

*Authors &
Illustrators &
Their Books*

How dare you? a conversation with JonArno Lawson on nonsense

by Michael Heyman, with illustrations
by JonArno Lawson

JonArno Lawson is the KoKoPryminjet of Arlington Avenue. He has a brick driveway, and a passion for cheaply acquired hand-painted practical-use ceramics. His books are many, though some have been pulped. Many of them contain literary nonsense of one kind or another. He is a fan of sweet potato pierogy - especially those curated on beds of beet-cooked cabbage, as they do at the Blomidon Inn, near the Minas Basin. He's a faded beauty. His days are numbered, lettered, and coloured by hand. Some books appearing under his soul's main pseudonym are *The Man In The Moon-Fixer's Mask*, *Black Stars In A White Night Sky*, *A Voweller's Bestiary*, *Sidewalk Flowers*, *Enjoy it while it hurts*, *Down in the Bottom of the Bottom of the Box*, and *There Devil, Eat That*. He has several times been awarded a very fine award — his very favourite award — (the Lion and the Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry). His wife deserves so much better, and he is the father of three phenomenons and forces to be reckoned with.

How dare you?

MH: I mean this most of all, and I shall ask it first. If this interview stopped with this question, I would be sated: *How dare you?*

JA: When I was still quite small, I reached my zenith: I was good-looking, immensely strong, incredibly bright – probably the smartest person I knew was me.

I even had access to a very primitive form of magic that allows a person to hover slightly above the ground, and with practice, and a small leap, to travel that way for very short distances – I was only in the trial stages of improving this ability when I saw it could mean big trouble for me in the long run.

Being as smart as I happened to be, I realized that none of my gifts and abilities were going to endear me to anybody, and so I chose to don a disguise of sorts: I put on a lot of weight, started to wear glasses, developed robotic body language and a slow, monotonous way of talking, while biding my time as a bookish introvert.

Six or seven years later, when I finally felt free to throw off my disguise, I discovered that it was only partially possible to do so. Some of my powers had left me almost completely. I even had a little belly I couldn't get rid of. You can't imagine how I felt.

But I'm sure you can imagine my delight when I realized that I was still able to invent complicated homonyms, and say entire sentences backwards – and not only when my life depended on it.

My derring-do was intact, and I discovered not a moment too soon that I dared! I gave up everything else to inch my way around the shadow-casting edges of sound – over the bright silences I hovered, taking shorter and shorter leaps over shorter and shorter distances. Finally, I found a way to enter the future from the wrong direction. No one else was going that way, so the road was clear: when, in the end, I faced the Devil's behind, and took a switch to it, he blushed at my cunning.

Definitions and dongulations

MH: The poem "*An Adventure Begins*" in *Black Stars In A White Night Sky* talks about adventure involving grinning after grimacing, winning after losing, sinning after sanctitude, along with danger, boldness, and light. Is nonsense a kind of adventure?

JA: Here you are, stuck in your repetitive, swirling

self-hatred and self-love, often both at once – it's awful. Robert Twigger described this (or something like this) in his book *Walk* as a never-ending talk-show that goes on in your mind. And on that talk show you defend yourself, or attack others, with commercial breaks and guest celebrities and shameful revelations. . .the terrible thing about it is that most of it seems to make sense to us, so we surrender to this grey and bloodless half-dead passive immersion in ourselves. It's the opposite of an adventure.

The adventure that nonsense makes possible is the disruption of this repetitiveness.

Just as gravity took advantage of slight variations in the temperature of background radiation to start clumping matter together in the early universe, so levity takes advantage of slight variations in our inner-repetitions to help us gravitate outwards again. This is one of the reasons why it's so important to welcome new experiences, new people, inconveniences of any kind – even to walk down a street you've never walked down before – because in the attempt to take it in, and make sense of it, you see more of your inner nonsense for what it is. You even forget about it for a while, and when you return to it, you see it differently. It hates that. But the best parts of you – the red-cheeked full-blooded parts of yourself know what's going on, and they take this opportunity to get the grey sub-selves exercising again.

MH: This disruption of our "inner nonsense" seems related to something said in John Agard and Grace Nichols's nonsense anthology *Pumpkin Grumpkin: Nonsense Poems From Around The World*. It is rumored that they said that Pumpkin Grumpkin himself said that you said, "Trying to make sense of nonsense brings us back to our senses." Now, is your pumpkin chai latte always this hot?

JA: I've always been afraid of hot drinks. My brother was constantly knocking them over when we were little, and so I associate hot drinks with scalded thighs. I do however like pumpkin spice, and lattes, and even more than that – John Agard and Grace Nichols. They crossed the Atlantic that way, and I wish they would cross back again this way. The quote you're quoting was more elaborate originally, and they forced me to simplify it. Their forced compression heated it up. It was their fault.

