

## Jules Feiffer on Children's Books

Jules Feiffer is a Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist whose weekly comic strip of political and social commentaries has, since 1956, addressed, attacked, and changed the mores and attitudes of the American public. His satiric jabs at sexual and interpersonal relations, in books such as *Jules Feiffer's America*, plays such as *Grown-Ups*, *Knock Knock*, and *Little Murders*, and screenplays including *Carnal Knowledge*, have been key in breaking the strictures imposed on the post-World War II generation. In recent years, he has somewhat turned his attention from the baby-boomer adult world that he greatly influenced, to the post-cold war children's world, with novels and picture books that deal with the travails of growing up. Now in his late sixties, while continuing to make political commentary, he has turned from his theater and film audiences to their children and their children's children.

### **How did this new interest in authoring children's books come about?**

The first satire I wrote back in the fifties was *Munro*, about a four-year-old who gets drafted by mistake. It was written as a children's book for adults. But the notion of writing about children *for* children didn't occur to me until after I left the theater in 1990. I stopped writing plays, and being a creature of obsession, needed a new one. If I am not obsessed about work in at least one of the forms I play with, I tend to be very unhappy, pissed off, and bored with myself.

### **Why did you leave the theater?**

I left the theater, or maybe the theater left me, after *Elliot Loves*, which took six years to write and was produced in 1990. It was directed by Mike Nichols. During rehearsal I said to him, "This is my best play. If they don't like this one, I'm out of the business." He said, "So am I." As it turned out, he lied and I didn't.

### **It was as simple as that to walk away?**

I felt that at an advanced age, with a sizable family and lots of expenses, I could no longer afford to be a pro bono playwright. The theater scene in New York had changed to a point where outside of the production itself, I didn't enjoy it all that much. In the years of *Little Murders*, I was writing for a specific audience that was identifiable, that I felt needed what I had to say and could get value out of it. In subsequent years, I think that audience stopped going to the theater, and the audience I was dealing with more recently treated works like *Grown-Ups* not as illuminating pieces of stage craft that told them something about their lives they wanted and needed to hear, but as assaults on their very being.

**So the audience that you were writing for—and I consider myself part of that audience—started having kids?**

And I started—late in life—having more kids, too. (I have a three-year-old and a thirteen-year-old, in addition to my older daughter, now pregnant, thank you very much.) So, I was having these young kids, looking for new areas to work in, and also looking for a form in which I could show the more positive side of myself—less critical, less combative. But the particular incident that drove me into children's books was purely accidental. What happened was, a close friend of mine, a brilliant illustrator, had a terrific idea for a kids' book. He wanted to illustrate it, but he didn't have a real story to go with the idea. He asked if I would come up with the story. Since the story had to do with our common background in the Bronx as kids back in the thirties and with movie stars, I thought it was terrific. A summer went by, then finally I started to click on it. I called him up and said, "I've been working on it for two weeks now; it's going great." A long pause, and he said, "Uh . . . I guess I should have told you; I decided to write it myself." "When did you decide to do that?" I asked. "Two weeks ago," he said. "That's when you should have told me," I said, and hung up in a fury. He called back immediately and said, "I'm a schmuck. It's your book; *you* do the book." I said, "No, I'll do my *own* book, and my book will be better than your book." So, what got me into writing for children was spite. If you've been around kids long enough, you know it's a feeling that's not inappropriate.

**I can appreciate that.**

Then I thought, what other subject going back to my childhood was I nuts about? Since my friend's idea was movies, I thought about old-time radio, but that certainly had nothing to say to today's kids. So I thought of comic books. Then as I started fooling with the idea, it went from the passive idea of a kid who read comic books to a kid who drew them, and suddenly I was in autobiographical territory, which I really hadn't planned at all. I didn't want to set it in the past. Like all the fictional things I do based on my life, *Grown-Ups*, *Little Murders*, even *Carnal Knowledge*, I get bored when I'm dealing with facts out of my past; so I make up a story that is true to my sense of the past, only the facts are changed. That is what happened in *The Man in the Ceiling*. Nothing in the book ever happened, and everything in it is true.

