BUT IT'S SO SILLY

A CROSS-CULTURAL COLLAGE OF NONSENSE, PLAY AND POETRY

BY JONARNO LAWSON

BUT IT'S SO SILLY

A CROSS-CULTURAL COLLAGE OF NONSENSE, PLAY AND POETRY

BY JONARNO LAWSON

WOLSAK
& WYNN

© JonArno Lawson, 2017

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher or a license from the Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). For an Access Copyright license, visit www.accesscopyright.ca or call toll free to 1-800-893-5777.

Cover image: Nahid Kazemi
Cover and interior design: Rachel Rosen
Author's image: Philip de Vos
Typeset in Adobe Caslon Pro
Printed by Ball Media, Brantford, Canada

"The Horse Turned Driver" image on page 91 courtesy of the Toronto Public Library Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books.
The drawing on page 35 and the map on page 127 are copyright JonArno Lawson.

The Canada Council for the Arts | Le Conseil des Arts du Canada
40 YEARS + 40 ANS
ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
Canadian Heritage Patrimoine canadien

The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Government of Canada.

Wolsak and Wynn Publishers, Ltd.
280 James Street North
Hamilton, ON
Canada L8R 2L3

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Lawson, JonArno, author
But it's so silly : a cross-cultural collage of nonsense, play and poetry / JonArno Lawson.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-928088-45-5 (softcover)

1. Play--Cross-cultural studies. 2. Finger play--Cross-cultural studies. 3. Games--Cross-cultural studies. 4. Rhyming games--Cross-cultural studies. 5. Children's poetry--Cross-cultural studies. I. Title.

GR480.L38 2017 398.8 C2017-904860-0

This book is dedicated to those who, finding no way back, went forward.

Briefly and in passing: it is a sad thing that what is written has permanence, whereas what is said is often unnoticed.
– Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*

Logical, scientific, and verbal presentations are honored in our society. Less honored are spatial ability, grace in movement, and those aspects of a comprehensive awareness of relationships between objects or ideas which do not translate well into words.
– Robert Ornstein, *The Mind Field*

The crucial driver of evolution, Darwin understood, was not nature's sense of purpose, but her sense of humor.
– Siddhartha Mukherjee, *The Gene*

Korf invents some jokes of a new sort
That only many hours later work.
Everybody listens to them, bored.

Yet, like some still fuse glowing in the dark,
You wake up suddenly that night in bed
Beaming like a baby newly fed.
– Christian Morgenstern, "Delayed Action"

We can all be explorers, and can all find wonderment wherever we are.
– Tahir Shah

In art there is only one thing that counts: the thing you can't explain.
– Georges Braque, *Illustrated Notebooks*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface................9

Chapter One – Baby Play, School Workshops and an Ojibwe Perspective................13

Chapter Two – Hamilton, Trinidad, Jamaica and Chechnya...............36

Chapter Three – Dutch America, the Netherlands and South Africa................59

Chapter Four – Malta................77

Chapter Five – Israel, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, Cuba, Nursery Rhymes and My Father's Stroke................87

Chapter Six – Colombia, Hallowe'en and Mexico................110

Chapter Seven – Russia, Belorussia, the Ukraine and Poland............119

Chapter Eight – Yiddish and Eastern Europe................128

Chapter Nine – Eastern Scotland................148

Chapter Ten – India, and Japan in Austria................151

Chapter Eleven – Mauritius and Domestic Magic................161

Chapter Twelve – The Philippines and Toronto................169

Chapter Thirteen – China, Cambodia and Korea................180

Chapter Fourteen – William Carlos Williams, Verbal Oddities, Abe and How Adults Play................187

Chapter Fifteen – Italy and Nonsense................198

Chapter Sixteen – Saudi Arabia, Human Appendages, Touch, Eritrea and South Africa................211

Chapter Seventeen – Local Play................225

Chapter Eighteen – Iran and Pakistan................233

Chapter Nineteen – Sri Lanka, Ghana, Greece and Albania.............248

Chapter Twenty – Circassia, Latvia and Northwestern Scotland.......268

Chapter Twenty-One – War, Children, Sandcastles and My Coat....276

Epilogue................282

Acknowledgements................283

Appendix 1: Sunny View Workshops................286

Appendix 2: Tanya Winer................291

Appendix 3: Recommended Books................293

Bibliography................298

Poem, Game and Song Index by Country................305

Poem, Game and Song Index by Language................311

PREFACE

The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall once wrote of the "absolute obligation that each of us has – in spite of the risks – to share our insights with others and the great loss when people lack the confidence, energy, or courage to describe systematically the conceptual worlds in which they live."

The thirteenth-century Scottish magician Michael Scot recorded the following story: "The tale is told of an ape or monkey with three young. When pursued, she takes the one she loves best by the hand, the second under her arm, and leaves the third, which she likes the least, to its fate. But it leaps onto its mother's back and alone escapes when she loses hold of the others."

This book could be read as a collection of shared insights from a fairly large number of people, but it could just as easily be described as a brief account of what's been achieved by that ape that escaped.

But what does the ape stand for? The bits of rhyme and play that live on in us after we lose hold of so much else? Or does it represent talkative, playful humanity – our own particular brand of primate that leapt free of its earlier hominid ancestors (who might have felt relieved to see the back of us when we departed) millions of years ago.

