

PREVIEWING

NONFICTION

The Clown

Patrick F. McManus

PERSONAL CONNECTION

Have you ever turned blue in the face or almost passed out trying to keep from laughing in class? Think back to the crazy moments you have had in the classroom during your school career. Share any comical stories that come to mind. If you remember a class clown, tell how your teacher and your classmates reacted to this student. Did he or she cause you to burst out laughing or simply to roll your eyes? Use your notebook to jot down what you recall.



BIOGRAPHICAL CONNECTION

Like many of us, the humorist Patrick McManus enjoys reminiscing about his life experiences. Most of his stories are based on actual incidents, with exaggeration added for humorous effect. McManus explains, "If I stick to the unembellished truth for too long at a stretch, I tend to tense up, get a headache."

This kind of humorous writing is usually categorized as nonfiction, which, as you recall, tells about real people, places, and events. In this account, McManus starts with a true incident in his own classroom experience and then magnifies it somewhat. He confides, "Although I may base a story on an actual experience I've had, I usually will use characters who will produce the best comic effect."

READING CONNECTION

Exaggeration As you have learned, humorists use exaggeration to make readers laugh. An exaggeration is a statement that something is much more than it actually is. For example, in "The Clown," the narrator claims Miss Bindle, his teacher, has "an eighty-year-old face and twenty-year old red hair." If you saw her, it is doubtful that you would find this to be true. As you read McManus's account, look for and enjoy his exaggeration of the truth.

THE CLOWN



by Patrick F. McManus

I admit it: my sense of humor is a bit weird. It's caused me some trouble over the years. For example, the only time I ever got sent to the principal's office at Delmore Blight Junior High was because I laughed in the wrong place at the wrong time—Miss Bindle's math class.

They don't make teachers like Miss Bindle anymore. At least, I hope they don't. She was tiny, scrawny, and fierce, with an eighty-year-old face and twenty-year-old red hair. Her wrinkles were permanently fused into a frown beneath the glowing halo of frizzy hair. Miss Bindle was the Jesse James of sarcasm: she could quick-draw a sarcastic remark and drill you between the eyes with it at thirty paces. She once hit Mort Simmons with a slug of sarcasm that spun him around half out of his desk. Then she walked over and coolly finished him off with two shots to the head. Mort recovered, but he was never the same afterward. His was a sad case.

Mort had always been dumb. The reason Miss Bindle drilled him was that he had been

sneaking a look at one of my answers during a test; that's how dumb he was, or so Miss Bindle remarked, catching me with a ricochet from her shot at Mort. She never coddled us dumb kids, as did some of the kinder, more merciful teachers. She made us learn the same stuff as the smart kids. A few teachers took pity on us and let us relax in the cozy vacuum of our dumbness, but Miss Bindle forced us to learn everything the smart kids did, even though it took us three times as long. Everybody hated her for it, even the smart kids, who were cheated out of the satisfaction of knowing more than the dumb ones. Anybody could see that wasn't fair.

But I started to tell about Mort. He couldn't do arithmetic without counting on his fingers.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

sarcasm (sär'kăz'əm) *n.* humor intended to hurt, criticize, or ridicule a person
ricochet (rĭk'e-shă') *n.* a rebound, as from a surface

Miss Bindle said she didn't care what parts of his anatomy he had to count on, he was going to learn just as much math as anybody else. Mort did, too, but it was a terrible strain on him, dumb as he was. When we got to multiplying and dividing fractions, his fingers moved so fast he had to keep a glass of ice water on his desk to cool them off. It was a good thing we didn't do algebra in seventh grade, because somebody would have had to stand next to Mort with a fire extinguisher.

It is my understanding that modern educational theory dismisses the use of fear as a means of inducing learning in adolescents. Educators now take a more civilized approach and try to make learning an enjoyable experience. I agree with that. I know that all my children enjoyed school much more than I did. On the other hand, none of them knows how to multiply and divide fractions. I suppose that's part of the trade-off.

