Constructing Identity, Power, and Relationships:

Verbal and Visual Humor in the Flat Stanley Books

By

Anne W. Anderson and Rebecca L. Powell

University of South Florida and Florida Southern College

Presented at the
South Atlantic Modern Language Association (SAMLA) Conference
November 15, 2019
Atlanta, Georgia

Abstract

In the twenty-five years since the Flat Stanley character became a cultural icon and in the more than fifty years since the first *Flat Stanley* book was published, few scholars have turned their attention to the text itself, addressing it primarily in curricular terms for elementary education. Building on our previous study of texts about the character Flat Stanley, we explore the visual and verbal languages of humor found in both the original series. We draw on Villy Tsakona's adaptation of General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) as a framework of analysis, looking particularly at the ways **exaggeration, contradiction,** and **metaphor** are used for humorous effect in the narrative and how those instances of humor speak to questions of **identity, power, and relationships.**

For example, the underlying absurdity in the Flat Stanley series is that of a boy, crushed by a bulletin board, who now is one-inch thick. Because of his condition, he can slide under doors, travel through the mail, and fold himself into origami art, all used to humorous effect but at the expense of his original identity. Stanley, in a word, is the ultimate Other. Various scenarios within the narratives depict Stanley as manipulated, both physically and emotionally, by family and friends but never with malice. In some cases, the illustrations of such scenes work in opposition to the text, further extending the absurdity. In other cases, they support the text by elaborating on or exaggerating the verbal description. In both cases, the complementary layers of the verbal and visual texts flavor the humor, enhancing the effect of the absurdity.

Constructing Identity, Power, and Relationships: Verbal and Visual Humor in the Flat Stanley Books

Studies of the development of a sense of humor in children and of humorous media written for children, like many other disciplines involving children, tends to be marginalized as unimportant. After all, childhood typically comprises only a small percentage of a person's lifetime, one that, as C.S. Lewis noted in a 1952 lecture, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," most of us are quick to abandon lest we appear childish. Even to be termed childlike is suspect. And yet, what happens during childhood has a great deal to do with how we function as adolescents and as adults. In this paper, we explore an iconic figure of children's literature, one who grew beyond the original six books written between 1964 and 1996 by writer Jeff Brown. Brown, who worked on the editorial staffs of *The New Yorker* and other magazines, created Flat Stanley, who became a cultural icon and found new life in the 21st century as an app and as the title character in a new series of books. We first explored Flat Stanley and his many iterations in an essay titled "The World is Flat, Stanley: Globalization, Ethnocentricity, and Absurdity," which was published in *The Early Reader in Children's Literature and Culture* (2016, Routledge), one of the first compilation of works theorizing reading material produced especially for beginning readers.

In our reading of what scholars have observed about children's senses of humor and about humorous literature for children, we found three main observations. First, what children actually choose to read and what adults think children should read differs, and not by just a little. In a 1997 study, for instance, Gail Munde compared the 1995 Children's Choices list with "the combined lists of the American Library Association's 1995 Notable Books for Children and the 1995 Teachers' Choice List" (221). Munde found 168 unique titles listed on at least one of the three lists, but only six titles—less than four percent—were chosen by both children and adults. Thirty-four percent of the books (32 of 94) children chose were ones where humor was a primary element; only twenty-one percent of the books (17 of 80) chosen by adults were humorous. Additionally, as Munde analyzed the humorous books children chose for situations in which humor was expressed, she realized most addressed what Michele Landsberg had observed: the anxieties of childhood—sibling rivalry, loss of body control, and time.