While I was writing my first books of poetry for children I made a sometimes careful, sometimes playful, study of English nursery verse and of English lap and finger rhyme games. I believed that extending this study to the rhythms, themes and dramatic movements of lap and finger rhyme games belonging to non-English languages and cultures could provide an important stimulus and grounding for further work I wanted to do as a children's poet, and that it might have a secondary importance, as well, as an archive of cultural artifacts that might otherwise disappear.

As I went along with my research, I started to take an interest in, and collect, other forms of brief poetry, games, entertaining traditions and other surprising (to me) approaches to play. In the end, this is a bit of a cultural collage . . . a chaotic compendium, even. And I've barely scratched the surface, if you look at this from a global point of view – most of what I gathered I gathered opportunistically from a handful of people representing a small number of nations and languages. There are hundreds more to be looked into.

You may want to (or even should?) check any (or all) of these on the Internet, or on YouTube, to see other versions (especially on the amazing Mama Lisa's World website – it's a treasure trove of information) and to get a "live" sense for how people use them. I can describe things here, but nothing beats actually watching these things being done. Not all of them are out there, though. A few of these, as of now, are gathered only here, including some I knew from my own childhood.

You ought to consider the fact that you, the reader, might be – probably are – the sole repository of a rhyme, game, joke or riddle – or at least of a unique, familial or regional variation of one, or of several.

While people who study education often look at how play is part of preparing a child for later stages of life, we sometimes forget that this goes both ways. Adults playing with children are also being reconnected to, or if there's no long break between generations, staying in touch with, something important that keeps their own minds and imaginations moving.

The physicist Richard Feynman (who cited his father's inquisitive nature and conversations with him when he was a child as a major influence) always taught first-year physics, at university, because he said it kept him in touch with the fundamental questions of physics all through his life.

The first-year students always asked the biggest, most difficult questions, and Feynman was reminded each time that most of those questions remained unanswered. He had to think about them again and explain what was known again in the simplest and most interesting terms he could think of, and he felt this kept his research fresh.

Writing for children has been similar for me – the work I'm happiest with almost always stems directly out of ideas or concerns my children expressed.

For instance:

My child Sophie (age seven): Imaginary aginary. Now that's a word, *imaginary*. What do you think of when you think of something imaginary? Aginary? I think of my poor self, with the very small, small elves.

My son Ashey (age four): We have to make all the elves and Cyclops stop because Noah said to God if those imaginary creatures build another ark I don't want them to build another because if they build another ark they'll squash our ark and our ark will go to pieces and all of us will die, and we'll see no people or animals we'll only see imaginary creatures.

Sophie: Said Noah to the imaginary animals
We're all packed up to go
God only sent for the other animals
So to you, we'll have to say, "No."

Shortly after this, I wrote a poem called "Our Imaginary Selves":

"I'm sorry," Noah said, "we've taken all that we can carry,
God never said I could save anyone imaginary . . ."
"Don't worry," said the gryphon, to the downcast dwarves
 and elves,
"We'll build another ark for our imaginary selves."

What interests me about this exchange is that I had no clear memory of this conversation with my kids when I wrote this poem. I knew Ashey had been worried about the other creatures and I remembered writing this to cheer him up. But I had no memory of jotting this conversation down on an envelope as they were talking. I had forgotten all about it when I was writing my own poem – I only came across the envelope again by chance, long after my poem was published.

Clearly my poem was based on their ideas and worries, and was scaffolded off of some subconscious memory of Sophie's brief poem – my poem comes at the idea a little differently, but the fundamental idea is entirely theirs.

Many of my poems are more consciously and clearly taken from things they've said or worried about – in response to them. My kids keep returning me to the fundamentals, and because they're still acquiring vocabulary and encountering old stories new, for the first time, they come out with great original expressions I'd never think of.

CHAPTER ONE

BABY PLAY, SCHOOL WORKSHOPS AND AN OJIBWE PERSPECTIVE

NOBODY PLAYS ENOUGH

Nobody plays enough – people get out of the habit.

Play, which can be part of almost everything you do, is often relegated to one room in the house, or to one part of the day, or even to one stage of life. Is this one of the reasons that so many new parents find their changed circumstances overwhelming? New parents sometimes feel isolated, lonely and bored. It can, and often does, take time, patience and a sense of humour to figure out your child's world, and to get to know yourself as an adult with children, if you're not used to being one. Play, in whatever form it takes, may be the best way to get you back on your feet and moving again.

TICK-TOCK

It was the sort of friendship that seemed destined to last forever. It didn't – it barely lasted a year – but I learned some important things from Jean-Marc before he and his family suddenly moved away and completely disappeared out of our lives.

The pursuit that became this book started as I watched Jean-Marc interact with his two-year-old son. I was sitting quietly on the floor with little baby Sophie, when Jean-Marc suddenly jumped up, put his son on his head and started spinning around.

I was shocked. Was that really safe? But his son squealed with delight – he loved it.

Next, Jean-Marc dropped his son down so that he was holding him upside down by his ankles. He opened his legs to brace himself, and started swinging his son back and forth like a pendulum. He chanted:

Tick-Tock
Tick-Tock
Sammy is a little clock

Boom Boom Boom!

When he said, "Boom Boom Boom!" he stopped swinging his son from side to side, and instead swung him back and forth through his open legs. His son couldn't get enough of this.

