

Humor in 20th- and 21st- Century British Literature
(A Partial List!)

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950)

Mrs Warren's Profession (play; 1897)

Pygmalion (play; 1913)

- Shaw's plays exhibit *"female chauvinism" and serve as "social satires."

Edith/E. Nesbit (1858-1924)

The Story of the Treasure Seekers (1899)

The Woodbegoods (1901)

The Treasure Seekers (1904)

Oswald Bastable and Others (1905)

The Enchanted Castle (1907)

- Nesbit's books about the Bastable children "use magic as a comic device" and as a serious metaphor to represent the power of the imagination."
- For Nesbit, "serious, well-behaved children" are "timid and dull."
- Both J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis counted Nesbit as an influence on their writing.

J.M. Barrie (1860-1937)

~~————— *The Admirable Crichton* (1914)~~

- ~~• *The Admirable Crichton* satirizes "the master-servant relationship."~~

Beatrix Potter (1866-1943)

~~————— *Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902)~~

~~————— *The Tailor of Gloucester* (1902)~~

~~————— *Squirrel Nutkin* (1903)~~

~~————— *The Tale of Jemima Puddleduck* (1908)~~

- ~~• A critic describes Potter as "a benign humorist" whose stories have "a teardrop at the center of each laugh."~~

G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936)

The Innocence of Father Brown (1911)

The Incredulity of Father Brown (1926)

The Secret of Father Brown (1927)

The Father Brown Omnibus (1982)

- Chesterton's work is filled with "wit, paradox, verbal play."

P.G. Wodehouse (1881-1975)

The Inimitable Jeeves (1923)

Ring for Jeeves (1923)

Carry On, Jeeves (1925)

Very Good, Jeeves (1930)

Thank You, Jeeves (1934)

Joy in the Morning (1947)

(or any of the *Jeeves* titles/collections)

- Wodehouse creates characters who are "buffoons . . . but [who] are sympathetic characters, with redeeming qualities."
- The power of Wodehouse's novels lies in "the paradoxical tension which exists between the humorous surface events and the serious issues beneath them."

A.A. Milne (1882-1956)

When We Were Very Young (poems, 1924)

Winnie-the-Pooh (1926)

Now We Are Six (1927)

The House at Pooh Corner (1928)

- Milne's stories are filled with "puns and wordplay," "tangled thoughts, logical illogic, deductive reasoning, euphoric blending, and coined language."

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973)

The Hobbit (1937)

The Fellowship of the Ring (1954)

The Two Towers (1955)

The Return of the King (1956)

- Tolkien's writing "tends to be whimsical, satiric, ironic, parodic, and incongruous."

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)

The Screwtape Letters (1942)

- The "humorless antagonist, Screwtape . . . is undercut by the book's humor."

The Chronicles of Narnia (7 vols. [choose one!], 1950-1956)

- The *Chronicles* "are satires."

Norman Hunter (1899 – 1995)

The Incredible Adventures of Professor Branestawm (1933)

Professor Branestawm's Treasure Hunt (1937)

The Peculiar Triumph of Professor Branestawm (1970)

Professor Branestawm Up the Pole (1972)

Professor Branestawm's Great Revolution (1974)

Professor Branestawm Round the Bend (1977)

Professor Branestawm's Perilous Pudding (1979)

Professor Branestawm and the Wild Letters (1981)

Professor Branestawm's Pocket Motor Car (1981)

Professor Branestawm's Mouse War (1982)

Professor Branestawm's Building Bust-Up (1982)

Professor Branestawm's Crunchy Crockery (1983)

Professor Branestawm's Hair-Raising Idea (1983)

- The eponymous main character "is depicted throughout the books as the archetypal [absent-minded professor](#). The name "Branestawm" is a [pun](#), as a [homophone](#) of the word [brainstorm](#)."

Stella Gibbon (1902-1989)

Cold Comfort Farm (1932)

- The novel is "a parodic satire of the romance novel of the 1930s."
- The novel is "a satire of the turn-of-the-century pastoral novel."

George Orwell

— *Animal Farm* (1945)

- ~~The novel is “a brilliant Swiftian satire about the Russian Revolution . . . filled with dark humor.”~~

Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966)

A Handful of Dust (1934)

- *A Handful of Dust* “contains episodes of the most savage farce.”

Scoop: A Novel About Journalists (1938)

Brideshead Revisited (1945)

The Loved One: An Anglo-American Tragedy (1948)

- “Many of Waugh's novels depict British aristocracy and high society, which he savagely satirizes but to which he was also strongly attracted.”
- “[Waugh’s] humour, satire, cruelty and wit were spread even-handedly, attacking the foibles of his own country at least as vigorously as those of foreigners.”

Nancy Mitford (1904-1973)

Wigs on the Green (1935)

- The novel “lampoons the Fascist movement.”

John Betjeman (1906-1984)

Collections of poetry:

Continual Dew: A Little Book of Bourgeoisie Verse (1937)

Old Lights for New Chancels (1940)

A Few Late Chrysanthemums (1954)

- Betjeman uses “light, humorous verse as the vehicle for serious truth about himself and contemporary society.”

~~P(amela) L(yndon) Travers (1906-1996)~~

— ~~*Mary Poppins* (1935)~~

— ~~*Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935)~~

— ~~(plus six additional *Mary Poppins* titles)~~

- ~~Critics ponder the “humorous portrayal of the ‘tremendous vanity’ of Mary Poppins.”~~

Roald Dahl (1916-1990)

Someone Like You (short stories, 1953)

Kiss, Kiss (short stories, 1960)

Danny, The Champion of the World (1975)

— *The Twits* (1980)

— *The BFG* (1982)

— *Matilda* (1988)

- Dahl’s wit is “frequently wickedly macabre, his language . . . sometimes less than genteel.”
- Dahl writes “macabre incident[s] in such a way that the reader shudders and smiles at the same time.”