Fear was Miss Bindle's one and only motivator. It was as though she had done her teacher training at Marine boot camp. She would stick her face an inch from yours and, snarling and snapping, rearrange the molecules of your brain to suit her fancy. It was clearly evident to the person whose brain molecules were being rearranged that breath mints either hadn't been invented or hadn't come in a flavor pleasing to Miss Bindle. The oral hygiene of an executioner, however, is scarcely a matter of great concern to the potential victim.

Miss Bindle preferred psychological violence—whipping your psyche into a pink froth—to physical violence. Physical violence was direct

and straightforward, something all of us youngsters thoroughly understood. There was no mystery to it. Given a choice, we would have taken the teacher's physical violence, which consisted of snatching the culprit by the hair and dragging him off to the principal's office. As I say, Miss Bindle was extremely short, only about half the size of some of the larger boys. When Miss Bindle grabbed them by the hair and took off for the office, they had to trail along behind her in a bent-over posture, which didn't do a lot for the macho image of some of the guys, particularly if they were saying, "Ow ow ow," as they went out the door. On the other hand, if they had stood erect, in order to depart from the room in a dignified fashion, Miss Bindle would have dangled from their hair, her feet swinging a good six inches off the floor. It was a no-win situation, and wisdom dictated the less painful of the two modes of being escorted to the office. In contrast to Miss Bindle, other teachers merely pointed toward the door and ordered, "Go to the office!" This method allowed the typical louts, some of whom were near voting age, to leave the room swaggering and sneering. No lout ever left Miss Bindle's room swaggering and sneering.

I was a fairly timid fellow and took great care never to attract the wrath of Miss Bindle. I studied ways to make myself invisible in her class, with such success that a couple of times she marked me absent when I was there. Pitiful victims were snatched from their desks on all sides of me, but month after month I escaped unsnatched, making myself increasingly invisible, until finally there were only a few weeks left of my seventh-grade sentence. I thought I was going to make it safely through to the end of the school year, but I hadn't taken into

WORDS **inducing** (ĩn-doo'sĩng) *n.* bringing about the occurrence of **induce** *v.*
TO **motivator** (mō'te-vā'ter) *n.* a spur to action
KNOW **psyche** (sĩ'kē) *n.* a mind or soul

account my weird sense of humor—or my friend Slick.

Clifford Slick was the class clown. Ol' Slick felt his purpose in life was to make people laugh, and he was pretty good at it. Everybody liked Slick. We would gather around him during lunch hour to watch his routines and laugh ourselves sick. He did a wonderful impression of Miss Bindle snatching a kid by the hair and dragging him off. He did both parts alternately, the kid and Miss Bindle, and it was hilarious. One of the reasons Slick got the routine down so well was that he got snatched about once a week. It was as though he had researched the act. He knew every little nuance of a snatching, and how to exaggerate it just enough to turn the horror into humor. It was a gift.

One day before school, I made the mistake of bragging to Slick that I was going to make it all the way through the year without getting snatched by Miss Bindle. Slick was concentrating on combing his hair into a weird shape. His father had shot a bear, and Slick had come into a quantity of bear grease. He slathered a copious amount of bear grease on his hair and was delighted to see that he could now comb it into any shape he wanted. He combed it flat down against his skull, so that it looked as though he were wearing a shiny, tight leather helmet.

“How’s that look?” he asked me. “Funny?”

I grinned. “Yeah, pretty funny, Cliff. I like the one best, though, where you comb it straight out from your forehead. It looks like a duck bill. Ha!”

“Okay, good,” he said. “I’ll go with that. Should get some laughs. Now what was that you were saying?”

“I said I’ve never been snatched by Miss

Bindle. I’m going to make it all the way through the year without getting snatched.”

Slick turned a malevolent smile on me. “No you ain’t. Today you’re going to bust out laughing right in old Bindle’s class!”

“Not a chance!” The mere thought of bursting out laughing in Miss Bindle’s class would totally paralyze my entire laughing apparatus. It was like having a fail-safe mechanism.

“You’ll laugh,” Slick said. “I’ll make you laugh.”

I shook my head. “No way.”

In the whole hundred or so years that Miss Bindle had taught, I was reasonably sure that not so much as a snicker had ever been heard in her class, let alone a laugh. It was absolutely insane for Slick to think that I, a profoundly fearful and insecure person, would achieve fame as the one kid ever to burst out laughing within snatching range of Miss Bindle.