Watching Jean-Marc, I realized I had no idea how to physically play with a child, though to be fair, Sophie was still too small to play with in the vigorous way Jean-Marc was playing with his son. J.M. was originally from Brazil, though he'd lived in France, then in the United States and now was in Canada. I wondered in that moment – and still wonder – about the influence of culture on adult-child interactions. I had never seen an adult play with children like this when I was growing up. My father had bounced me on his lap while chanting a rhyme, but no one had tossed me about, or spun me – not that I could remember, anyway.

I was determined to learn how to do this. It was the sort of thing you could only learn by watching, and doing. But as time went on I also got up the courage to ask questions. I realized I didn't have to just passively wait to see this kind of play, here and there, randomly – I could go and actively seek what I was looking for, as well. Even though I wasn't exactly sure what it was I was looking for, I knew I would know when I found it.

I've assembled all of what's below in the hope that one or two pieces might be of fun, practical use, and that the rest might be at least entertaining.

As Alison Gopnik says in her book *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, "contemporary middle-class parents may allow themselves license to play only if they are convinced that it is part of the work of parenting. There is a famously puritan streak in America. We have a knack for taking what are simple pleasures in other cultures, from food to walks to sex, and turning them into strenuous work projects." Canada has a puritan streak, as well, though puritanical Protestant culture never gained as strong a foothold here, thanks largely to the counterbalancing influence of Roman Catholic French Canada. From the beginning of the colonial period the Protestants and Catholics were roughly equal, population-wise. The very large French-Canadian community in Canada has probably helped save Anglo-Protestant Canada from itself in more ways than I have time to go into here.

In any case, I'd hate for anything here to be taken in the Puritan way! I have no strenuous work projects to recommend. But as my child Sophie once said when she was very small, pretending to be Cinderella while she cleaned up her room (her idea, not ours!): "It's possible to do something real while you're pretending." In other words, while pretending to be Cinderella, cleaning up her evil stepmother's kitchen, she was actually just Sophie, cleaning up her own bedroom.

If you find something you can adapt in your own way, that's great. I used some of these for brief periods of time, and some not at all, because the time or stage I might have used it had passed, or the right opportunity hasn't yet presented itself.

I'll no doubt return to (and re-adapt) many of them, especially if a time comes again when I spend a lot of time with small children. It's never too late to put our insights to use, even if we only get to them later in life, or are among the last to make use of them.

YOU WILL EXPERIENCE LIFE AS A HUMAN

The grandfathers and the grandmothers are in the children; teach them well.
– Ojibwe proverb

Don't show them your mind. Show them your imagination.
– Thomas King [quoting his mother], *The Truth About Stories*

Over coffee at Pain Perdu on St. Clair Avenue, I told the storyteller Mariella Bertelli about the problems I was having finding sources and examples for First Nations versions of bouncing rhymes and finger games. I had found lullabies in First Nations languages, but always from secondary sources. Mariella, who had a personal and professional interest in bouncing and finger rhymes, as well, had found a similar dearth of this type of material from First Nations sources.

It was important to me to find First Nations examples of these rhymes and games, because I live on land that is part of the traditional territory of the Wendat, Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nations and the Métis Nation. I had grown up in a town (Dundas, ON) that had been Attawandaron territory for millenia. If I was gathering games and rhymes from global sources, I definitely wanted this book to contain examples from the part of the globe I call home.

Part of the problem, I realized, after a thoughtful email response from the Haida storyteller, K̲ung Jaadee, might have been my approach.

Though much of the material I gathered in this book came to me haphazardly, through people I met in everyday circumstances (through family and friends, on planes or while standing around on playgrounds), some of it I sought actively. If there was an area of the world that interested me, I would sometimes go looking for a source. Active looking was often less successful than casual collecting, but usually I got some kind of response.

I would write someone a brief letter, explaining what I was looking for, or call a community centre and explain what I was after (or send a note on Facebook) and then follow up a little later if I didn't get a response right away.

Using this approach, I had written K̲ung Jaadee a quick, impersonal note about my research early in 2016 asking if she might know anything about Haida lap, finger and bouncing rhymes. I had never met her before, I had only read about her online, so I was writing as a complete stranger. By this point, I had already tried many other people from First Nations backgrounds without much success.

I'm including part of K̲ung Jaadee's response below, with her permission:

> I'm wondering if you're interested in contacting other Aboriginal/Metis/Inuit people, you might also let them know more about yourself; Indigenous people usually introduce themselves, telling us their English names, their traditional names, the Nation they come from.
>
> Your message only let me know you're writing a book with rhymes, and actions with babies or toddlers. I'm only stating this because I'm sure other groups will feel more comfortable replying with their information if you say a bit more about yourself. Where do you come from? Have your written other books? Where were you raised?
>
> These are things First Nations/Metis/Inuit are interested in knowing from others. It helps us to figure out more things about a person. And it helps build trust between people.
>
> Thank you for asking me.
>
> Haw'aa, thank you.
> Good luck.
> – K̲ung Jaadee

She could have just ignored me. Instead she trusted that my intentions were good, and took the time to reorient me. I really appreciated this. Her advice ended up being very useful as I went forward with the later stages of my research. It was good advice to put into practice when approaching anyone at all. She also said that – to the best of her knowledge, and from her own experience – Haida people didn't have or use these kinds of rhymes and games.

