

# PERPLEXICON



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Your Pea-Green Guide  
to Nonsense

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## TWO MAD TEA-PARTIES



*Edward Lear*



*Lewis Carroll*





## THE JOY OF NONSENSE

*Nonsense is the fourth dimension of literature.*

Gelett Burgess

THE APPEAL of the correct and sensible is limited. Sometimes we want the broader picture, and then nonsense literature can help out. This line of literature dreams up ideas and vistas very much outside the box. As the American nonsense poet Dr. Seuss put it, ‘Oh, the things you can think!’ This book is a guide to such things. It is a reader’s guide with a simple premise: if you like the works of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, you may also like these other poems, stories, and plays. This book is not an academic survey, but an outreach from one nonsense buff to another. It offers a helping hand in finding fine nonsense, from a quietly perplexing poem to robust lunacy in prose. These pages will show that there is more to the English School of Nonsense than Lear and Carroll, and that there are more schools of nonsense than just the English one. However, I should warn that this guide takes a purist’s approach to nonsense. There will be no place for half-hearted whimsy; only bona fide idiocy will do.

The book’s main part will be a celebration of a wide array of nonsense written in English. This is followed by a scan of the globe for further nonsensicalities. Nonsense can be heady stuff, so most chapters will be tactfully compact, but each chapter will end with tips for further reading. It will be a limited selection of in total a hundred or so titles (you only need so much nonsense in your life), but each title has something special to add. First of all, though, there will be a crash course in nonsense, a ‘Nonsense for Dummies’ if you will. Learning how to make sense is a standard

part of our education, but when it comes to making nonsense we are all autodidacts. In the next chapter you can catch up. You, too, can be pointless!

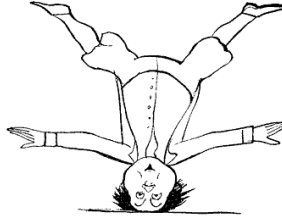
The bodily functions have always been a major inspiration for humour (the primal joke probably involved a fart), but nonsensical humour is more a play on the mechanics of the brain. As a student of nonsense, you will find that the genre has one serious side effect: it can make you think. Here is Dr. Seuss again: 'I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells.' Some of the nonsense to be discussed here was actually meant as a shortcut to wisdom. Other nonsense, however, not so much. The physicist Niels Bohr put his finger on the central flaw in much of our thinking: 'You are not thinking. You are merely being logical.' Nonsense is past being logical. It gives a *really* fresh perspective on things. Free from the burden of a moral or a message, nonsense can spread its wings and take us to out-of-the-way places – as in this refrain by Edward Lear.

Far and few, far and few,  
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;  
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,  
And they went to sea in a Sieve.

There is a world of difference between such a magical refrain and ordinary humour. Ordinary humour is merely humour-coated sense. It is observational humour, a sideways look at life which can be spot-on. Or it is mockery and satire, a strong opinion in a clown's wig, which can be the height of common sense. All very worthwhile, of course, but sometimes this thinly veiled sense simply will not do. Sometimes we need to purge our soul with point-free fun. Then all we want to hear is the merry din of our brain short-circuiting in some pun or paradox. In such emergencies we turn to nonsense literature.

About now would perhaps be the time to come forward with a firm definition of the genre, but here is a bit of a conundrum. How to pinpoint a literary genre within rules if it grandly ignores every single one of them? There have been ingenious attempts at academic precision, but in this consumer's guide we keep things simple. We will keep our definition down to this little formula: nonsense is a parody of sense. It sends up the humdrum rules of reason by being buoyantly out of bounds. It makes fun of our dull demand that everything should have a point – from verse to Universe. Nonsense is also a self-parody of our mind. It is our brain making fun of its own curious habits, needs, and limitations.

Nonsense ignores every rule in the book – even the rules of humour itself. This type of humorous literature is in fact not so much about the routine of making jokes as about rollicking invention. Often it will be exhilarating rather than hilarious. The genre is nonsensical both in the sense of illogical and pointless. It is quite partial to some of humour's special effects, such as pun, paradox, and parody, but no single type of joke is unique to it. It really is the preposterous pointlessness that sets it apart within humour. This pointlessness comes with surprising benefits. Precisely by not *making* any point, nonsense literature may, in the end, actually *have* one – but we will save that finer point for later. Bona fide idiocy is much rarer in literature than you might think, but it comes in a generous array of shapes: nursery rhyme, limerick, quatrain, ballad, sonnet, prose poem, riddle, proverb, list, catalogue, alphabet, rigmarole, tall tale, fable, fairy tale, sketch, short story, romance, novel, essay, review, report, letter, play, and haiku. This book will be a parade of all of those. But first, to really start things off, a drawing by Edward Lear, introducing the main event in nonsense.



