Navigating Neurodiversity: Humour as an Adaptive Defence in Henry Winkler and Lin Oliver's *Niagara Falls, or Does It?*

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Abstract

Humour plays a vital role in children's literature, not merely to entertain but also to serve as an adaptive defence to cope with difficulties, especially in narratives of marginalisation shaped by disability, race, class and gender. Narratives on cognitive differences, such as learning difficulties, often portray protagonists who are typecast. The shift from the medical to the social turn in Disability Studies emphasises the need for reasonable accessibility practices to prevent vulnerability. *Hank Zipser: The World's Greatest Underachiever* is a series of 17 books, published between 2003 - 2010, each dealing with an experience in the life of the protagonist Hank Zipzer, who has a learning difficulty. This series narrates the troubles of social exclusion and misrecognition experienced by the American actor Henry Winkler before being diagnosed with a learning difficulty. This paper attempts to study the first book in the series, *Niagara*

Falls, or Does It? (2003), to examine how the protagonist uses humour as an adaptive defence mechanism to reframe the narrative around his learning differences. This helps him navigate moments of vulnerability and deflect instances of marginalisation into self-assertion. The study also discusses how derisive use of humour reinforces academic hierarchies. Complementing these findings, this analysis also focuses on how the teachers' attitudes, peer relations, and family dynamics reinforce or challenge the stigma associated with the cognitive difference of the lead character.

Keywords: Cognitive Differences, Learning Difficulty, Maladaptive Humour, Adaptive Defence, Academic Hierarchies

Introduction

Literature enhances a child's capacity to confront substantial challenges in life. Children's literature addressing social issues promotes critical thinking and social justice (Aisyah & Mustofa, 2023). This highlights the need for diverse and realistic portrayals of race, class, gender, and disability in children's literature. Furthermore, these depictions must transcend restrictive prejudices, particularly those foregrounding a disability experience. It is, therefore, imperative to incorporate more strength-based representations of characters with disabilities in children's literature to facilitate acceptance and to challenge discriminatory beliefs about disability (Hayden & Prince, 2023).

Despite the growing emphasis on disability representation in literature and academics, depictions of invisible difficulties like Learning Disabilities (LD) remain at the periphery. They often go unnoticed, leading to misunderstanding and stigma. A standardised definition for this disorder has remained elusive. The National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) defines LD as "A generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities." (Hammill et al., 1981, p. 1).

LD leads to academic underachievement, even when individuals have average or above-average intelligence. Consequently, understanding the specifics of learning difficulties can improve one's educational and support strategies.

Hank Zipser: The World's Greatest Underachiever series provides an insightful portrayal of the challenges associated with overcoming the social and academic exclusion faced by individuals with learning disabilities. Henry Winkler collaborated with Lin Oliver to produce this children's book series published between 2003-2010. Set in New York City, it delineates the experiences of Henry Daniel Zipzer, referred to as Hank Zipzer in the series. Hank is a 12-year-old schoolboy who is dyslexic (a learning disability that affects either reading or writing), inspired by Henry's own experience as a child. Learning disability makes school difficult for Hank. Nevertheless, he is creative, humorous, and optimistic. The books in the series are printed in the dyslexie font, a typeface specifically designed to make reading easier for people with dyslexia. The letters in this font are designed with wider openings and a thickened base to reduce common reading errors, which improves their legibility for readers affected by dyslexia.

While academic research on characters with learning difficulties in children's literature delineates emotional and social marginalisation, critical scholarship that narrates humour as a mechanism for resilience in such narratives is comparatively less. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse the inaugural book in the Hank Zipzer series- *Niagara Falls, or Does It?* (2003) to comprehend how the protagonist employs humour as a mature and adaptive defence mechanism to navigate the sense of exclusion and reframe the story of his learning difference into a strength-based representation. The study also focuses on the aggressive use of humour in reinforcing academic hierarchies. In extension, this paper seeks to examine how teachers' attitudes, peer relationships, and family interactions either promote or challenge the stigma around the cognitive differences.

Humour as an Adaptive Defence in the Novel

Defence mechanisms serve as a useful concept for contextualising this study. They are a vital part of development that affects psychological functioning from childhood to adulthood. As children mature, they develop various strategies to regulate their emotions. Sigmund Freud, in his 1894 work "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence", presents them as unconscious mechanisms that protect one's ego from anxiety or distress by concealing or distorting reality. Rudolph M Loewenstein, in 1967, identified them as "essential parts of the normal human mind" (p. 797). These "mental manoeuvres" (Cranmer, 2006, p. 4) uphold psychological well-being. Metzger (2014) notes that defence mechanisms "serve as fundamental psychological responses triggered by internal or external stress and conflict" (p. 1). Thus, an optimal use of defensive mechanisms guards a person from anxiety brought on by either internal or external stimuli. George E. Vaillant (1994) delineates how individuals tackle their mental conflicts "by altering how these events are perceived" (p. 44). Accordingly, though employing such defences does not alter reality, it does improve a person's ability to manage unpleasant feelings.