**Why do you get bored with your own experiences?**

Lots of people whom I find enjoyable, love telling entertaining anecdotes about their experiences—"And then this happened, and then I went, and then I did, and then I won. . . ." But if it happened to me, I know the ending, and I'm not interested in relating it except, perhaps, with a drink or two. And to work on a story that simply tells what happened to me, it's predictable, I already know the story, having lived the story—I don't know how to make that art. But if I take my feelings, sensibilities, attitudes, and maybe incidents that did occur, and reshape them, reangle them, reposition them, throw them in with other things, and mix them all up—that's an aspect of writing I can bite into, that godlike aspect. It's the only time in your life where you really control events.

**Right. You're the creator.**

And even here, in the controlling of events, losing control can be very exciting—when the characters take off and do things that you didn't expect them to do. That game, that

playfulness, that fun (and fun is a very important part) takes on a joy that borders on and sometimes crosses into pure euphoria.

**What are the parameters for you? You said everything is fictional, but is everything, really?**

The form is chosen by the idea. Once I had the idea for *The Man in the Ceiling*, it had to be naturalistic. There's no other way of doing it. Once I had the idea for *A Barrel of Laughs*, *A Vale of Tears*, it had to be an absurdist fairy tale, written deadpan, without tongue-in-cheek. So the idea dictates to me the style of the writing, and it even dictates to me the style and number of drawings.

**Did you have to alter your writing style and your sensibility to write for a child audience?**

Only in the beginning. *The Man in the Ceiling* was the first time I'd tried this, and I didn't have an author's voice; the first voice I fell into was coy and condescending. Rereading my first day's work made me blush in embarrassment.

**And you knew immediately that it was the wrong direction?**

Yes. And I said, "This is no good, but what would be good?" I didn't have a clue. So I thought, "To hell with it; I'll go to the best," and I picked up copies of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, read Mark Twain, and saw clearly that this was a man who took no prisoners, condescended to nobody, just spoke in a language that was very much his own—in vernacular, but serious vernacular, without any attempt to kowtow to a young reader. I had to find my own vernacular for Jimmy, my hero—one that wouldn't kowtow. And I did. Once I had guidance from Mr. Clemens, I knew how to proceed, and then it just took a few hours to find the voice and to start working on it.

**Was Mr. Clemens your only mentor in this regard, or did you have an editor?**

I'm sure I couldn't have done this without having read the children's books of E. B. White, *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. Thurber did not help, because Thurber, if you read *The Thirteen Clocks*, is very arch. A lot of writers taught me, through negatives, what not to do.

**Thurber's *Last Flower* was similar. It seemed like it was for you and me, and not for children at all.**

Also, Thurber had a lot of contempt, which you don't find in White at all. With my books for grown-ups and kids, I've always believed that this work must be approached out of innocence—wide-eyed with a sense of discovery. And not *mock* wide-eyed, not with a cynic pulling the strings.

**How do you do that after being a grown-up for so long?**

You know, I think it helps to be a broken leftist, with virtually every dream that came true either turning into a nightmare or reversing itself entirely. When I was a kid and when you were a kid, we didn't think that social Darwinism and racism would be legitimate and respectable concepts.

**Stop, you're depressing me.**

Well, you have two ways to go with this information. There's the kind of cynicism that allows you to throw up your hands in disgust. I had seen what that cynicism had done to people whom I admired as a young man, people like Fred Allen and Henry Morgan and others who, not having things work out as they wanted, just went sour. I clearly knew from the beginning that if I ended up as a success at the difficult work I was determined to do, I was bound to get kicked in the teeth now and again; I made an early promise to

myself that I wasn't going to let it get me, that I wasn't going to give my critics the power to decide who I was or what I became.

**How much mentoring for your first two books came from your own children?**

The child I was working most with in *The Man in the Ceiling* was me. But in Jimmy's youngest sister, Susu, there is a lot of my daughter Halley. And the stories Jimmy tells Susu are stories that I told Halley. She was also my unofficial editor on the book. I'd read it to her, and she would not understand certain passages (she was about seven at the time); the questions she raised would guide me to rewrite—and that was an enormous help. But where she *really* mentored was on my next picture book for children.