As babies, one of our earliest and most memorable experiences of hilarity is to be held upside-down. Inversion is the mother of nonsense. Through time, mankind really had its fun with turning things upside-down. In the sixteenth century, illustrated broadsides on the theme of the topsy-turvy world began to get published all over Europe. Some of these inversions had a social agenda, with a baron serving his butler tea, but others were purely nonsensical, with a chair making itself comfortable on top of a struggling lady. This topsy-turvy world, this escape from the tired clichés of reality, is the central theme of nonsense. One nonsense classic is a trip to a quite literally reversed world, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carroll. Here are some helpful lines from another famous example, the poem ‘Topsy-Turvy World’ by ‘the laureate of the nursery’ William Brighty Rands (1823-1882).

If the pony rode his master,  
If buttercups ate the cows,  
If the cat had the dire disaster  
To be worried, sir, by the mouse;  
If mama, sir, sold the baby  
To the gipsy for half a crown;  
If a gentleman, sir, was a lady –  
The world would be Upside-Down!

A gentleman turning out to be a lady may have become less of a shock, but if there is one constant in this unruly literary genre, it is inversion. Today, nonsense writer and film director Woody Allen is so addicted to it that friends call him 'Allen Woody'. The genre as a whole could indeed be called the flip side of literature. Normally our poems and stories will aim for some sort of coherence and significance. We go for consistency, only to end up with clogged brains. Nonsense always limits meaning to a safe minimum.

Before embarking on the crash course in nonsense in the next chapter, it may be a good idea to line up some of the more helpful studies and anthologies. Of course the academic studies of nonsense, unlike their subject, rather *do* hope to make some sort of point. The alternation of loony quotes and scholarly precision in these studies often makes for fun perusal. Surprisingly and regrettably, no general survey or history of nonsense literature has as yet been published. Most scholars have been focussing on one aspect, often the problem of defining the genre. This may not be the primary concern of the ordinary buff: he knows what he likes. One of the finest connoisseurs of nonsense is the English writer G.K. Chesterton, best known for his detective series about Father Brown. He wrote several spirited and spiritual essays on nonsense, and one of them, 'Two Kinds of Paradox' (1911), opens with this.

There is nothing that needs more fastidious care than our choice of nonsense.

It could be the motto of this guide. The idea of nonsense as a parody of sense, which this guide gladly adheres to, was most famously put forward in a passage on Edward Lear in 'The Music of Poetry' (1942), a lecture by T.S. Eliot. One of the first academic publications on the subject is quite enjoyable for the ordinary buff. *The Field of Nonsense* (1952) by Elizabeth Sewall is an elegant and eloquent essay on Lear and Carroll, which sees the genre in terms of a game, 'a play of the side of order against disorder'. Like

more nonsense experts, Dr Sewell has a background in philosophy. A tableau of the specifics of the genre, plus a substantial bibliography of primary nonsense, can be found in *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense* (1988) by Wim Tigges. Dr Tigges has also a justly stern section on ‘What Nonsense Is Not’.



*Interspecies bonding through dance,*  
*by Edward Lear*

And now for an even more important set of books, the anthologies. Nonsense literature is in large part made up of isolated gems by otherwise disappointingly sensible authors, so the anthologies (and the occasional guide) are really indispensable. There is a sliding scale between nonsense and other types of humorous literature, and anthologies of ‘nonsense’ tend to reflect this. The discerning devotee will find that often they are really broad humour anthologies, with quite as much satire and observational humour as nonsense. Thankfully, some anthologists took their remit a bit more serious. We do have several collections with decent nonsense quotas, and in conclusion of this introduction I’m happy to make a presentation of them. There will be a further list of collections specifically meant for children in the chapter ‘Nursery Nonsense’. Sadly, most of these books are not very recent, which I’m sure says something about the state today’s world is in.

Most nonsense anthologies published so far have been of verse. The advantage of the poetry is that, within the madness, there will always be the steady metre to cling to. Plus, some extra fun can be had with the comical contrast between the punctual metre and the completely unhinged content. One of the first collections is an American one, *A Nonsense Anthology* (1902), compiled by Carolyn Wells. It offers nonsense poems and light verse written in English – many of them a bit dated, so not included in the more recent anthologies. The best poetry collection for nonsense starters may be *The Faber Book of Nonsense Verse*, first published in 1979 and compiled by Geoffrey Grigson. The selected verse was mostly written in English, but there is also some translated German, French and Russian nonsense. It contains much of the poetry quoted in this guide. The overall finest poetry collection is *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry* (1988). It was compiled by Hugh Haughton, who also edited a recent edition of *Alice in Wonderland*. It is a magnificent international selection of poetry written or translated in English, with a substantial introduction and interesting annotations. It has many new finds, for instance from Eastern Europe. A nice addition to these collections would be *Straw in the Hair: an anthology of nonsensical and surreal verse* (1938) compiled by Denys Kilham Roberts. Quite a few of the poems in this collection are not included in the three other ones, partly because this selection emphatically follows the view that nonsense literature is exhilarating, but not necessarily hilarious. It has primarily poetry written in English; the ‘surreal’ aspect is limited to mainly English poets like Edith Sitwell. There is also some comic verse by Lord Alfred Douglas, the romantic partner of Oscar Wilde.