MH: And now to another viscous rumor: were you "born / with a danger horn?"¹ How does your nonsense blow it?

JA: I was born with a danger horn, though I'm always misplacing it. I made a little strap for it once, but it looked silly, so I only wear it now when we're on holidays, in countries and resorts where that sort of thing isn't frowned upon



On holidays, I blow it at every opportunity (though not when we're eating – it's as hard to clean a danger horn as it is any other type of horn).

Whenever I blow it, help arrives from the God of Nonsense. I am lifted above the maze, and allowed to see the pattern. When I am lowered again into the maze, I am able to find the best way forward, which is usually the only way forward, since most other ways force you back over the same paths.

MH: Speaking of the God of Nonsense, how does your professed existential exegetical eczema depend upon a teleological turnspit?

JA: I highly value the silence that follows all the questions I put to God, because, with a little imagination, I've always been able to interpret that silence in ways beneficial to myself.

MH: I see, and I'm glad the imagination steps in to tame the teleological lacunae—but what if the maple leaves that Mabel leaves *aren't* real?²

JA: Then she's really had it. There's no way out – you have to turn the page and hope things turn out better for her in some other universe.

MH: But how do you *appease* the nonsense gods? What offerings, what secret pacts, what crossroads dealings, what kind of boots, what immortal hand or eye could bake thy fearful nonsense pie? In other words, what is at the bottom of the bottom of your nonsense?

JA: The danger horn, as you guessed above. It was bequeathed to me at birth, and it was the only thing I allowed myself to keep when I donned my disguise at the age of six.

On the Craft

MH: One of my favorite nonsense pieces from *Black Stars In A White Night Sky*, "Tickle Tackle Botticelli," ends with the alarmingly sensical sentiment, "words, / however used, / are just playthings / of a thought." Do you mean playthings like blocks, like dolls, like balls, like costume, set, and scenery, like we to the gods (as flies), like lingerie?

JA: I fear the power of words (I give them so much – they give me so little in return), so this was my way of belittling them, trying to put them in their place. Sadly, in this case, I had to use words to do that.

¹ Referring to the poem "Hip Hop Handsome Han," in *Black Stars in a White Night Sky*. It goes, in part:

Hit fiddle nikabrik
Bricabrac bong

Hip-hop handsome Han!
Hip! Hop! Boom! Bam!

And if you were born
with a danger horn,
then blow it
as hard as you can. [...]

² This question refers to the poem, "The Maple Leaves That Mabel Leaves" (17-18) in *Black Stars in a White Night Sky* (2006). It begins:

Mable leaves the maple leaves she's raking in a pile	that Mable leaves are make-believe
to make believe she's Cleopatra sailing up the Nile.	but I believe the maple leaves that Mable leaves are real. [...]
You may believe the maple leaves	

MH: How do you funny?

JA: With whitening and funder.

MH: The one question you order us, in a way, *not* to ask, I'll ask: "Wreck or mend"?³ What does your nonsense do?

JA: It does things to the dour when things are dire, and it does things to the do-er as well, if the do-er dares, though like a deer, in fear, he often dashes for the door.

MH: Are you or your children better at different ways and means of nonsense?

JA: Have my children contacted you? What did they tell you about me?! Don't listen to them, please – it's all nonsense.

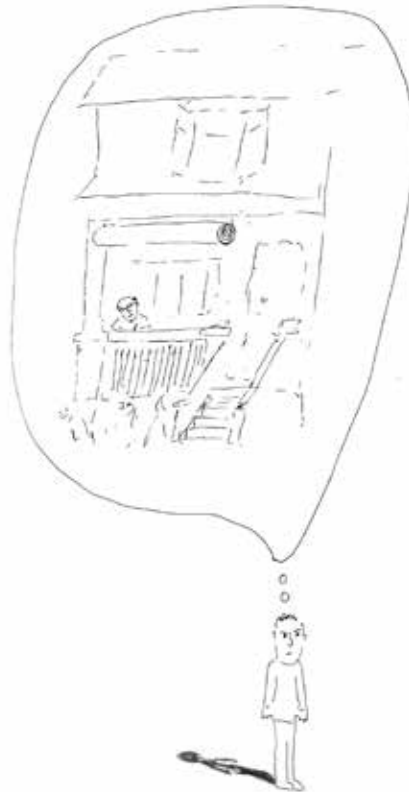
But it's a problem – I've taken so much from them – wordplay, and all kinds of ideas for all of my books. So far they haven't been able to stop me – they're too small – but they're growing up and eventually I won't be able to plunder the riches of their linguistic idiosyncrasies anymore – they might want to use them for their own ends, and then what will I do? My panic about this should tell you who's better at it.

