter study. The books Anchieta reviews should be particularly welcome at this moment, as several months in lockdown have led to a new appreciation for the outdoors in many countries. Kristine Dizon looks at four picture books that present different points of view on laughter and one of its counterparts: boredom. Hilariously, the depiction of boring carnivals can teach about humour and invite young readers to consider why something might be interpreted as funny. Finally, Rick Gooding reviews a collection of essays that could be seen as an excellent resource at this juncture, as we slowly come out of the COVID-19 "apocalypse" and enter a new "normal"— whatever that might entail. He argues that Mike Cadden, Karen Coats, and Roberta Seelinger Trite's *Teaching Young Adult Literature*—a collection of essays designed to support post-secondary education—is a timely and important volume that includes resources for online and in-person teaching.

Laughter might appear trivial or irrelevant during a pandemic and the reckoning with racism and colonialism that has occurred in its wake. It has, however, proven crucial to the survival of many during the trials of this past year, and now, when continuing anxieties about case counts perpetuate uncertainty. Funny memes and videos have been commonplace on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, providing an important release at a time when people are losing loved ones to COVID-19, dealing with loss of employment, caring for children while working from home, and generally attempting to survive in conditions that have worsened since the start of the pandemic. Indeed, the primary theme in this issue is the status of laughter as a two-sided coin. Laughter can erupt in moments of grief as well as joy; it can punctuate positive feeling but also function as medicine during difficult times. Or, it can be recruited to hateful agendas. People have committed suicide under the soul-crushing heel of cruel laughter. As teachers, librarians, scholars, artists, and activists, we need to attend to both sides of laughter, noting when it divides and when it brings people together. Precisely because laughter is so resistant to analysis, it is important to remain attuned to how, when, and where it shows its face, and who occupies the positions in its triangular dynamic.

Works Cited

Abate, Michelle Ann. "Taking Silliness Seriously: Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show*, the Anglo-American Tradition of Nonsense, and Cultural Critique." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2009, pp. 589-613, doi: 10.1111/j.1540-5931.2009.00698.x.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. 1965. Translated by Hélène Iswolsky, Indiana UP, 1984.

Bryant, Gregory A., et al. "The Perception of Spontaneous Volitional Laughter across 21 Societies." *Psychological Science*, vol. 29, no. 9, 2018, pp. 1515-25, doi: 10.1177/0956797618778235.

Cheung, Monit, and Carol A. Leung. "Laughter Yoga as a Social Work Intervention." *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2020, pp. 288-301, doi: 10.1080/00377317.2020.1819938

"Donkey Laughs When Dog Gets a Shock on Electric Fence Funny TikTok Vine." *YouTube*, uploaded by VineToks, 4 May 2021, youtu.be/UJ9u3NiayJ8.

Ethofer, Thomas, Sophia Stegmaier, Katharina Koch, Maren Reinl, Benjamin Kreifelts, Lena Schwarz, Michael Erb, Klaus Scheffler, and Dirk Wildgruber. "Are You Laughing at Me? Neural Correlates of Social Intent Attribution to Auditory and Visual Laughter." *Human Brain Mapping*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2019, pp. 353-61, doi: 10.1002/hbm.24806.

Freud, Sigmund. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. 1905. Translated by Joyce Crick, Penguin, 2002.

Hackley, Chris, Andrew Bengry-Howell, Christine Griffin, Willm Mistral, Isabelle Szmigin, and Rungpaka Amy Hackley née Tiwsakul. "Young Adults and 'Binge' Drinking: A Bakhtinian Analysis." *Journal of Marketing Management*, vol. 29, no. 7-8, 2013, pp. 933-49, doi: 10.1080/0267257X.2012.729074.

Hau'ofa, Epeli. *Kisses in the Nederends*. U of Hawaii P, 1995.

Horlacher, Stefan. "A Short Introduction to Theories of Humour, the Comic, and Laughter." *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*, edited by Gaby Pailer, Andreas Böhn, Stefan Horlacher, and Ulrich Scheck, Rodopi, 2009, pp. 17-47.

Law, Mikaela M., Elizabeth A. Broadbent, and John J. Sollers. "A Comparison of the Cardiovascular Effects of Simulated and Spontaneous Laughter." *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, vol. 37, 2018, pp. 103-109, doi: 10.1016/j.ctim.2018.02.005.

Lindquist, Cynthia. "Very Good Medicine: Indigenous Humor and Laughter." *Tribal College: Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2016, tribalcollegejournal.org/very-good-medicine-indigenous-humor-and-laughter/.

McKenzie, John. "Bums, Poos and Wees: Carnivalesque Spaces in the Picture Books of Early Childhood. Or, Has Literature Gone to the Dogs?" *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2005, pp. 81-94, education.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/2004v4n1art6.pdf.

Mistry, Rohinton. "Squatter." *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, McClelland, 1987, pp. 145-69.

Nicholls, Christine. "Online Humour, Cartoons, Videos, Memes, Jokes and Laughter in the Epoch of the Coronavirus." *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, vol. 10, 2020, pp. 274-318, doi: 10.18778/2083-2931.10.17.

Pailer, Gaby. Introduction. *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*, edited by Gaby Pailer, Andreas Böhn, Stefan Horlacher, and Ulrich Scheck, Rodopi, 2009, pp. 7-14.

Reichl, Susanne, and Mark Stein. Introduction. *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, edited by Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, Rodopi, 2005, pp. 1-23.

Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. U of Minnesota P, 2017.