I took what K̲ung Jaadee said about her own experiences seriously, but I also wondered whether the residential school history might have had something to do with the lack of information. The relationships between Elders (primarily grandparents and parents) and their grandchildren and children had been under direct attack for generations, along with First Nations languages, cultural traditions and spiritual transmission. The First Nations have been undergoing (and, incredibly, persevering through) a genocide that's lasted for five hundred years.

How could things as fragile and ephemeral as games between adults and children *not* have been lost? At the same time, it's quite possible that, as K̲ung Jaadee said, they simply didn't exist in Haida culture, and maybe never had.

Still, I think it's worth considering something stated in the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada:* "*Cultural Genocide* is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. . . . Most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next."

Sabrina Williams, an intergenerational Aboriginal survivor from British Colombia, is quoted in the same book: "I didn't realize until taking this language class how much we have lost – all the things that are attached to a language: it's family connections, it's oral history, it's traditions, it's ways of being, it's ways of knowing, it's medicine, it's song, it's dance, it's memory."

When I asked my friend Lylee Williams, a school librarian on the Kahnawà:ke reserve near Montreal, and the Mi'kmaw poet Rebecca Thomas the same question about rhymes, lap and finger games, I encountered the same answer. There were lullabies, but they didn't know any examples of lap bounces, or finger rhymes or games. Was it that that particular way of playing with infants was common in Europe, Asia and Africa, but wasn't something that was ever widely practised here, among the First Nations?

The fact that I didn't find what I was looking for didn't necessarily mean it had never existed, doesn't mean it doesn't exist now and doesn't mean it won't exist in the future. It might mean any or all of those things, though. I asked probably a dozen people from First Nations backgrounds or communities the same questions over a half-dozen years – still, however you look at it, that's a small sample over a brief period.

Luckily, though, Mariella knew Ojibwe storyteller Esther Osche through her work with the Toronto Storytelling Festival, and she suggested that I give her a call and tell her what I was looking for.

Esther Osche is an Ojibwe historian and storyteller of the Whitefish River First Nation. Anishinaabemowin is her first language. It's one of several languages of the Anishinaabe people, related to, among others, Fox, Cree and Potawatomi. There are close to three-quarters of a million Anishinaabe living in Canada and the United States. Osche has lived all her life on Birch Island, on the north shore of Lake Huron.

We had to speak on the phone, because I didn't have time to drive up to meet her. Even if I had, she was just about to take a leave from her regular job as a lands manager at the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek Band Office. I caught her at a lucky moment.

After we introduced ourselves, and talked a bit about who we were, and what we did, I went ahead and asked if she thought she might have any material along the lines I was asking about: Finger games, lap rhymes, interactive games between adults and children.

While Esther spoke I tried to jot everything down:

"We start talking to a child when it's in vitro – as if they weren't in vitro – as if they were already here. As soon as we find out we're pregnant, we start talking. They feel your energy. As the pregnancy progresses, the language used becomes more complex. We talk to it as a spirit. 'You are coming into human form.' 'You will experience life as a human.' We don't just let it float about in there alone, it isn't a passive relationship, it's direct.

"And when the child is born – 'See, now you're here – all is well – it's different here. . .' From the beginning we exercise them to build their strength, to motivate them, to engage them and capture their attention. It's important to draw their attention, to try to get them to listen, so that once they're mobile they'll really listen.

"When I was little my grandpa gave me a little wooden doll, little wooden toys he'd made. It's important to allow a small child to hold different things like this – flowers, feathers, leaves – to get them to look at them, to regard them. To really look, concentrate and examine. And then when they're done, when they've exhausted it, to go on to something else.

"We sing to the child in vitro, as well, with a drum. It's important to learn the parents' voices, and their energy. To make that bond, because that bond matters for everything. Everything at first will be experienced through that bond. We chant with the drum, not pronouncing words, but chanting. The chant goes up and down, which allows the child to deepen their understanding of themselves.

"The chants have patterns. Some, everyone knows. But some are invented by you alone – you go with the drum. The drum suggests, or underlies the patterns. You are teaching the child to go on a journey when it hears the drum.

"By the age of two and a half, the child is able to figure out a lot on their own. So it's important to take the child everywhere – not to let them run loose, but to take them everywhere to see everything. A cradleboard allows the child to stay in a fixed position, where they can see everything. They like to be standing, but they may not be strong enough. The cradleboard is for posture, and for strength – binding in a blanket may work that way, too.

"In a high chair, they won't be as happy – they can sit back, and squirm.

"By watching, they discover there is a purpose in everything. That there is a purpose also in themselves. You want them to engage with the world. You want them to have a good countenance, and posture – a good stance, which will give them confidence.

"I learned from my grandmother the ways of children. My mother was more modern – she liked Jack and Jill rhymes. But Jack and Jill is too flat. Nursery rhymes are flat. They quickly come to an end. I liked my grandmother's way better – it was more open.

"Out in nature with Elders, fishing, camping, having shore dinners, these are my early memories. Watching everyone working together – it all comes together – you learn by watching – and you know from observing. You know how to put yourself to a task. It teaches a purposeful way of living.

"Every day is purposeful. Every day has its menial tasks, and every day has its magic.

"Not just women sang, but men, too. Men and women did equally hard tasks. I never felt like I wasn't strong enough. The message was 'Try. See how strong you are.' And if you couldn't do it, you go away and practise, and come back again.