**Is that *I Lost My Bear*?**

Yes. *I Lost My Bear* is about a little girl who loses her pet stuffed animal in this huge, rambling West Side apartment and searches for it everywhere. But what the book really takes a look at is the nonlinear logic of children. Time and logic as understood by grown-ups is unknown and unusable to children. So the book follows this girl's winding, circular, in-and-out trail, looking, pretending to look, forgetting to look, looking for other things, as she's going after this stuffed bear. I studied Halley as an older father—I didn't have my second generation of daughters until I was in my fifties—at an age when I've slowed down enough to spend more time with her, watch her, and see how, if you insist on keeping to your own concept of time, you'll go out of your mind with a small child. You have to not be impatient, not rush them along, kind of Zen yourself into a time-freezing stupor and let whatever happens happen, in order to be with them. You have to, in order to enjoy them, enter their minds or enter their world as much as you can. It's impossible, but there's really so much there.

**How hard was that for you?**

It was very hard, then it got easier. Now it's getting hard again.

**Getting hard again because you have a much younger child or because of your interests?**

When my career was not a problem and everything was more or less in place, I could do these books and sort of wander in time with them like the heroine of *I Lost My Bear*. But because of things that happened last spring, career suddenly became a major factor in my consciousness again [after forty years, the *Village Voice* ceased publishing Feiffer's weekly comic strip], and I had to scramble to figure out how, two years short of seventy, I was going to make a living. So, career forced itself into the forefront of my mind again, and until I'm reasonably rich, it will stay there.

**What's the difference for you in terms of the first two books, which are novels, and the last two, which are picture books? Is there a shift in approach that you have to consciously explore?**

There is. The picture books go so much faster, at least the writing does. A day, a day and a half. So there's an element of condescension—that this isn't men's work—that I don't have toward the longer novels. But when I look at the finished work, it's every bit as serious, every bit as involved in the kids' world. It's just that if I haven't spent a year on a book, I feel as if my mother wouldn't approve.

**Your editor, Michael di Capua at Farrar, Straus and Giroux, is a highly respected children's book editor. Did he take a hands-on role with your book?**

From the time he accepted *The Man in the Ceiling*, he and I went over virtually every line. He took something that began as an act of unconsciousness and made me aware of what I had done and should do—not from his point of view but my own. So that when I did a second draft, and later went on to future books, I had much more control over the writing process than I had before. He helped put everything into focus.

**And what was that?**

I can't even quite tell you. But it was a kind of attention to detail and structure and language—the casual repeating of certain words or restating certain locutions. I felt that not since working with Mike Nichols on *Carnal Knowledge* had I learned so much or been helped so much by an editor.

**Is your newfound obsession for children's books a way of postponing the inevitability of your own children getting older?**

I hadn't thought about that, but it may well be so. I also couldn't help noticing, once I started this, how many cartoonists we know in middle or late middle age who started for the first time doing books for children. And what is that all about? Jim Stevenson. Bill Steig. A lot of it is about the need to make money and other markets drying up. Certainly there's that in me, but why this form seemed like the right one as opposed to something else, I don't know.

**Leo Lionni is another one. He didn't start until he had grandchildren. Does it have to do with having accumulated a lot of experience already?**

Well, as you say, it may have had a lot to do with having so much experience that a certain calm settles or semissettles on your life. You're no longer in anguish about the present or the future, you look on things—just as kids do—with a greater simplicity. I've done cartoons and talked endlessly over the years about how we never actually leave adolescence. It keeps coming back. It has different names when it comes back. When you're a kid, it's adolescence; when you're older, it's neurosis or midlife crisis, "male menopause." But it feels the same: confusion, self-hate, lack of worth, insecurity about what you're doing, what you want to do with yourself, are you wasting your time? nobody likes me.