Influenzas and Foreign Ports of Cholera

MH: What do you talk about when you are hanging out with Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Dennis Lee, and bpNichol? Who buys the rounds? Anyone else you're hanging out with lately?

JA: Dennis Lee lives a half hour's walk from here. I once dropped by his house to give him a book, and there he was, sitting out on his cozy little veranda, working; I was gripped by a soul-destroying bout of porch envy. I sat there with him, for a few minutes, seething. It felt so unfair. And it was worse when I returned home and had to face, again, the reality of my own meager stoop.

I don't know if Robert Priest works on some beautiful balcony – I suspect he does, and I hate to think of it: I am surprised that his *Secret Invasion of*



Bananas isn't known wherever nonsense is spoken. And what about Danny Kaye in the movie *The Court Jester* – the amazing tongue-twisting lines he speaks and sings – they were mostly written by Sylvia Fine. Why weren't they both immortalized by the Nonsense God(s)?

I never, ever, tire of the company of Jim Copp and Ed Brown – their nonsensical *Gumdrop Follies* recordings have been snapping at (or up) my attention for over forty years. Karen Elizabeth Gordon and her *Deluxe Transitive Vampire* are welcome at my table anytime. And I wish so much that Jacob Nibenegenesabe was still alive – the Nonsense Gods made special use of him in his *Wishing Bone Cycle*.

David Pendlebury's translation and abridgement of Hakim Sanai's *The Walled Garden of Truth* has meant so much to me – his Afterword to it (an e-version is available now) contained ideas (or challenges) that were the direct inspiration behind at least two of my books.

I've also derived a quarter century's benefit from Adrienne Rich's essay collection *What is Found There*, the many essays of Robert Graves, Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*, and Ted Hughes's essay collection

¹ Referring to the poem "Recommend" (37, corrected), in *Down in the Bottom of the Bottom of the Box*.

Winter Pollen. Michael Joseph and Sue Goyette are both poets of the first importance to me. I think a lot about Charles Causley's *Ballad of the Bread Man*. And Les Murray's *Driving Through Saw Mill Towns*.

And how could I forget Monty Python, many of the Saturday Night Live players, and the Second City actors? My daughter and I went to some Second City shows last summer in Chicago – I can't remember when I last laughed that much. Comedy writing is some of the best writing, nonsense or otherwise, out there. I get all of my news from *The Onion*. I love *Brooklyn Nine Nine*. And why has Howard Garis's *Uncle Wiggily and his Friends* been forgotten? This book, with its definitive George Carlson renditions of the great rabbit, should be as revered in the U.S. as *Peter Rabbit* is in the UK, but it isn't. It isn't pure nonsense, but there's lots of first rate absurdity in it. . .

MH: I heard through the wire that, in admiration, you have claimed Erin Moure's work to be more "cerebral" than yours. I disagree. Why am I so right?

JA: Hmmm. . . Erin is really fearless, startling, and incredibly generous, in person and in poems, and in prose. In that sense, it seems wrong to say cerebral, unless we value the mind, which I do. She reaches and she wants you to reach with her. And she's not afraid to reach with her mind, while using words in ways no one else has used them before. I reach more using words in ways people use them when their tongues slip, taking advantage of what happens during brief disconnections between the mind and its mouth muscles. And then it's exciting if there's a bit of philosophical terror in the nonsense that emerges...maybe you're right that I was wrong. Erin's use of language is, maybe, more physical and deeply personal than mine too...I can't help wondering if I'm not erring more when I'm not reading Erin Moure.

MH: Do you have any words on nonsense outside of North America and England? What do you fancy? What don't you fancy?

JA: I fancy it all and anywhere, all the time!

Indian nonsense, certainly. . . Sukumar Ray, and Anushka Ravishankar – they were and are (and in the future will continue to be) brilliant. Take a look at Michael Heyman's *The Tenth Rasa*. I know you

wrote it, but that doesn't mean you remember everything (or anything) you put into it (or do you?). And South African nonsense, as brought to us by Philip de Vos – Philip is amazing! The Cree nonsense (or trickery) of Jacob Nibenegenesabe isn't well known, but it (and he) ought to be. Jacob Nibenegenesabe isn't alive anymore, so we can consider him as being outside of North America in some way now, though he lived in Manitoba.

I heard once, probably from an Irishman, that the Irish saved civilization. There's apparently lots of evidence for this too. To bolster their case, I would suggest getting the novel *Leaves for the Burning* by Irishman Mervyn Wall which should be better known – it's satirical, but contains some nonsensical situations worthy of Monty Python.