"We're boring babies to death with television and videos. I'm competing with devices, with my own grandchildren, but I still get them outside at every opportunity. I tap them on the shoulder, and say 'Imagine this . . .' I give them a few clues.

"I do a lot of storytelling with my grandchildren. They don't want a flat story about 'Do this, or that,' they like something richer. Not like Jack and Jill, where something happens, and then it ends. Something like 'How the North Star Came to Be.' They're listening, they may not understand the words, but they hear the tone of your voice. They can understand the energy. The voice that invites, or the voice that repels. They understand the difference.

"I became an expert at distracting a child. And I had fun with it! Make them forget what they're trying to control you with. You can shake something at them, something big, or shiny, something they haven't seen before. And they forget how important they are for a moment. Diffusing a child's sense of self-importance is important. The parent has to guide.

"If I was difficult with my parents, if I was being headstrong, my father would show me how creatures in nature interacted with their parents. He showed me to take cues from nature. We watched bears. The mother bear explored first. She found a bag, and explored it. She snarled at the cubs, at her babies, to give her room for safety. When they got too close she snarled, and they scrambled up a tree. Do they come down on their own, when they feel like it? No. The mother lets them know when it's time. And the cub who doesn't listen? Who comes down before she's ready? She bats it hard and it rolls away like a ball. So I also saw how much harsher the animal world was. My parents didn't treat me like that.

"Watching the bears spoke more loudly than my parents' words. This is why our people aren't big speakers. Have you noticed First Nations people aren't usually big speakers? It's all eyes and ears with us.

"But I'm different! I speak a lot. My grandmother said it was the French in me.

"And I want to add, that it's nice for a child to watch someone carve something. It's good for them to see the transformation, from a piece of wood, to transform it till it looks like someone they know."

I found myself wishing I'd met Esther Osche twenty years ago, before I'd had children. I loved particularly the idea of preparing the child for the world before it appears. By doing so, you are also developing intimacy, as well as preparing yourself for what lies ahead. And reminding yourself that no matter what, you, too, are experiencing life as a human.

WHEN IS CHILDHOOD OVER?

Childhood is never really over. We acquire thinner adult years that barely stretch, or in some cases, fit, over top of those initial dense layers of our early youth. For a while we grow physically bigger, but essentially most of us stay, internally, who we were as children. If we openly regress, it's often childhood behaviours that we regress to. At the same time, if we mature, it's often through the connection we've maintained to the sense of wonder and curiousity we had as children.

In any case, like many people who don't have younger siblings, once I reached adolescence, I thought childhood was over everywhere, for everyone. I didn't know children anymore, so I thought "That's it for childhood!"

I found it surprising when I started meeting children again later in life. Their existence seemed to offer surprising proof that childhood was still going on in the world without me. It had seemed like just a stage, just for me, and from my individual perspective, but childhood turned out to be a pervasive, widespread phenonemon, global in nature – a universal experience. Wherever you go, there are children, and even if you don't return to the place where you were a child for thirty or forty years, when you go back, you will, usually, still find children.

I realize that to many people, this isn't a strange thing, but to me, it really was a revelation. We become so familiar with ourselves that we forget that almost every self-discovery is an accident, at first. We forget that what we now take for granted we once had to learn.

AWAKENING YOUNG MINDS

I may not have thought much about children since I was a child, but in the late 1990s I came across a book called *Awakening Young Minds* that changed that completely. Denise Nessel, its editor, had selected a very wide-ranging set of essays on the nature of what education was and wasn't, while also exploring what it could and might be. Reading it made me feel like it was important to go out and explore life with children again. To see for myself.

My wife, Amy, and I had started talking about having a family, and I realized that I didn't know much about what I was doing. This was something I would re-realize again and again.

Re-realizing, by the way, is a word (and concept) that comes from my friend Geoffrey Corbet. He uses it to describe the process of realizing something important, then forgetting it, and then later, re-realizing it. Part of the sensation of re-realizing something is the sense of wonder you have that you could have ever forgotten it once you'd learned it.

In any case, I decided to volunteer at a local school. A friend of mine taught at Memorial Elementary School, in the east end of Hamilton, Ontario – coincidentally, it was the primary school that my grandmother had attended in the 1920s.

THE ICE PLANET

My friend who was a teacher there sent me students to work with one on one (and one by one), to do writing exercises.

There was a boy in grade four who brought his pencil case in which he had a single piece of paper folded up. He sat down at the table across from me. I asked him if he wanted to write a story. He nodded. He took out his piece of paper, and unfolded it. He wrote –

There was an ice planet.

Then he sat there looking at the paper. He didn't write anything more. After five or ten minutes, as I didn't want to rush him, I asked if he was done. He nodded. I sent him back to class.

The next week he returned. I asked him if he wanted to keep working on his story. He nodded, took out the paper and wrote under the first sentence:

The Ice King lived by himself in the ice.

Again he sat quietly, and again I asked if he was done. He nodded, and went back to class. He followed the same pattern the next week, adding:

On the other side of the ice planet, the Ice Queen lived by herself.

And the next week:

The King and the Queen of the ice planet never met.

That was it. A four-line story, or poem. He didn't come back again after that.