This link between humor and anxiety has been addressed from a different perspective, that of the similarity between humor and horror. Katherine Slater (2016), in writing about horror in early readers, notes, "The pleasures of an unexpected punchline following a significant build-up and the pleasures of an unexpected terror following a significant build-up are inextricably intertwined; the shocks of both inspire a similar physiological response" (123). To adults, the idea of exposing children to horror literature or even to certain types of humorous literature can be disconcerting. Kathryn Douglas (2005) observes that children like humor that addresses bodily functions—the line between control and lack of control of one's own body being very fresh among the recently toilet-trained—because laughing at something is a way of defending oneself against the terror of that same thing. Similarly, Michele Landsberg (1992) notes that humorous children's books featuring "clumsy adults get[ting] their comeuppance" may resonate with children, who are largely at the mercies of adult whims and institutions, to "triumph by seeing clearly through the hypocrisies of adults" (37).

In discussing humor in *Flat Stanley*, we turn to a 2009 article published in the *Journal of Pragmatics*, in which Villy Tsakona proposes a multimodal theory of humor based on Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor. Tsakona applies it to the visual elements in cartoons, alone and in combination with the verbal elements. However, Tsakona does not limit his theory to cartoons, in which the verbal and visual elements are more closely entwined. Rather, he leaves room for us to apply his ideas to illustrated chapter books like *Flat Stanley,* especially as he ties his theory to James Gee's (2003) concept of a semiotic domain. Gee (2003) defines a semiotic domain as "any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g. oral or written language, images, equations, …) to communicate distinctive types of meaning" (18), and that would include illustrated chapter books, in which the story is told through both the modality of written language and through the modality of images.

Tsakona notes first that the "starting point of GTVH is that humor results from the full or partial overlap of two different and incompatible scripts activated in a single text" (1172), and script opposition is the first of six knowledge resources, to use Tsakona's term (1173), that can be used to analyze humorous texts. The six knowledge resources Tsakona identifies (1173), and as we see them relating to *Flat Stanley* are:

Script opposition: An abnormally flat boy interacts in a "normal" world

Logical mechanism creating the script opposition: A bulletin board fell very slowly (exaggeration) one night with enough force to flatten a child flat as a pancake (metaphor) but not hurt him (contradiction)

Situation: Each is different as the story progresses

Target: Varies by episode

Narrative strategy: Narrative text, dialogue, illustrations

Language: Verbal wording and visual artistic devices

In this paper, we examine four episodes in the first book about Flat Stanley for uses of exaggeration (and its inverse understatement), contradiction, and analogy/metaphor in both creating humor and in addressing questions of identity, relationship, and power. Before we begin, we note that the original verbal text, written in 1964 and illustrated by Tomi Ungerer, is unchanged in all subsequent editions. In 2003, illustrator Scott Nash moved Stanley, who by then had become a global pen-pal project, into the twenty-first century. In 2009, a new series of books sending Stanley on adventures around the world was launched, with illustrator Macky Pamintuan reimagining the illustrations for the original books and for the *Flat Stanley's Worldwide Adventure* series and the *I Can Read* series. Our presentation today focuses only on the original text of the first book with the 2003 Scott Nash illustrations.

The story begins one morning just before breakfast when Arthur, the younger of the Lambchop boys, calls to his parents.

> "Hey, Come here and look! Hey!"
>
> Mr. and Mrs. Lambchop were both very much in favor of politeness and careful speech. "Hay is for horses, Arthur, not people," Mr. Lambchop said as they entered the bedroom. "Try to remember that." (1-2)

Arthur apologizes, then points out that his brother, Stanley, is buried beneath a bulletin board that has fallen from the bedroom wall during the night. They lift the bulletin board and:

> "Gosh!" said Arthur. "Stanley's flat!"
>
> "As a pancake," said Mr. Lambchop.
>
> "Let's all have breakfast," Mrs. Lambchop said. "Then Stanley and I will go see Dr. Dan…." (4)

This exchange sets the tone for the story, a tone of understated exchanges, simple plays on words, illogical jumps in thinking, and incongruities between what is probable and what is maybe, just maybe, possible.