As soon as Miss Bindle’s back was turned to scratch some fractions on the blackboard, Slick went into his routine. He took a dainty sip from his ink bottle and then made a terrible face. His greasy duck-bill hair contributed considerably to the comedy. I felt a laugh coming on but easily strangled it. Slick looked disappointed. Then he stuck two yellow pencils up his nose, his impression of a walrus. I felt a major laugh inflating inside me. Slick next imitated a walrus taking a dainty sip of tea. That almost got me, but the laugh exploded deep in my interior with a muffled *whump!* Suspicious, Olga Bonemarrow, in the next row, glared at me. Feeling as though I had suffered major internal injuries, I wiped some

WORDS **nuance** (nōō’āns’) *n.* a slight shade of difference
TO **copious** (kō’pē-es) *adj.* in great quantity; abundant
KNOW **malevolent** (mē-lēv’ō-lənt) *adj.* showing ill will; evil

tears from my eyes. Slick took this as an encouraging sign and pulled out all the stops. He was doing his duck-bill walrus daintily sipping tea while wiggling its ears when Miss Bindle turned to face the class.

He was doing his duck-bill walrus daintily sipping tea while wiggling its ears.

“Clifford!” she roared, hurtling down the aisle like a tiny, ancient, redheaded dreadnought.¹ Slick’s ears ceased to wiggle; the pencils in his nose quivered; a bit of inky drool dribbled from his gaping mouth. He clenched his eyes in preparation for a major-league snatching. Miss Bindle grabbed at his hair and headed off down the aisle, obviously expecting Slick to be firmly in tow. But Slick was still seated at his desk, eyes clenched, pencils up nose. Miss Bindle rushed back and made another pass at his hair, but again her hand slipped off. She snatched again and again, with even less effect. Apparently, it was the first time she had ever encountered bear-greased hair on one of her snatches.

All the while, Slick sat there numbly, the yellow pencils poking out of his nose and a terrible expression on his face. Maybe it was Slick’s expression that got to me, or maybe it was the way the teacher stared down at her greasy palms, her eyes full of rage and disgust and incomprehension. Whatever the trigger, it bypassed the fail-safe mechanism. My wild, booming laugh detonated like a bomb in the

frozen silence of the room. I could scarcely believe it was my own laugh. I hoped it might be Mort’s: only he might possibly be stupid enough to laugh in Miss Bindle’s math class. But no, the laugh, now diminishing from a roar into a sort of breathless squealing, was none other than my own. I had been betrayed by my weird sense of humor! By Clifford Slick and his bear grease! And yes, even by Miss Bindle! As I writhed in an agony of mirth, half hilarity and half terror, I could feel Miss Bindle’s stiletto² eyes piercing my living—for the moment—flesh. My stunned classmates failed to find my laughter infectious. He who laughed in Miss Bindle’s class laughed alone.

And then it happened. “Clifford! Pat!” snarled Miss Bindle. “Go to the office!” She pointed the way with a finger shiny with bear grease.

I left the classroom erect and dignified. Cliff went out the door sideways, doing his comical little vaudeville³ dance. It didn’t get a laugh.

After the principal, Mr. Wiggins, gave us his bored lecture on the importance of discipline in a learning environment, he ordered us back to class. As I was passing the entrance of the cloakroom, I heard strange sounds emanating from the far end. A quick glance revealed that it was Miss Bindle. At first I thought she was crying, possibly over the disappointment of failing to snatch Cliff’s and my hair. But no! She was laughing! Cackling, actually, quietly and to herself. It struck me that Miss Bindle had a weird sense of humor, too. ❖

1. **dreadnought** (drēd’nōt’): a heavily armed battleship.
2. **stiletto**: a small dagger with a slender blade.
3. **vaudeville** (vôd’vīl’): a stage performance made up of song-and-dance numbers and slapstick comedy.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

writhe (rīth) *v.* to twist or squirm
mirth (mûrth) *n.* merriment shown in the form of laughter