The research on humour as a defence mechanism dates back to Sigmund Freud, whose 1909 book was translated into English as *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1963), wherein he describes the psychological impacts of humour. However, Vaillant was the first to categorise humour as a defence mechanism. In the 1994 article titled "Ego Mechanisms of Defence and Personality Psychopathology", he classified defence mechanisms into four levels: narcissistic, immature, neurotic, and mature (p. 45), hierarchically based on their adaptive nature. This typology, based on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III), introduces humour as a mature defence mechanism as it helps in acknowledging unpleasant emotions using comedy. Valiant's hierarchical classification of humour from narcissistic to mature defence depicts the

relationship between different humour styles and the psychological well-being of individuals. In a similar vein, Psychologist Rod Martin developed the HSQ (Humour Styles Questionnaire) that evaluated the four variable dimensions of humour as affiliative (joking to enhance relationships), self-enhancing (using humour to cope with stress), aggressive (ridiculing or disparaging others), and self-defeating (self-deprecation for acceptance) (Martin et al., 2003, pp. 53-54). The first two illustrate constructive deployments of humour to enhance relationships and to cope with stress, respectively. The latter two are indicative of derisive or maladaptive use of humour to ridicule others and to employ self-deprecation for acceptance. This provided a clear distinction between constructive and detrimental styles of humour. Adaptive humour includes self-enhancing humour, a "generally humorous outlook on life, even under adverse circumstances" (Kuiper & McHale, 2009, p. 360).

Humour plays a prominent role in children's literature. Self-enhancing humour serves as an adaptive defence in the Hank Zipzer series. Hank is often characterised as an underachiever because he struggles with reading, writing, and other subjects. Throughout the narrative, Hank encounters various challenges, including the demands of schooling, the strictness of teachers, peer victimisation, comparison with his high-achieving sibling, and misunderstanding of his parents. Hank employs humour as an adaptive defence to subvert the social norms that are ill-adapted to accommodate his learning style.

According to the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), the prevalence rate of learning disorders among students in public schools in the United States was approximately 5%, and their school drop-out rate was reported at nearly 40% (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 47). The traditional educational system did not consider students as individuals with diverse needs but as a homogenised group. This jeopardised the academic prospects of children with learning disabilities, who were eventually marginalised by the 'normal' school culture. Unlike other

children, Hank often tends to lose track of directions (p. 12), has difficulties with punctuation, upper case letters, spelling (p. 16), and mathematical operations (p. 40), and is allergic to lined paper (p. 38).

The subtitle of the story, "the world's greatest underachiever," is reflective of the prejudices that the neurotypical academia holds towards individuals with neurodivergent, hidden disabilities like dyslexia. However, Hank's humour enables him to find joy in learning amidst his initially undiagnosed dyslexia. His first homework assignment in the fourth grade was to write a five-paragraph essay on "What one did during the summer holidays." Hank considered this task as tricky as skiing Mount Everest backwards, butt naked (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 10). He felt singled out, and his feelings of inadequacy increased when the teacher announced that he would be the first to read his essay to the class. Overwhelmed by expectations, Hank feels helpless as he says: "It's not like I don't try. I do" (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 40). Hank employs creativity and mature humour as adaptive ways for navigating the demands of schooling, which might otherwise seem impossible to meet with his dyslexic brain. The exaggerated list of descriptions he creates for not writing the essay is indicative of his playful and humorous way of coping with the pressure of the assignment. However, when everyone else writes the essay, he uses creativity to 'build' (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 46) a live model of the Niagara Falls he had visited with his family during the summer holidays. Furthermore, he lists ten incredible things that will happen after everyone sees his project (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 55). This underscores Hank's use of adaptive humour to mediate the pressures of traditional academic expectations, which could impose significant constraints on an individual with a disability. Even when there is chaos in the classroom due to the flood from the model of Niagara Falls, Hank cannot resist laughter- "I didn't mean to laugh, but I couldn't stop." (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 69).

Hank's relationship with his teachers is marked by humour, tension, and a yearning for understanding. His learning disorder makes it difficult for him to connect with teachers who adhere to traditional teaching methods and fail to accommodate his unique learning style. However, he retorts with the use of humour to lighten the tension. His apprehension about authority is evidenced by his interactions with the head teacher, Mr. Love, whose name stands quite ironically with the attributes mentioned in the narrative. In the first hour of the first day of school, the loudspeaker demands that he present before Mr. Love. His dramatic reactions to it add humour to what would otherwise have been a moment of panic for a student. He playfully observes his surroundings and the people he encounters in the narrative. This is evident when he reflects on his way to Mr. Love's office: "I thought about sliding down the banister, but I was already in enough trouble, so I took the stairs – two at a time." (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 3). His light-heartedness is further evident when he compares the mole on Mr. Love's face to the Statue of Liberty.