As for the anthologies of poetry and prose combined, two collections may serve your nonsense needs perfectly. *The Book of Nonsense* (1977), compiled by Paul Jennings, is a handsome collection of prose and poetry written in English, including some virtuoso madness by the Reverend Sandys Wason and a ‘Report on Resistentialism’ by Jennings himself (to be discussed later).

Usually the nineteenth century is seen as the Golden Age of Nonsense, but John Davies, the anthologist of *Everyman's Book of Nonsense* (1981), finds that it is really the twentieth century. His selection of prose and poetry written in English is made accordingly. Some of the poetry in this collection was written by a cockroach, expressing his immortal soul on a typewriter by jumping from key to key – that at least is what the American poet Don Marquis will have us believe. Fortunately, there is not too much overlap between these two collections. A good complement to both would be *This Fish is Loaded! The book of surreal and bizarre humour* (1991) by Richard Glyn Jones, a collection of thirty stories written or translated in English. It bypasses the classics to focus on lesser-known modern prose, such as 'The Children's Marquis de Sade' by Marcel Mariën. This is a sweet adaptation for the nursery of Sade's spectacularly obscene novel *Juliette*. Yes, the joys of nonsense are manifold.

Big ideas and big emotions have an unfortunate habit of becoming overbearing. This is where nonsense may be of help. The poems, stories and plays in these wonderful anthologies take things down a notch, and reduce meaning to a cool minimum. They show nonsense at its most refreshing: as a reset button for the soul.





## FURTHER READING

### *Studies*

**Chesterton, G.K.:** ‘Two Kinds of Paradox’ in G.K. Chesterton: *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton XXIX* (Ignatius Press, 1988). [Also available on line, with many more interesting texts by Chesterton and others, at the website *A Blog of Bosh*: <http://nonsenselit.wordpress.com>]

**Eliot, T.S.:** ‘The Music of Poetry’ in T.S. Eliot: *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. (Faber and Faber, 1975)

**Sewell, Elizabeth:** *The Field of Nonsense*. (Chatto & Windus, 1952)

**Tigges, Wim:** *An Anatomy of Literary Nonsense*. (Rodopi, 2014) [First published in 1988]

### *Anthologies*

**Davies, John:** *Everyman’s Book of Nonsense*. (J.M. Dent & Sons, 1981)

**Grigson, Geoffrey:** *The Faber Book of Nonsense Verse*. (Faber and Faber, 1986) [First published in 1979.]

**Haughton, Hugh:** *The Chatto Book of Nonsense Poetry*. (Chatto & Windus, 1988) [A new edition seems to be in the making.]

**Jennings, Paul:** *The Book of Nonsense*. (Macdonald/Raven Books, 1977)

**Jones, Richard Glyn:** *This Fish is Loaded! The book of surreal and bizarre humour*. (Xanadu Publications, 1991)

**Roberts, Denys Kilham:** *Straw in the Hair: an anthology of nonsensical and surreal verse.* (John Lane, 1938)

**Wells, Carolyn:** *A Nonsense Anthology.* (Blue Ribbon Books, 1902)  
[Now freely accessible via the Gutenberg website.]

**Wyndham Lewis, D.B.:** *The Nonsensibus.* (Methuen, 1936) [A debonair collection of poetry and prose written in English. It is useful collection for the interwar period, but maybe a bit *too* debonair: rather a lot of the selections were taken from the same handful of books.]

#### *Texts*

**Rands, William Brighty:** ‘Topsy-Turvy World’ [The complete poem is included in Roger Lancelyn Green: *The Book of Nonsense.* (J.M. Dent & Sons, 1973). That collection will be profiled with other collections for children in the chapter ‘Nursery Nonsense’.]

## NONSENSE FOR BEGINNERS

*A miss is as good as a smile.*

Nonsense proverb

WHAT REALLY sets nonsense apart is that it reverses evolution. The whole sorry notion of life as a battle for survival is turned around by nonsense literature, where we try our jolly worst instead of our competitive best. It is things like this which make the genre so attractive. However, it is not that easy to write a decent bit of nonsense. These awkward efforts by two amateurs, the philosopher Bertrand Russell and the linguist Noam Chomsky, make that abundantly clear.

\*Quadruplicity drinks procrastination.

\*Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.

It does not really sing from the page. How to be perfectly pointless? Good sense will always be pertinent, competent, and well-balanced, whereas nonsense, on the other hand, always makes a real effort to be inane, inept, and over the top. We can minimise meaning by deflating it, by making a complete mess of it, or by inflating it to grotesque proportions. Each of these three tantalising options will be demonstrated in this chapter – starting now with some pointers for the deflation of meaning. Here is Allen Woody.

Eternal nothingness is O.K. if you're dressed for it.