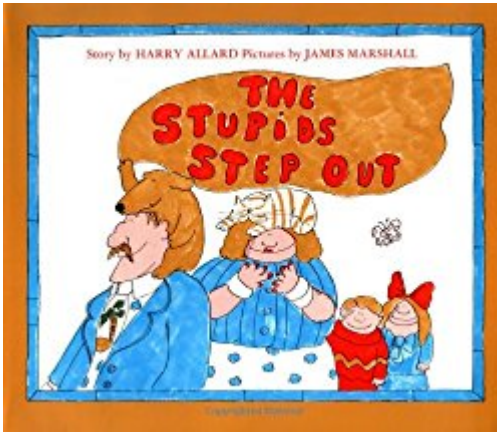


April Fools & Children's Stories

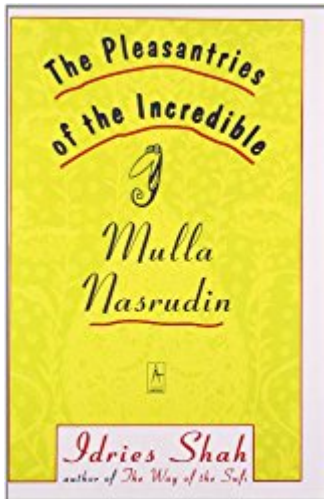


How kids appreciate moron jokes, stupid folks, and playing the dummy

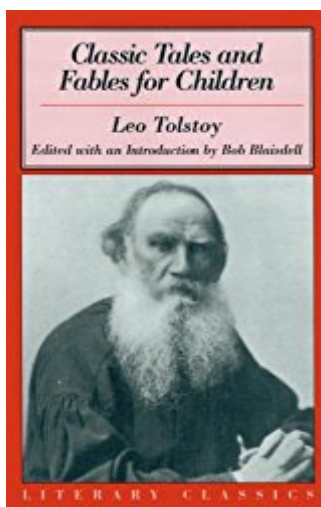


Moron jokes—“Why did the moron eat dynamite? So, his hair would grow out in bangs”—are staples of the very young. Adolescents like films in the “Dumb and Dumber” category which feature Pee-wee Herman, Beavis and Butthead, Happy Gilmore, the Simpsons and other dunderheads. What gives? How to explain the fascination of the young with stupidity and the empty-headed?

Laughter is certainly one of the pleasures evoked when parents read to their offspring about the moronic behavior of the Stupids in the series of picture books written by James Allard and illustrated by James Marshall. In the first of these ([*The Stupids Step Out*](#)), the Stupid family readies for their day’s travels by assembling at the bottom of the stairs and then mounting the bannister (they are stunned when they can’t slide up); they then join in the bathtub (but do not add water since this would get their clothes wet). As both the pictures and other incidents suggest, these characters *are* genuinely stupid; and stories like these offer a zany liberation from the humdrum of everyday behavior and logic.



Stupidity, however, can be a kind of wisdom in the folk tradition where the fool figure often has a conspicuous place. Among the best of these may be Nasrudin, the legendary wise fool of the Muslim tradition, whose stories have been collected in various books by Idries Shah. There is, for example, the story about the time Nasrudin opened a lecture agency and was asked by a group of people to send a wit to entertain them. Unable to quite accommodate their request, Nasrudin sent, instead, two half-wits.



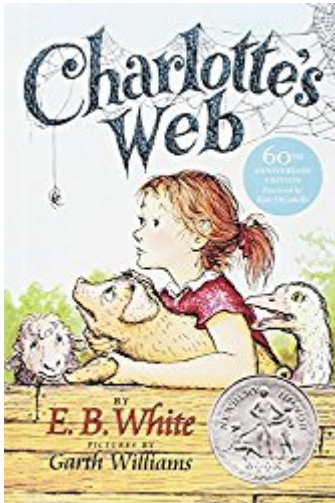
Very much like this folk figure is the dim-witted hero of Leo Tolstoy's [Ivan the Fool](#) who rules over a kingdom of fools. Ivan's subjects are so stupid that gold, for example, is just another metal used for trinkets; and when invading armies come and demand it, the inhabitants do not take up arms to defend themselves but simply give the silly stuff away. Indeed, Ivan and his neighbors are not "worldly wise," but their foolishness is a kind of higher wisdom. In this, Tolstoy, the Christian pietist, seems to have taken a cue from St. Paul: "If any one of you thinks himself wise, in

the ordinary sense of the word, then he must learn to be a fool before he can become truly wise.”

From Tibet to Africa, and places in between, many cultures have set aside a special place for fools. We may be most familiar with this from Shakespeare’s plays where court jesters appear, like the wise one who has a role in *King Lear*. And to all appearances, court fools had an enviable job since they could say what they liked with impunity and be pranksters without fear of reprisal. Protected by their special status, given room to act up, making acute but silly comments from the side of the stage, not taken very seriously—the fool, in many ways, resembles the child. Hence, the appeal of this figure to children: the fool is their cousin. Hence, too, the childhood business of “playing the fool.”



In the famous Grimm fairy tale, Gretel pretends to be a dunderhead when the plotting witch tells the little girl to climb in the oven to see whether it is hot enough. Gretel knows the witch plans to make an ogre’s meal of her, so the little girl claims not to know what to do. Exasperated, the witch—calling Gretel a “stupid goose”—demonstrates, and the clever girl pushes the witch in the oven, thereby freeing herself and brother Hansel from their evil captor.



In this and many another story where a child “plays dumb” to hoodwink adults, it’s difficult to miss the familiar and underlying point: grown-ups are easily fooled and manipulated because of their mistaken prejudice that kids are ignorant and not very clever. Things may seem altogether different in a book like E.B. White’s [Charlotte’s Web](#) where it is the animals (the “dumb” beasts) who are really smart and running the show, while humans (at least, the adults) are slow and easily conned. But don’t mistake who’s who: “Animal fables often present the almost universal attitude children adopt with grown-ups,” the famous psychologist Otto Rank observed. That attitude, Rank says, is “playing the fool.”

Originally appeared in Parents’ Choice (April 2006). I first wrote about this topic in “The Fool and the Child” in [“Sharing Literature with Children: A Thematic Anthology,”](#) ed. Francelia Butler. New York: David McKay/Longmans (1977), 153-155; rpt. Waveland Press (1989). In this anthology, Francelia Butler had a rabbi write about Jewish children’s literature, a Native American discuss North American Indian stories, and an East Asian Indian comment on tales from India. I leave without comment the observation that I was asked to write about the Fool.