James Herriot (1916-1995)

All Creatures Great and Small (1972)

The Lord God Made Them All (1981)

- Herriot writes about “humorous animals” and “humorous people.”
- The author “finds humor in the use of dialect” and in the comic misunderstanding of a word (e.g., “The sheep bled from its biblical cord” and “Trouble always comes in cyclones.”)

Muriel Spark (1918-)

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961)

- The novel is “a satire of education” and is “wryly amusing and yet profound.”

Brendan Behan (1923-1964)

Borstal Boy (1958)

- The novel is “hilarious comedy” and “contains many literary allusions, as well as frequent bawdy songs and humorous banter.”

John Mortimer (1923-2009)

Rumpole of the Bailey (1978)

[Or choose from the 17 (or so) *Rumpole* titles; the *Omnibus* volumes offer more than one title in one book.]

- Mortimer creates one of the most memorable literary lawyers in the character of Horace Rumpole. Rumpole defends petty criminals and seemingly hopeless cases; he survives the rigors of marital life with “She Who Must Be Obeyed” and hostile colleagues by drinking large measures of Pommeroy’s wine, smoking cheroots, and quoting Wordsworth, “that old sheep of the Lake District.”

Beryl Bainbridge (1933-)

Young Adolf (1978)

Another Part of the World (1980)

Winter Garden (1980)

- Bainbridge uses “black humor” to chronicle “the lives and neuroses of English lower middle class characters.”
- Bainbridge’s style “juxtaposes horror and comedy” with the use of dialogue that “is always wildly funny.”

John Cleese (1939-)

(N.B. Cleese writes in collaboration with other authors in some of the works listed below.)

The Rise and Fall of Michael Rimmer (1970)

Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975)

The Strange Case of the End of Civilisation as We Know It (1977)

Monty Python’s Life of Brian (1979)

Fawlty Towers (1989)

- Cleese makes “nonsensical fun of all who are pompous, pretentious, humorless, or boring, or who take themselves too seriously.”

Julian Barnes (1946-)

History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters (1989)

- Barnes’ fiction examines modern relationships and explores the absurdity of ways people connect and fail to connect.

James Kelman (1946-)

Kieron Smith, boy (2008)

- *Kieron Smith, boy* “gives voice to an honorable decency which guides the human spirit even in the midst of its own brutality” . . . in “scenes of great humour”

Terry Pratchett (1948-)

The Colour of Magic (1983)

[Or choose from over 20 additional titles in the *Discworld* series.]

- The “*Discworld* series is a humorous and often satirical sequence of stories set in the colourful fantasy world of Discworld.”
- “Characters, place names and titles in Pratchett’s books often contain puns, allusions and cultural references. Some characters are parodies of well-known characters.”

Alexander McCall Smith (1948-)

The *44 Scotland Street* Series:

44 Scotland Street

Espresso Tales

Love Over Scotland

The World According to Bertie

The Importance of Being Seven

The Unbearable Lightness of Scones

Bertie Plays the Blues

Sunshine on Scotland Street

Bertie’s Guide to Life and Mothers

The *No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency* Series:

The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency

Tears of the Giraffe

Morality for Beautiful Girls

The Kalahari Typing School for Men

The Full Cupboard of Life

In the Company of Cheerful Ladies

Blue Shoes and Happiness

The Good Husband of Zebra Drive

The Miracle at Speedy Motors

Tea Time for the Traditionally Built

The Double Comfort Safari Club

The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party

The Limpopo Academy of Private Detection

- McCall Smith was born in Zimbabwe and has lived in Scotland most of his adult life. He has taught medical law at the University of Edinburgh and has published books on medical law and ethics. The books listed above have all been published since 1998.
- McCall Smith’s books are noted for their memorable creations of characters. A critic has written, “It is hard to think of a contemporary writer more genuinely engaging. . . [his] novels are also extremely funny: I find it impossible to think about them without smiling.”

Douglas Adams (1952-2001)

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (1979)

The Restaurant at the End of the Universe (1980)

Life, the Universe, and Everything (1980)

So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish (1984)

[Adams published the four books listed above in a one-volume edition entitled *The Hitchhiker's Trilogy* in 1984.)

Mostly Harmless (1992)

- Adams writes “science fiction as social satire.”
- “Much of [Adam’s] comedy comes from his misapplications of pseudo-high-tech concepts.”

Hanif Kureishi (1954-)

The Buddha of Suburbia (1990)

- *The Buddha of Suburbia* is “a funny novel on cultural, class and gender differences and how the British way of life copes with these.”

Irvine Welsh (1958-)

Trainspotting (1993)

Filth (1998)

- Welsh explores questions of the “working class and Scottish identity in the period spanning 1960 to the present day.” He explores, “perhaps most of all, the humour, prejudices, and axioms of the Scots.”
- Welsh’s use of dark, often satirical, humor serves to lighten his depiction of tragic lives.

Ayub Khan-Din (1961-)

East Is East (play; 1999)

Rafta, Rafta (play; 2007)

- The plays offer “insight into the integration of ethnic minority communities in working-class Britain.”
- Ayub Khan-Din offers serious themes with the use of comic plot incidents and characterizations.

*Many of the critical comments about the works listed above may be found in:

Nilsen, Don L.F., ed. Humor in Twentieth-Century British Literature. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2000.

(This reference book will be made available “on reserve” in Fant Library.)

Students may also choose works listed below by Jane Austen or Charles Dickens and explore those books for irony and/or satire:

Jane Austen (1775-1817)

Emma (1816)

Northanger Abbey (1818)

Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Hard Times (1854)

Little Dorrit (1857)

Great Expectations (1861)