Mikhail Zoshchenko's *Nevous People* is full of wonderfully absurd situations – and for the same, nobody should overlook Fazil Iskander's *Sandro of Chegem*. There's always Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*, and Nicholas Awde once told me that Nigerian literature is full side-splitting stuff, but I have yet to explore in that direction.

I met a woman at the local Eritrean community centre a few years ago who gave me some fine examples of Eritrean nonsense, including the Eritrean (Tigrinyan) version of Eeny Meeny Miney Mo, which my kids loved – Sana, Mana, Boortookana, Sandal, Jow, Boof!

Last but not least, I spend as much time as I can with the Mulla Nasrudin – I'd say there's no better nonsense out there than the nonsense expressed in Idries Shah's *Mulla Nasrudin* books (*The Exploits of the Incomparable Nasrudin*, *The Subtleties of the Inimitable Nasrudin*, *The Pleasantries of the Incredible Nasrudin*, *The World of Nasrudin*). Shah also wrote a thought-provoking and entertaining book called *Special Illumination* about the importance of humour in metaphysical experience.

Shah was English, of Afghan/Scots extraction (or was he an Afghan/Scot, extracting and distilling the humorous proclivities of the Anglo-Saxons? Is it possible he was both? See his *Darkest England*, *The Natives are Restless*, *The Englishman's Handbook*) so – was his work inside England and Afghanistan, or outside England and Afghanistan? Maybe it gets understood most usefully as an incomparable, subtle, inimitable, pleasant, and incredible bridge between both.

MH: Through *Bookbird's* secret society of sapient

sleuths (the SSSS), and by perusing *This Book Makes No Sense*, we have learned that you sometimes write under the pseudonym of "Jonaraja." Do feel free to ask Jonaraja any of these questions. Perhaps you and he might even answer the same question... though I imagine your answers might differ.

JA: How would Jonaraja answer? He's too busy with his chronicle of the Kashmiri Kings – the latest being his speculative volume "Kashmiri Kings of the Future", which is far from nonsensical, though apparently, already full of errors.

MH: If we don't have access to the somewhat more exotic Jonaraja, perhaps a cultural question for JonArno: notwithstanding your home, your considered and proclaimed self-identity, your wife and children, your work, your local barber, and the air you breathe, are you in any way at all a Canadian nonsense writer?

JA: When I write about Maple leaves I am. Though I actually associate the word "Maple" with the farm my grandmother grew up on in Arlington, NY (The Maples).

Canadian identity is a weak force – I like how weak it is. All real Canadians do. The less Canadian you are, the more Canadian you are – in that sense, it's one of the most difficult identities to shed. Strangely, those who try to make it a stronger force lose it completely – they start to seem like mock-Americans, and really, nobody should mock the Americans. I'm half-American myself. To be a mock-American is embarrassing to everybody. To be a real American – why not? One national identity is as good as (or at least no better than) any other.

MH: You seem to have an ear and some nostrils for playground poetry, for the rikkity-nock of nursery rhyme. Those who know an ear and a nostril from a handsaw might even liken your nonsense to Theodore Roethke's. Might you?

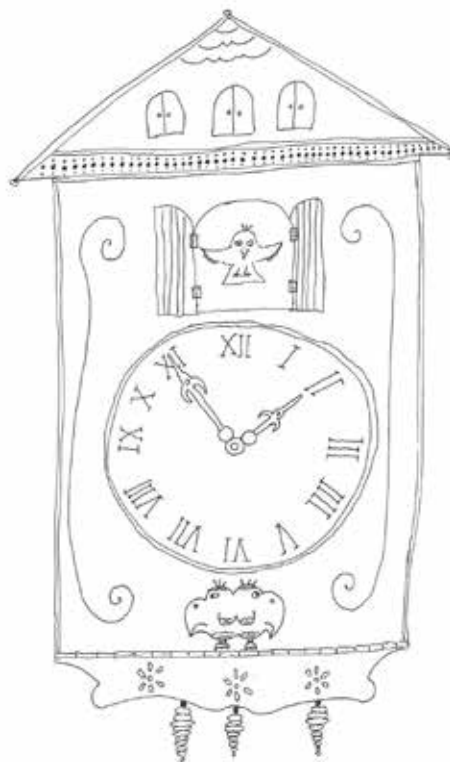
JA: Where would we be without Roethke? He was, like so many American poets of his time, a canary in the mine.

