

Nursery crimes: A tough egg to crack

Wordplay, genre and meta-fiction

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“Humpty had always sat on walls, it was his way.”
Jasper Fforde, *The Big over Easy*

Humperdinck (Humpty) Jehoshaphat Aloysius Stuyvesant van Dumpty “businessman, philanthropist, large egg”, is found dead at the bottom of his wall. “Was he pushed? Suicide? Accident?” In Jasper Fforde’s *The Big Over Easy* (2005) Detective Inspector Jack Spratt, a nursery rhyme character himself¹, Head of the underfunded Nursery Crime Division, and Sergeant Mary Mary (the... “Quite Contrary” one) are determined to crack the case.

This is the first novel of a series entitled *Nursery Crimes*. Wordplay is used here to blend two very different literary worlds. Phonetic similarity is given as a justified indicator of a connection at the semantic level, inextricably linking crime and (nursery) rhyme. In opposition to the asserted view which sees puns, and by extension rhymes, as destabilising meaning by denying “the meaningfulness of words and so call into question the genuineness of the linguistic currency on which the social order depends.”², Fforde is creating a world ordered and bound by pre-existing literature and riddled with crime. Fforde thus utilises the idiosyncratic logic of wordplay which usually undermines coherent meaning by turning it into a solid determining factor both in characterization and in promoting plot.

Wordplay is extensively used to uncover the clichés of the Crime Fiction genre while submitting it to the constraints generated by the irrevocable power of the rhyme. In this paper I would like to investigate the role of wordplay in the blending of genres of Crime Fiction and the Fairy Tale/Nursery Rhyme, focusing on the binding force akin to fate with which literary discourse is adorned in Fforde’s work, and the metafictional discussion this entails.

References

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- Westling, Donald (1980). *The Chances of Rhyme. Device and Modernity*, Berkeley, LA, Oxford, University of California Press.

¹ Jack Spratt’s character is the conflation of the nursery rhyme Jack Spratt (could eat no fat), Jack of *Jack and the Beanstalk* and the Cornish fairy tale *Jack the Giant Killer*.

² Sigurd Burckhardt, quoted in Donald Westling, *The Chances of Rhyme*, University of California Press, 1980, p. 56.