Ms. Adolf, Hank's class teacher, does not appreciate his creativity but considers it "silly thoughts" (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 78). She refers to him by his name, 'Henry,' rather than his preferred name. When he suggests that his friends call him 'Hank,' she callously responds that she does not consider him her friend. Ms. Adolf responds severely to his attempts at humour and considers detention an "appropriate punishment" for what he has done (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 72). Hank humourously compares this with his impressions of the other fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Sicilian, whose demeanour contrasts with Ms. Adolf's. Hank recounts how Mr. Sicilian plays football with everyone during break and never assigns homework on weekends (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 4).

Mr. Rock, the music teacher, supports Hank in coping with the challenges of conventional learning. He eases his stress during detention, understands his struggles, offers support, and encourages creativity. He boosts Hank's confidence with positive

reinforcements: “Your brain isn’t as stupid as you think. It’s got plenty of good information tucked inside it.” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 83). Using music as a learning tool helps Hank vent his frustrations of being an odd one in his school. Hank testifies- “I had never had a teacher pop by before. But then again, Mr Rock wasn’t like other teachers” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 87). Humour bridges the relationship between Hank and Mr. Rock, wherein the teacher turns moments of vulnerability into validations of Hank’s struggles.

Hank’s relationship with his peer group provides a contrasting mix of both adaptive and maladaptive humour at work. Though Hank enjoys moments of light humour with his friends, the aggressive behaviour of his classmate Nick McKelty depicts instances of derisive use of humour. Hank’s relationship with his friends Frankie and Ashley features several instances of humour that nurture their relationship. Scenes of pretending as magicians, performing the rules of their magic team and the apparent disparity between their expectations and actual outcomes showcase his gentle humour. However, Hank is teased by Nick McKelty, and the troubles caused by these interactions add to his other challenges at school. Nick uses aggressive humour to demean Hank’s creative ventures. This broadens the scope of humour as an adaptive mechanism to a means of overpowering someone. It occurs when the impulse to be humorous overrides sensitivity to others’ well-being (Martin et al., p. 54). In a study on humour styles in middle school, Klein and Kuiper (2006) explain how “aggressive humour may often be used against peer victimized children, as one means of maintaining their lowered status within the peer group” (p. 387). Nick teases Hank to make himself seem cool and to maintain peer prominence at the cost of Hank’s disability. Hank recounts his experience of being subject to aggressive use of humour as Nick shouts at him in front of the class: “Way to go, Zipper Boy” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 1). Nick jokes about Hank’s difficulty with spelling and laughs out loud when Ms. Adolf scolds Hank. He ridicules Hank’s Niagara Falls project and undermines the latter’s creativity. However, Hank

tries to deflect these instances of sarcastic humour using clever humour as creative resilience to lessen the tension.

Hank's interactions with his parents depict both elements of frustration and love, and he transcends those moments using benign humour. Both father and mother have great expectations about Hank's academic performance. However, he comes up with clever and humourous excuses for not completing his homework as he says he has "a very important meeting in the clubhouse" (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 36) When his father questions him for being late and advises him to be more responsible, he humorously retorts to himself: "Responsible? I'm a small-business owner. How much more responsible can you get?" (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 34). The sarcastic tone is indicative of Hank overstating his accountability. Hank's jokes diffuse parental worries at least for a short while.

Hank is often contrasted with his 15-month younger sibling, Emily, who is academically successful, unlike him. If Hank is a troublemaker at school, she is praised for her "neatest handwriting" (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 35), and her summer reading list has impressed her teachers. When Emily is focused on traditional academic success, Hank loves music and magic. Amidst the contrasting abilities, Hank's exaggerated reactions to Emily's iguana and his playful teasing of her educational accomplishments lighten the otherwise tense instances that would have led to sibling rivalries. The witty repartees in Hank's interactions with Emily reveal how humour softens their tensions and strengthens their identities.

Conclusion

Unlike usual stories wherein a third-person omniscient narrator often narrates marginalisation experiences, Hank's journey toward self-advocacy is backed by a first-person point of view. The use of mature humour coupled with supportive gestures from his grandfather, Papa Pete; his close friends, Ashley and Frankie; and his music teacher, Mr. Rock, makes Hank feel unique. The narrative concludes with a moment of self-assertion, in

which Hank tells his grandfather that he is proud of himself. Mr. Rocks' reminder validates the same when he says: “Everybody learns differently… Your brain is your brain. You just have to figure out the right way to feed it.” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 82). As Grandfather Papa Pete reminds Hank: “There are many ways to Rome” (Winkler & Oliver, 2003, p. 50); Hank represents all individuals who navigate their unique experiences.

Representation of humour in the first book of the Hank Zipzer series- *Niagara Falls, or Does It?* serves a dual purpose. Maladaptive humour leads to peer group exclusion and marginalisation as exhibited by Nick. Institutional spaces further this with rigid responses to humour by the principal and the class teacher. Nevertheless, Hank’s use of mature and adaptive humour transforms experiences of marginalisation into spaces of inclusion and affirmation as theorised by Freud, who presented them as unconscious mechanisms that protect one’s ego from anxiety or distress. Humour emerges as an adaptive defence that reframes disability as difference rather than deficit.

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