“I don’t know any jokes,” I told him. “I’m not funny.”
“But everyone says you are,” he insisted.
I shook my head. “I’m not,” I mumbled. “I don’t know why people say stuff like that.”

What constitutes funny? Something that is funny to one person can be tragic, boring, or even offensive to another. I had never thought of myself as funny. Short, yes. Strange, sometimes. But funny, no. I didn’t become funny for decades, until I wrote my first book. Then everything changed. Well, not everything. I am still short and strange. But now I can add “funny” to my resume. Why? Because I have my name engraved on a plaque that says I am.

The year was 2004. I was at my day job, coming up with names for Red Lobster’s lobster-claw cocktails, when I got the phone call telling me I had won SCBWI’s Sid Fleischman Humor Award. I was stunned. I thought it was a mistake. Especially since I had only written one book, *Millicent Min, Girl*

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Genius, and it wasn’t funny. When I called my best friend, he said, “Why would they give that to you?” adding, “Your book made me cry.”

Exactly.

Then I went back and reread the reviews. Sure enough, every one of them mentioned the humor. The weird thing was, I hadn’t set out to write funny. I was an accidental humorist.

My son was engaged once. In kindergarten. It ended badly. Now that he’s in college, he can laugh about it, though at the time he found it tragic. And therein lies the secret to humor, or at least the kind I write. I have to find the funny, though it may not be obvious at first. For example, a failed engagement is not inherently funny. But a failed engagement between five-year-olds? Funny. Sometimes it takes time and distance to discover what is funny about ourselves.

I strive to write intimate stories, ones that each reader will interpret differently. Millicent Min’s novel begins with the line, “I have been accused of being anal retentive, an overachiever, and a compulsive perfectionist, like those are bad things.” This sums up Millicent. Is she trying to be funny? No. Do some people find it funny? Yes. Does everyone? No. Just like loving milk chocolate versus dark chocolate, humor is subjective.

I don’t write jokes or flat-out slapstick; I don’t write parody or mockery. Though deadpan humor and irony are often part of my stories, the one constant is that I write situationally. Usually my characters are unable to laugh at what’s happening to them. They are too invested, too self-conscious, and too in-the-moment for that. However, readers, who are observing, can see clearly.

Different kinds of humor make themselves known at different points in our lives. Make a raspberry sound at a baby and she will laugh. Say the word fart to someone in kindergarten and watch him fall over. In elementary school, humor is often about an outlandish situation. In middle school, it ramps up and can be cruel. In high school, the jokes are often dirty, or dark. In college, it turns political. And off we go. But in each phase of our lives, our sense of humor becomes more finely honed as we discover what makes us laugh.

A few years ago, my then-twelve-year-old daughter got hold of my Facebook account. While I was at a conference she wrote (as me), “I am constipated.” By the time I figured out what had happened, I had dozens of “likes,” plus concerned people had posted helpful suggestions to remedy my “situation.”

I was livid. Daughter was grounded. Today, I think it’s hilarious. I’ll probably use it in a book. Humiliation plus time equals humor.

It’s been thirteen years and seventeen novels since Millicent Min, Girl Genius. There is humor in every book I write, even the ones in which sadness and/or tragedy has occurred. Wait. Especially in the ones in which
sadness and/or tragedy has occurred. My outlook on life is that humor helps heal. It isn’t a luxury; it’s a necessity.

So, then, is it hard to write humor? Yes. When I think too much about it as I write, it can be paralyzing. I often teach humor writing workshops where I tell my students, “I can’t make you funny. But, if you already are, I can make you funnier.” It has to do with understanding your characters, setup, pacing, and payoff. The better you know your characters and what makes them unique, the easier it is to find the humor in their situations, even if they don’t.

Unlike slapstick humor, which is immediate and visual, poignant humor reflects one’s life experiences and requires the reader to become engaged in the story. That’s not to say that

The punch line is usually the best part of a joke. So I never bother with the rest.

**Classics**
A newspaper.
To get to the other side.
To hold up his pants.

**Elephants**
From jumping out of trees.
By the footprints in the Jell-O.
You don’t. You get down off a goose.

**Obviously**
A brown stick.
It gets wet.
Because 7 8 9.

**Almost Gross**
Because they have such big fingers.
Winnie the Poo.
European.

**Maybe the Best Punch Line Ever**
You don’t eat a good pig like that all at once!

—Jon Scieszka
slapstick humor can’t be found in my work. It’s there, especially in those stories that are more action-oriented. However, knowing the players makes the humor that much more immediate and relatable. I home in on the characters—who they are, what shapes them, how they act and interact in the world, what they are like when they are humiliated, happy, sad, bereft, confused.

In *Supergirl at Super Hero High*, when Kara Zor-El’s planet Krypton explodes, she is heartbroken to lose everyone she has ever known and loved. The teen finds herself on Earth and suddenly has superpowers she can’t control. The first time Kara (who later becomes Supergirl) tries out her heat vision, a cornfield explodes and popcorn rains from the sky over the town. (Slapstick!) Kara is mortified. However, hopefully, the reader is delighted—not by Kara’s pain but by her power, one she has not yet fully claimed. The scene tells you about who Supergirl is, it helps move the story forward. We laugh at the falling popcorn not in mockery but in sympathy for what she is going through.

When I wrote the YA novel *The Kidney Hypothetical, or How to Ruin Your Life in Seven Days*, I had a vision of a teenage boy in a fuzzy pink bathrobe standing paralyzed with fear atop a water tower. Not only is Higgs Boson Bing afraid of heights, he is worried about Stuart Little, his pet mouse, who has disappeared. The police think he’s up on the water tower because he is suicidal. And yet, the absurdity of the situation is one that has been building throughout the entire novel, which is what makes it tragic and funny at the same time.

It was a difficult chapter to write because I did not want to diminish the seriousness of the situation. Humor puts a salve on wounds. It reminds us that we can entertain more than one emotion at a time. Had I set out to write this scene funny, it would not have been. Instead, I focused on what the teen was going through, and how it looked to other people—and later, himself.

Writing funny is a mindset and a willingness to let individual quirks and characteristics take over. It is trusting your reader to bring his or her knowledge and insight to the scene, often knowing more than the characters themselves about what it is really going on.

At an author’s dinner recently, someone who is not in the children’s book business said to me, “I’ve heard you are funny. Say something funny.”

I looked around the table, then said, “If you want to get rich, be a children’s book author.”

At that, everyone burst out laughing.

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**The better you know your characters, the easier it is to find the humor in their situations—even if they don’t.**