Many people would say he was not a good writer. He didn't add lots of detail and it was difficult for him to get even this much out, over the course of a month. But to me, this is a very powerful story, or poem. It underlined for me how important it is to let children do what they can do at their own pace.

There is a great push to categorize everything, to write by category, to publish by category, to react to – whether to reward, or punish – the work of certain people because of their reputations. All of that has its purpose, and works to a point, but most of that activity can become a hindrance, as well. Here we are twenty years later, and I can still recite this boy's poem from memory. His work became part of my personal anthology of important poems. It shouldn't surprise me, but it still surprises me, because I can't categorize him – I don't even remember his name.

His work works for me, and so I remember it. It's very probable that he himself, whomever he is (he'd be about thirty now), has no memory of it.

THERE WON'T BE ANY ROOM

I want to include one other brief, brilliant, anonymous example from another school workshop I did, because it's also a personal favourite. It emerged from a writing exercise I do with students from any age group, where I ask them to think of two seemingly incompatible types of animal, or thing (like the sun and the moon, or the shore and the sea) and imagine what would happen if they fell in love. Would it go well? Would it end in disaster? What would happen?

I tried this out with a grade seven (or eight?) class at Centennial

Regional High School in Longueuil, Quebec, a few years ago. A student in that class (I have no idea what her name was) came up with the following, which, like the Ice Planet poem above, ended up in my own private anthology:

> The ceiling and the floor fell in love, but they realized they needed walls to keep them apart, if they wanted to be together. Without the walls they'd stop existing, because there wouldn't be any room.

WHY DO THEY MAKE THE CLOUDS BLUE?

"Why do they make the clouds blue?" an elementary school teacher once asked me. "How many times have they looked at the sky – I take them to the windows to look – but always – blue clouds. Jesus Christ! Clouds are white or grey! Maybe red – but never blue. And how many pictures they've made so beautiful, and in the middle of it they stick their own awful faces – huge, smiling – I could wring their necks . . ." She ended my session twenty minutes early so that she could "prepare the students for the end of the day." I was sure her students were prepared for the end of the day before it even started.

She was frightening, this teacher, but I found her question about the clouds so interesting. I would never have questioned blue clouds – something I myself have always drawn without thinking twice about it.

I don't mind blue clouds. But her observation seemed like one worth exploring even if her feelings about, and way of expressing, her observation were unfortunate.

If what we usually see is white or grey clouds floating in a blue sky, why do most children draw blue clouds in a white sky? My own feeling is that it's easier – to draw a blue cloud on white paper is quick, and most people looking at the picture would simply see white and blue – the right colours, and don't think about whether those colours are illustrating the right parts of what you'd normally see in the actual sky.

It wasn't the first or last time that I almost ignored a good question because I was frightened by (or disliked) the person who'd asked it.

SUNNY VIEW SCHOOL

Before I had published any children's books, I received a grant from the Artists in Education program of the Ontario Arts Council to run poetry workshops in six different schools. The trouble would be – though I didn't realize this at first – finding six schools that might want to work with me.

I thought it would be easy, but I was inexperienced, and principals and teachers I called out of the blue were, of course, leery about my lack of experience, and negligible credentials. After striking out over and over, I called my auntie Fran Kirsh, who's an elementary school teacher. She suggested that I call my cousin Ellen Little, who's also an elementary school teacher, who suggested that I call the principal of Sunny View Public School. She knew people there and said it was a remarkable place.

Sunny View is a school for special needs students in Toronto. It opened in 1953, and it's still going strong today in 2017. Close to a hundred students bused in from around the city receive intensive support to address multiple physical, communication, intellectual and health care needs. It sounded fascinating. This time when I called, I was invited over immediately by the principal, Annie Appleby. She wanted to get a sense of who I was and of what I was proposing. A meeting with Annie Appleby, I soon discovered, involves a great deal of walking – we walked around the entire school, around and around it, through every corridor and into every room as she introduced me to dozens of staff members and students. She wanted to know if I would be willing to work with all the different levels: primary, junior and intermediate.

I felt hesitant – I'd never worked with primary students before.

Really, I felt scared in general. What did I know about working with little people? Nothing. I had volunteered a little bit at Memorial Elementary School in Hamilton four years earlier, but I had worked with students there one on one: this was a school for students with special needs, and I would be working with entire classes.

Right from the beginning, before I had agreed to anything, Annie was introducing me as the poet who would be doing workshops at the school – she told people I would be starting right away!

Her energy and enthusiasm were captivating. It made me think of something I'd once read; that England's success at building an empire came about because it recognized two aristocracies – one of birth and one of ability. I'm not romanticizing the British Empire here – abilities, obviously, can be insidious, and/or used in insidious ways. Annie, I could see, came from the aristocracy of (non-insidious) ability. She was the undisputed captain of this ship, and her mission was to explore and make use of any opportunity for learning and self-expression that might be made available to her students.

She introduced me to the special projects art resource teacher, Gyongyi "Gingi" Venczel, and left me to talk with her. Gingi asked what my plans were. I didn't know what to say. I couldn't imagine how any of the workshops I'd thought of doing could fit with the needs or abilities of the students I'd just met. It didn't seem possible.

In fact – with a great deal of collaborative adaptation – it *was* possible, but at the beginning I wouldn't have believed it. I said I needed time to think, and then we chatted about our various teaching experiences. I described some of the things I'd done with students before. After a short while Annie came back and asked if I would come again later that week to see demonstrations of other creative classes that Gingi had worked on. They also gave me a copy of Tim Lefens' extraordinary book *Flying Colors,* to read in preparation.