Chapter 2 begins with the words "When Stanley got used to being flat," suggesting that he has had to rethink his physical identity. In the illustration introducing the chapter (3), readers see a boy so flat he can slide under a door. In other words, Stanley's width is exaggeratedly thin or, to put it another way, to say he is thin is an understatement. Incongruously, Stanley—unlike Wile E. Coyote being flattened by a steamroller—is little worse for the wear, other than being flat, of course. Never explained is the fact that Stanley seems also to have lost weight—paper-thin also apparently meaning he has become light as a piece of paper. Stanley, however, challenges readers to think about other ways to pass through a doorway, in this case, by sliding under it.

Episode One: Stanley helps his mother find her ring

After Stanley adjusts to his new life, that of a "flat human," he recognizes that being flat can be more than just fun, it can be helpful. While walking with Mrs. Lambchop, her "favorite ring [falls] from her finger" (10), drops through a grate in the road, and lands in a storm drain. Stanley's mother, distraught, begins to cry, but Stanley—contradicting parent/child problem-solving expectations—saves the day. He uses his shoelaces and "an extra pair in his pocket" (10) to make a long lace. After tying one end of the string to his belt, he hands the other end to his mother who lowers Stanley into the storm drain so he can locate the ring.

In the first illustration of this episode (11), readers see Stanley dangling from the string and reaching for the ring. The second illustration (13) shows what the police officers see as they approach Mrs. Lambchop. They see a woman holding a string through the grate and moving it from side to side, and up and down, like a yoyo. They logically assume that Mrs. Lambchop has a yoyo and that it is stuck in the grate. Because of the first illustration, the reader knows otherwise, so the reader has knowledge that the police officers do not. The officers ask Mrs. Lambchop if her yoyo is stuck. She quickly reprimands them and explains that her son is on the other end of that string, not a yoyo. The officers proceed to imply that she is "cuckoo" (14). Before the officers can convince anyone that Mrs. Lambchop is addled, Stanley exclaims "hooray"

(14), emerges from the grate, and holds up the ring. The officers apologize for being hasty in their accusations. In this episode, the reader experiences the satisfaction of a child saving the day and of both Stanley and his mother being more knowledgeable than the police officers. The police officer's logical assumptions are upended due to Stanley's unique form and the impossibly possible absurdity of the situation.

Episode Two: Mailed in an envelope

The next episode finds Stanley hoping to travel to California to visit a classmate who has recently moved. However, his parents question the cost of sending him by train or plane. Later, Mr. Lambchop arrives home from work with an "enormous brown paper envelope" and invites Stanley to "try this on for size" (16). Typically, we think of trying clothing on for size, but the contradiction here is that the illustration (17) shows Stanley sitting on the floor trying on the envelope and slipping inside it while Mr. Lambchop kneels on the floor and contemplates whether his son will fit. The written text explains that since there is extra room, Mrs. Lambchop prepares an egg salad sandwich on "thin bread" (a pun) and a toothbrush case filled with milk for Stanley to take in the envelope. Not addressed, but probably on the minds of child readers, is how Stanley will relieve himself on the journey.

The next illustration (19) shows Mr. and Mrs. Lambchop lovingly sliding the envelope, with "a great many stamps to pay for both airmail and insurance" (18) into the large mailbox. It is clearly absurd to think that any parent would attempt to mail their child in an envelope much less try to insure the envelope. The written text tells us that the "envelope [has] to be folded to fit" into the mailbox, but because Stanley is so "limber" (18) he flattens back out once inside. Mrs. Lambchop is "nervous because Stanley [has] never been away from home alone before" (20), which is not illogical except that one would expect her to be nervous because he is being left to the mercies of the U.S. Postal system without even a flight attendant guardian. She raps on the tall metal mailbox and asks if Stanley is okay. He exclaims that he is fine, but he wants to eat his sandwich. It appears Stanley has only been in the mailbox a short time, but he has no concept of the time it will take to travel by mail to California. Mrs. Lambchop tells him to "wait an hour" (20)—calling into question her conceptions of time—and not to get "overheated" (20). Rather than waiting to see the mail picked up, Mr. and Mrs. Lambchop say goodbye and leave.