Many, many poets of that American era found life unbearable, judging by the number of suicide attempts (of poets, and/or their family members) and

commitments of poets (and/or their family members) to mental institutions. What was going on? Was it because the Medusa of television had entered every home on its millions of wiry necks? Maybe in part. Was it because Mars was in full ascent, and the nation was becoming more and more defined by its wars? There was, too, a great disconnection taking place – a great restlessness – Americans were drifting apart after being held very closely together by the Depression.

Roethke was listening carefully. He was breathing the same air as everyone else, and he was singing and tapping his foot. Now and then, he stopped completely, when he couldn't breathe anymore. If he hadn't been in a cage, he would have flown away, I'm sure. Because he was in a cage, he dropped off his perch and drowned in a drowning culture. But – great luck for us - his poems were designed to float.

His nonsense is full of non-didactic instruction, beautifully sung – pure joy to listen to out loud, or aloud in your head. He was an exemplar, and had his own danger horn – though his was more of a terror tuba, with hints of Black Forest Cuckoo Clock and flashes and dashes of Teutonic accordion. . .





Intermission:

MH: Two nonsense poets walk into a bar...



JA:

One went nowhere, the other went far.
One pickled his epoch, the other sliced it thin,
one had the hiccups, the other had to grin.
One has a tunnel, the other has a wall,
one fears collapse, the other fears a fall.
One has a bomb on a belt above his bum,
the other keeps a thimble as a symbol of his thumb.



The World

MH: Have you written nonsense for adults? If so, is it different from your material for children? If not, would it be?

JA: No, I don't think I've ever written anything nonsensical for adults (at least not intentionally). They don't deserve it. They're already not paying attention to what Ogden Nash, Tom Lehrer, and Sylvia Fine did for them. Adults who pretend to like poetry tend to pretend to prefer obscure depressing alienated and alienating drudgery. . . stuff that's not very in-

teresting, or healing – it's a trend that's almost a hundred years old now in the English speaking world. It'll die out sometime soon – but while it's still dying (for all I know "soon" could mean another hundred years), anyone who likes to write poetry really has to address children, for the most part, because they're the only wide and authentic audience poetry has in the Anglo Saxon world.

If you don't believe me, look at all the adults who, in a university setting to this day study Pound and his progeny. How many, by comparison, study Seuss, Nash, Copp & Brown, or Edward Gorey? Why hasn't Marilyn Singer's *Mirror Mirror* set the poetry world on fire? Or Marilyn Nelson's *Fortune's Bones*? Why Why Why? All this curiosity still about Marilyn Monroe, and not enough curiosity about the two great Marilyns who are still here, living and breathing among us. Eventually we'll come to our senses – it would be too boring if we didn't! Mary Ann Hoberman is there to help too. Many are hiding, but few are seeking – a few are confiding, and many are peeking!

MH: Have you ever had trouble publishing nonsense?

JA: Oh yes – even today I'm having trouble, right at this moment. The trouble never ends. But at the same time, I've been so lucky. The good opportunities never (up till now) have come to an end either.

Discipline

MH: Okay, poet-man, drop and give me twenty!

JA:

- Jump high.
- Look at the sky
- Arms out
- twist and shout
- Fall flat, listen up –
- Suck in your gut
- Out of that rut!
- Quiver and shine! Aim for twenty -
- . . .stop at nine

Looking ahead

MH: Certain voluble vultures have buzzed that you are currently daring to write wordless books. Should I value their vultine volubility?

JA: I seem to have found a way to free myself from words, at least for now (see above about my bitterness over how much I've given them, and how little they've given me in return). What you've heard is true.

MH: But is it possible to write wordless nonsense? If you achieve success without words (clearly being against, and not for, words), then why would you ever go backwards?

JA: Through the indispensable illuminative vision of an illustrative genius named Sydney Smith, and the incomparable supernatural editorial genius of Sheila Barry, I was allowed to hop sideways (words expected me to be moving forever *for* words, I suddenly thought – Why should I? Do I really have to *back* words all the time? Always and forever? And sideways I went, without a word to the wise or otherwise.)

MH: Wordlessness aside, is there a kind of nonsense not out there that you would like to do – or to see done?

JA: Yes, but I'm not sure what it is yet. That's the trouble with nonsense – logic won't get you there, unless you follow it very literally.

The End

MH: But what do you really mean?

JA:

JA – Knock knock
M – Who's there?
JA – I wonder
M – I wonder who?
JA – I wonder who too. . .

MH: No, I mean *really*.

JA:

To really rally O'Reilly
They resorted to clamorous clapping –
Regal O'Reilly took offense
"Applause without cause doesn't make any sense,
kindly suppress this unruly pretense –
cease at once, please,"
O'Reilly asked drily.