**Is turning to the children's world a rejection of the adult political world?**

Absolutely. I had the illusion, coming of political age in the fifties and sixties, that me and mine could change things, affect things. My cartoons were not done from the start simply as attacks on the empire. They were meant to overthrow the government. And looking back, I realize that we did overthrow the government. And what replaced it was a mess! The education system that we worked to undermine was undermined. Getting people to distrust their government has worked so well that the Far Right distrusts the government more than the Left ever did. So many of our initial aims became part of the body politic and the body psyche that you look at it and say, "Well, wait a minute; did I really mean for this to happen?"

**In shifting much of your creative and psychic energy to the children's book arena, do you see this as a way of educating kids?**

Well, remember it's not only the kids' books I do. Each week I still do the cartoons in syndication. Each month I have a cartoon on the *Times* Op-Ed page. I contribute to

*Vanity Fair*. And I'm still saying what I think, trying to make it as fresh as I know how. But with all of that, the kids' books are as important to me as anything I've ever done. There's so much money going into kids, so much lip service; still, it's clear that outside of selling them products or buying these kids off, we don't really give a damn. Our kids, yours and mine, are likely to have a harder time growing up than we did. What I hope to do with these kids' books is what kids' books and comic books did for me when I was growing up. When I couldn't find a conversation going on at home or in school, I found it in the literature I read, which made me feel that I wasn't a freak, that I had a friend out there, which made me feel less isolated and less alone.

**That sounds like your early strips. It is what you were doing for those of us who were alienated and needed a voice. You were creating characters, like Bernard, that could be looked upon not as Everyman, but as Every-Nerd. In short, me.**

I go back to that point in *Catcher in the Rye* where Holden reads a book and wants to call up the author. You want to be that writer, where the book is your friend. Certain books and plays were my friends. And the desire is to return the favor. The books that change your life seldom change your life after thirty. It's the books you read from eleven or twelve on that give you clues about where to go and who you are.

**Are you implying that you have a moral agenda?**

I can't stand a book with an agenda or a book that teaches us that people of all colors should get along or that Billy is no different from you and me just because he comes from a funny place and looks funny or talks funny. Books that teach lessons, that have morals, make me want to throw up. They did that to me as a kid, they do that to me as a grown-up. I think if there is a lesson to be taught, it should be organic in the story you're telling, and the kid picks that up out of the incidents, the story, the characters and relationships. If I have a message in a book, it has to be so wound up in the character, in the storytelling, that no labels appear.

**Now that you've found this obsession, are you constantly thinking of new stories, the way you once used to think of ideas for plays?**

In fact, more so. Because with plays, a year would go by. You write a play and then there's the period of time it takes to get the play into production, find a producer, find a theater in or out of New York, et cetera. It was impossible to start work on a new play while the last play was in the process of production.

With the children's books, I found that before *The Man in the Ceiling* came out, I was able to start work on *A Barrel of Laughs*—and so on. I've been able, to my relief and great pleasure, to be in the middle of something or actually finish a new book before the previous one is published. At this moment, before *I Lost My Bear* is published in the spring, and just after *Meanwhile* was published a few months ago, I have two books in the works—one where the dummy has been completed, very little work to be done; and another where I don't have a dummy but I pretty much have the book under control. And then there is a long cartoon narrative for grown-ups, a kind of backstage Twentieth Century Fox musical about tap dancing. That's a year away.

**What other projects are you working on?**

I've written the text of a new book for older kids, another picture book but with complicated ideas, about running away and abandonment. And there's a book I've started but haven't gotten back to, also for older kids about a family of Lefties back in the 1950s.

**So children's books really have many of the Feiffer obsessions that came out in other media.**

What the children's books seem to have done, as they move more and more into the area of picture books, is move me closer to my roots as a cartoonist, so that I do this cartoon narrative for grown-ups that goes back to the days of *Sick, Sick, Sick* and *Passionella*. I haven't worked in that mode seriously in many years, and suddenly here I am again, doing this stuff. I've been finding all sorts of ways and means that hadn't occurred to me before. I seem to be using everything I learned in my years of playwriting and screenwriting, and turning it all back into my first form, my first love, the comic strip. It really is a ball.