Lefens describes an art class he conducted at the Matheny School in Peapack, New Jersey. His students were wheelchair-bound and had no use of their arms or hands. He had to devise ways to give them the freedom to express themselves through paint. The book is both practical and inspiring because it demonstrates the type of thinking that is necessary to adapt to what at first seems like an impossible situation. As the Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar once said, "When you believe that your situation doesn't have a solution, you become more spontaneous, you get involved in the lives of others, or if you like, the dangers of others."

Not knowing the students, but knowing that their abilities and levels varied widely, even within a single class, I felt as if I might be in a situation without a solution. Where should I start? Though I assured Annie on the first day we met that I'd love to do a workshop at the school, she later told me how reluctant I seemed, especially at the idea of working with students in the primary grades where I had very limited experience.

I was surprised she had sensed my reluctance – I thought I had hidden it well – but she was right. I had felt overwhelmed at first.

FRAME, MASK AND MIRROR

It took weeks of collaborative work to figure out how to do the writing workshops effectively – this one, my favourite of all of them – was dreamed up mostly by Gingi. I've included more about the other workshops in an appendix to the book.

I was going to have the students write a poem where every line started with the words *I am*. The idea was to have the students describe themselves in a variety of different ways, using strange images and trying out different moods. I was using "A Song of Amergin," a version of an ancient Irish calendar poem I found in an anthology called *Technicians of the Sacred*, as a model.

Each line in the poem begins with the words *I am*.

Gingi had a stroke of genius about how to model what we were after – she suggested doing a warm-up exercise using a picture frame, a lion mask and a large movable mirror.

The students sat in a semicircle in front of us as Gingi began her demonstration. She looked into the large mirror she'd set up in front of her. "Who am I?" she asked herself, and then she looked over at the class, and repeated, “Who am I?”

Students put up their hands – they answered: “Gingi,” “An art teacher,” “A good person.”

“Okay,” said Gingi, “but there are other ways I can look at myself.” Now she held up the picture frame so it enclosed her face and she looked at herself in the mirror again, and then out at the class, looking from person to person. “Who am I now?” she asked. “A painting,” “A picture,” “The *Mona Lisa.*” Now she put on the lion mask and repeated what she had just done with the frame. “And who am I now?” she asked.

“A lion,” “A scary animal,” “A monster” were some of the responses.

“Now I’m going to come around and I want you to ask yourself the same questions.” She pulled up to the first student on her rolling chair and pushed the mirror in front of him. “Who are you?” she said. “Ask yourself who you are.” The student stared deep into his own eyes for a long moment. He said his name.

Gingi said, “Now choose: the frame or the mask – which do you want?”

The student chose the frame.

“Now who are you?” Gingi asked.

“A famous basketball player,” said the student.

The students were incredibly quiet, fully concentrating as Gingi went to each one to repeat the exercise. There was a sense of heightened tension and expectation. Everyone was curious as, one after another, each was drawn into the mirror, and asked both to see themselves and to transform how they saw themselves.

Using this same exercise with a different class, a period later, Gingi said, “Now I’m going to be your mirror,” and she held up the frame and whatever the student did she mirrored it back.

I felt anxious at the beginning of this – How would students feel who had limited control of their limbs, who couldn’t help jerking their arms or splaying their fingers? But Gingi was in control of what she was doing, it was completely respectful and the students laughed and noticeably relaxed and the atmosphere lightened as Gingi acted the part of their reflections.

It struck me how liberating Gingi's exercises must be when I thought how much time many of these students spend trying to control their limbs and movements enough to communicate or to conform as much as possible to social norms. Part of what Gingi was communicating was "Just relax, this is you, have some fun with who you are. It's not all serious business."

During the question period, Gingi very politely reframed or re-answered questions I'd been asked, when she sensed that my answers might not to be meeting the needs of the children who asked them.

For instance, when I was asked by a student how old I was when I learned to read, I answered without thinking of what might be the intent behind the question: "I was young – three or four."

Gingi jumped in right away and said, "That *is* young! I was at least six before I started to read. I found it very difficult."

I knew as soon as Gingi said this what she was getting at. As she said to me after, "The student wanted to know if there was any hope for him as a writer – he was comparing himself to you, what age he was at when he started to read . . ."

Or when one student said she hoped to be a poet when she grew up.

I said, "I hope you will be, too." Gingi followed this up with "But you already are! Look at what you wrote today. You're already a poet."

This time I was a bit quicker and I said, "Gingi's right. You're already writing poetry. Just keep writing."

SELF-IMPERSONATION

The Victorian psychologist James Sully described the case of two sisters, aged five and seven, who spent the afternoon pretending to be sisters. Sully noted that the game had a strangely civilizing influence: the pretend sisters were much nicer to each other than the real sisters had been. Be yourself, for a change, the lesson seems to be. You might like what you find.
– Charles Fernyhough, *The Baby in the Mirror*

Wendy Doniger explores the phenomenon of self-impersonation in a wide range of stories from various mythologies and modern films in *The Woman Who Pretended to be Who She Was: Myths of Self-Imitation*. How do we discover ourselves through putting on masks, but also, by pretending to be who we already are, or feel we could be?