Stanley enjoys his time in California, and he returns home "in a beautiful white envelope" (20), airmailed, with the words "Valuable" and "Fragile" (20-21) written on it, suggesting the absurdity that Stanley's friends took better care of him that his own parents. Stanley explains that the travel was uneventful, and his mother agrees that planes and the postal service are both great, which is also logical except that humans don't travel in envelopes. Stanley's identity has now expanded from a child limited to traveling where his parents take him to a child who travels alone and with the ability to go basically anywhere that the U.S. Postal Service can take him.

Episode Three: Let's go fly a Stanley

In the first and second episodes, Stanley first adjusts to his new identity as a flat person and then begins to adapt and find it useful—even remarkably so. His relationship with his parents changes somewhat, as they, too, are caught up in the discovery of Stanley's new abilities. This third episode explores a different aspect of Stanley's changed identity and how it affects other relationships. The chapter begins with an illustration (22) of Arthur, Stanley, and their father headed to the park one Sunday afternoon. Arthur walks alongside his father. Stanley, however, rolled up and tied with a string, is being carried by Mr. Lambchop, who sees Stanley's new exaggerated flexibility and lightness as a good thing. Before, the text tells us, Mr. Lambchop worried about crowds and traffic separating him and the boys on the way there. Now, he can carry Stanley with one hand and "could hold onto Arthur with the other hand" (24), a smack-the forehead kind of lampooning of a supposedly more-knowledgeable adult's illogical thinking. Arthur gets it, as we can see by his less-than-pleased expression in the illustration. He also gets that he has to walk while Stanley gets to be carried even though Arthur, as the younger child, might previously have occasionally whined his way into being carried. Stanley doesn't seem to be deliberately gloating, but his eyes do seem directed toward Arthur. Arthur's jealousy grows until one night he tries flattening himself by lying on the floor and stacking encyclopedias on himself, and Mr. and Mrs. Lambchop speak to Stanley about being nice to Arthur based on his unchanged identity as Arthur's older brother.

The next Sunday the boys go to the park by themselves—with no explanation of the supposed safety concerns—where they see "many older boys … flying beautiful, enormous kites with long tails, made in all the colors of the rainbow" (28). Arthur

wishes he had a kite, too, but not just so he can fly it. Rather, he wants to "win a kite-flying contest and be famous like everyone else. *Nobody* knows who I am these days," he says (28, emphasis in the original). Stanley, trying to be nice, borrows a spool of string and tells Arthur he will be his kite. Once again, however, the spotlight falls on Stanley who swoops and zooms and side-slips and circles while Arthur runs to keep up, and as a double-spread illustration shows (30-31), Arthur's plan has backfired. No one pays attention to the kite-flyer on the ground; all eyes are on the kite-boy. Eventually, Arthur tires of running around and jams the spool into the fork of a tree. What neither boy realizes is that kite flying is a *pas de deux* of sorts, a dance between the kite-flyer and the unseen wind that is only made visible by the movements of the kite. In this case, the kite—Stanley—has a mind of its own and the *pas de deux* becomes a *pas de trois*. But once Arthur steps out of the dance, the wind becomes too powerful for Stanley and he ends up, as the next illustration shows (33), hanging upside down, tangled in the branches of a tree, and powerless to do anything about it. Fifteen minutes pass—a terrifying length of time to be up a tree—before Arthur hears Stanley's cries and rescues him. Stanley's flatness causes both boys to rethink their identities and, as a result, the relationship is stretched thin. This episode ends with Stanley not speaking to Arthur.