RESPONDING OPTIONS

FROM PERSONAL RESPONSE TO CRITICAL ANALYSIS

- REFLECT** 1. Did you find this selection funny? Why or why not?
- RETHINK** 2. What is the narrator's opinion of Miss Bindle?
Give evidence to support your answer.
Consider
- the two teaching methods he mentions
 - his own behavior
 - whether his perceptions of Miss Bindle have changed by the end of the selection
3. Use details from the selection to evaluate Miss Bindle as a teacher.
4. What do you think of Slick's behavior? Use pantomime to show what you think his behavior is like.
5. Could the events described in this selection occur in your classroom? Why or why not?
- RELATE** 6. The narrator seems to believe that modern teaching methods are more enjoyable but result in inferior learning. Do you agree with him? Do you feel that harsher discipline would improve students' performance? Explain your opinion.

ANOTHER PATHWAY

With another student, choose a section of "The Clown" that you would enjoy telling from Miss Bindle's point of view. Then rewrite that section in Miss Bindle's words. Don't forget about her "weird sense of humor," and feel free to exaggerate as McManus did. Tell your story to the class.


LITERARY CONCEPTS

McManus uses several methods to create **humor**, or make his writing funny. How does he use repetition in the third paragraph? What comical actions does he describe? What names of people and places add humor? What examples of exaggeration did you notice as you read?

CONCEPT REVIEW: Irony As you know, irony is a contrast between what is expected and what actually happens. Explain how the end of this selection is ironic and why the irony is amusing.

QUICKWRITES

1. Pretend that you are Miss Bindle and create an amusing rhyming **poem** about Clifford Slick.
2. Imagine other antics that Clifford Slick might perform in class. Write a brief **narrative** of new trouble he gets into. You may wish to include other characters, like Olga Bonemarrow.

 **PORTFOLIO** Save your writing. You may want to use it later as a springboard to a piece for your portfolio.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITIES

A caricature is a drawing of a person in which certain physical characteristics and mannerisms are exaggerated for the sake of humor. Using the descriptions in the selection, draw a **caricature** of Miss Bindle or Clifford Slick. If you have an art program on your computer, here is a chance to use it.



ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Media Watch a situation comedy or a standup comedian on television. Compare the ways in which humor is created on the television show with the techniques that McManus uses in "The Clown." Which methods work more easily in visual media, and which seem more appropriate for speaking or writing? Discuss your findings with the class.

WORDS TO KNOW



Review the Words to Know at the bottom of the selection pages. Decide which word is described in each riddle below, and write the answer on your paper.

1. Bullets, balls, and smart remarks can do this and come back at you!
2. I am a lot—maybe more than you need, like a great deal of homework.
3. Sticks and stones can break your bones, but I can hurt your feelings.
4. I can be money, praise, or a spanking; I'll make you do what I want!
5. Just a shade of me can make all the difference!
6. I'm more than naughty; I'm evil, and I wish you harm!
7. I'm what you might do if you laugh really hard or feel terrible pain.
8. Belly laughs, chuckles, howls, guffaws—these are all signs of me.
9. A girl in mythology is named for me; she really knew her own mind!
10. I'm making things happen.

PATRICK F. McMANUS

The humor and practical jokes that sustained the young Patrick McManus and his family through tragedy and hardship resurface in his humorous stories. McManus's father and stepfather died when he was young, and his family lost their first home to fire.

He claims that his entire family had a weird sense of humor. For example, his mother told him that after his birth in Sandpoint, Idaho, she paid the attending doctor in homemade preserves and canned vegetables.

When McManus was in the first grade, his mother taught in a rundown, one-room schoolhouse, and the family slept on beds in the back of



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the classroom. McManus attended the school where his mother taught until the eighth grade. He says that she flunked him in second grade. If it had not been for his love of reading about such heroes as Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, the author claims, "I might have run totally wild."

McManus began his writing career while attending college. He published his first book of humorous stories in 1978 and later was an editor for *Field and Stream* and *Outdoor Life* magazines.

OTHER WORKS *Real Ponies Don't Go Oink!*; *Kid Camping from Aaaaiii! to Zip*