When my son Ashey was three, he was wearing a Batman costume one day. He said to me, "Your son is inside my costume! Look!" He then took off his mask, saying, "Here's your son's face!" It was a complicated bit of pretending – it was as if his own face had become the mask of Batman, who was speaking from within his body. And the Batman mask represented the true Batman, who had to wear the mask to conceal Ashey, who wasn't really him. He was Ashey, pretending to be Batman, pretending to be concealed within Ashey.

Dementia can put someone in this position, too. Someone can become quite good at pretending they are who you knew them to be, but who they no longer know *themselves* to be. We visited my aunt Jean a few years ago, when she was in her mid-nineties and had lost much of her memory. My wife, who frequently works with demented patients in her practice, pointed out to me afterwards how adept Aunt Jean had been at circling around questions she couldn't answer. She questioned back, and used humour, which helped mask the gaps in her memory.

There are times when actors play themselves in their own biopics. Aging rock stars often (more or less) impersonate their younger selves on stage. Plastic surgery is sometimes used by those who want to look like their younger selves, too.

I once had a good talk with the poet Robert Priest about self-presentation. We happened to be presenting together at Brock University, and while we were there, writer and professor Kari-Lynn Winters asked us about our school presentations for research she was doing.

It turned out both Robert and I had thought a lot about how we were perceived by students when we went into schools to present. Much depended on the age and size of the group, but also on the mood of the group, the overall tone of the school itself, as well as the relationship between the students and the teacher (or teachers) in charge. There was often the fear that your persona (and/or presentation) might get in the way of how your work is received. Robert, though, is a natural onstage. He really had nothing to worry about from my perspective.

But as the three of us talked, I realized that over time, the more I had presented, the less I worried about how I was seen. It helped to realize (through experience) that it was very, very rare to meet a hostile or indifferent audience. As time went on, I also became more interested in learning from others who presented effectively, because I had become more comfortable with my own awkwardness. I wasn't a showman. I recognized my limits. But recognizing my limits meant better understanding how I could refine my style of presenting within those limits. I couldn't go beyond them, and become a song, dance and tricks man (however much I wished, sometimes, that I had those talents!). But I could still find better ways of engaging, by being more conscious of my body language and pacing, and of how and when I used humour. And I could then "impersonate" the successes of those experiences the next time.

I talked about this issue with the poet Robert Heidbreder a few months later in Vancouver, and he had his own fascinating account of how he'd handled the difficult issue of presentation – he started to use puppets (as a classroom teacher), and this was a huge success for him. The puppet became his intermediary.

Mark Twain, apparently, kept careful note of how people reacted to his public presentations, and revised his anecdotes, written work and future public presentations according to what he'd learned from audience reactions.

Erving Goffman wrote two fascinating books on the subject: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity.* In the first, Goffman analyzes the ways in which we try (and often fail) to project a certain persona in social situations. He analyzes the phenomenon as if it were acting on a stage. In the second, he talks about the ways in which people try to reduce the discrimination they experience because of social stigmas imposed on them by society.

The Japanese psychologist Takeo Doi wrote one of the most helpful books I've ever read on the issue of the self among (and as defined by) others, *The Anatomy of Self: The Individual Versus Society*. He pointed out that we are all different with different people, and in different situations. He felt there was a greater understanding of this in Japanese culture than there is in the West. He said that in the West, we often worry too much about finding our true or authentic self, as if we had one true version, which gets hidden from view. We ask the question "who am I?" as if there was only one possible answer.

And that leads to enormous stress, because there is no single answer for any person.

BUMBOSITY

One of my maternal great-grandmothers, Nina Allen (nee Hindman), grew up in Syracuse, New York. I asked my great-aunt Eunice, who's ninety, if she remembered any rhymes her parents used with them when she and my grandfather were children. She produced this one, from her mother, straight away. She said she heard it many times as a child in the 1930s:

The very idosity
Of your curiosity
If I was your Mother
I would spank your bumbosity.

Beyond the fun of the wordplay, and the implicit threat, there's also the momentary mind-bending oddity of your mother saying, "If I was your mother." This dampens the threat a little – it's as if the speaker (the mother), by pretending not to be the mother, is saying, "Don't worry, since I'm not your mother, I'm not going to spank you." At the same time, the child might be thinking, "My mother might remember she's my mother at any moment, and then I'll be in big trouble!"

I searched the Internet for any exact matches or variants of this one, and found a single reference in comments to an online obituary for a man named Richard Sweeney, who was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1935. As far as I can tell (from the family names) he wasn't a relative of mine. A family friend of Richard Sweeney notes that Richard's mother (back in the 1930s, or '40s?) would recite this verse:

Why the very idosity of your curiosity.
If I didn't have my white gloves on
I would spank your bumbosity.

I can't find a single other reference to this rhyme, and this version is quite different, since the mother pretending not to be the mother is replaced by a pair of white gloves.

KOO KOO! OPA!

In High Park one day I saw two parents, I think from Poland, playing with their child on a slide. The mother stood at the bottom and called up "Koo Koo!" to the child. When the child slid down and got to the bottom the father would shout an enthusiastic "Opa!" They did this over and over. I noticed because my two year old was watching and he wanted to do it, too. He continued repeating the two exclamations for a while afterwards. Koo Koo! and Opa! have a nice ring to them.