Episode Four: To catch two thieves

In this episode, Stanley's self-identity is challenged in a different way, one that might have been read by readers in 1964 differently than it would be read today, and the illustrations mirror the challenges. Chapter 4 begins with an illustration (34) showing Stanley and a neighbor, Mr. O. Jay Dart, the director of a famous museum, in their apartment building elevator. In the illustration, Stanley appears to be as tall as Mr. Dart's shoulder, and Stanley is the one taking control of the elevator buttons. Mr. Dart stands with his head leaned against the side of the elevator and his eyes closed. He tells Stanley is upset because thieves keep breaking into the museum and stealing paintings, and the police haven't been able to catch them. Stanley, however, has an idea—he can dress up as a cowboy in a painting and hang on the museum wall at night. A later illustration (41) shows Stanley and Mr. Dart viewed from above and discussing the plan as equals—and perspective further minimizes the height difference between the two. In the next illustration (43), however, Stanley appears to be only as tall as Mr. Dart's waist. In the scene, Mr. Dart is explaining that a cowboy painting will not fit into the theme of

the gallery in which the most expensive painting in the world is hanging. Rather, Stanley is to be disguised as a shepherdess. Reflecting, perhaps, that Stanley's self-identity is being seriously challenged, the illustration diminishes his height to about half Mr. Dart's size while written text says, "Stanley was so disgusted, he could hardly speak. 'I will look like a girl, that's what I will look like,' he said. ' I wish I had never had my idea'" (42-44). Maybe he wishes he had never been flattened, too. Stanley, however, is a "good sport, so he put on the disguise" (44). In the last illustration (45), Stanley—dressed as a shepherdess and so still diminished in size—nevertheless is positioned, by virtue of his being a good sport, above Mr. Dart. Of course, Stanley catches the thieves and is written up in the newspaper, becoming even more famous.

In the end, it is younger brother Arthur who rescues Stanley from his flattened state by inflating him with a bicycle pump. One of the last illustrations of the book (62) is perhaps the most obviously comical, as it shows the wide-eyed brothers watching as Stanley swells and buttons pop off of his pajamas.

Exaggeration, contradiction, and metaphor are present throughout the original *Flat Stanley* book. The humor in *Flat Stanley* isn't rolling-on-the-floor, side-splitting humor. Rather the exaggerations and understatements, contradictions, and metaphoric word play tend to produce groans and giggles. *Flat Stanley* humor is as much about making readers roll their eyes as it is about making readers roll ideas around their brains and turn their thinking toward exploring other possibilities. What would it be like if the physical limitations of our bodies changed, and how would that change our senses of self-identity, our relationships with others, and how we negotiate the power structures of this world? In a word, *Flat Stanley* uses humor to challenge our thinking to be less … flat.

Works Cited

Anderson, Anne W., and Rebecca L. Powell. "The World is Flat, Stanley: Globalization, Ethnocentricity, and Absurdity." *The Early Reader in Children's Literature and Culture: Theorizing Books for Beginning Readers*, edited by Jennifer Miskec and Annette Wannamaker, Routledge, 2016, pp. 173-184.

Brown, Jeff. *Flat Stanley*, 40th Anniversary Edition. Illustrated by Scott Nash. HarperCollins, 2003.

Kathryn Douglas. "Children's Humor." *Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide* [Volume 1], edited by Maurice Charney, Praeger, 2005, pp. 215-233. ABC-CLIO eBook Collection, legacy.abcclio.com/reader.aspx?isbn=9780313061394&id=GR2706-1353.

Gee, James. *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Landsberg, Michele. "Liberating Laughter." *American Educator*, vol. 3, 1992, pp. 34-48.

Lewis, C. S. "On Three Ways of Writing for Children." *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature*, Harcourt, 1982, pp. 31-43.

Munde, Gail. "What Are You Laughing At? Differences in Children's and Adults' Humorous Book Selections for Children." *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1997, pp. 219-233.

Slater, Katharine. "'I think these chapters are not real': *In a Dark, Dark Room* and the Horrors of Early Reading." *The Early Reader in Children's Literature and Culture: Theorizing Books for Beginning Readers*, edited by Jennifer Miskec and Annette Wannamaker, Routledge, 2016, pp. 115-128.

Tsakona, Villy. (2009). “Language and Image Interaction in Cartoons: Toward a Multimodal Theory of Humor.” *Journal of Pragmatics,* vol. 41, 2009, pp.1171-1188.