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Made-up words in Winnie the Pooh and Harry Potter 'help children learn English'

Nonsense terms and made-up words used in books such as Winnie the Pooh and Harry Potter can help children to learn English, according to a Cambridge academic.

By Martin Beckford, Social Affairs Correspondent
Professor Maria Nikolajeva claims the unusual phrases and words teach children the expressive power of language, which aids the development of their own imaginations.

She also says that the puns, linguistic inventions and fantastical names given to characters and places in fiction also allow children to understand the symbolic meaning of words.

In her inaugural lecture as Professor of Education at the institution's Faculty of Education, she will tell her audience: "Children's authors should be aware of the power of language, its possibilities

and also the dangers it presents in terms of manipulating children.

"A lot of people presume that writing children's literature is relatively simple, but in fact it demands great sophistication.

"The creative employment of language in children's books gives the child the power of expression. By challenging the arbitrary rules of language, especially written language, children learn to be critically-thinking individuals."

To back up her claims, Prof Nikolajeva shows how many of the most popular children's books over the past 150 years are based on the imaginative use of language.

In Winnie-the-Pooh, for instance, she says much of the humour is based on problems with words. Being a bear of very little brain, Pooh cannot spell - he writes "hunny" instead of "honey" and he thinks an "ambush" is a type of plant.

The stories are said to show the advantage gained by those who can distinguish between real and made-up terms, such as Christopher Robin who teases Pooh and Piglet by claiming he met a "Heffalump". Owl, meanwhile, is treated with reverence because he can spell Tuesday.

In the Harry Potter series, Prof Nikolajeva said that mastery of language is linked to magic, because characters can gain power over the world by learning spells from ancient grimoires.

"It is in this respect interesting to consider the character of Hermione, who gets all her knowledge from books and who is the most proficient of the three friends in magic incantations," she said.

The tales also include invented words such as "Quidditch", a game played by young wizards on broomsticks, and "muggle", used to describe people who are not from the magical world.

The Dr Seuss books, meanwhile, are said to provide a "perfect training in verbal competence" through their tongue-

twisting rhymes and made-up animals.

Younger readers learn to put words and concepts together because each imaginary creature is accompanied in the books by a picture.

However Prof Nikolajeva adds that some children's books risk looking down on their audience by pointing out the limits of their understanding.

In Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, for instance, the young girl is mocked for not understanding words such as "antipathy" and "longitude" but their meanings are never explained either to her or to the reader.

Alice is "disempowered", the professor claims, because she finds herself in a world where she cannot understand the logic of communication

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Jackie Chan announces 100th movie

HONG KONG (AP) - Jackie Chan has celebrated a milestone with the announcement of his 100th movie project - a collaboration with "Rumble in the Bronx" director Stanley Tong.

The 55-year-old "Rush Hour" star said on his Web site he will co-direct the film tentatively called "Chinese Zodiac" with Tong, with shooting to take place in China, Austria and France. The brief statement seen Wednesday did not give further details.

Tong, whose credits include the TV series "Martial Law" and the comedy movie "Mr. Magoo," directed Chan in the 1995 action film "Rumble in the Bronx" and the 2005 fantasy "The Myth."

Chan's main spokesman, Solon So, said he wasn't immediately available for comment.

Chan's most recent release was the Chinese-language gangster thriller "Shinjuku Incident," in which he plays a Chinese immigrant who becomes a hit man for the Japanese mafia. His upcoming films are the Hollywood action comedy "The Spy Next Door," about an undercover Chinese spy whose cover is blown, and another Chinese production, "Big Soldier," reportedly about the friendship between two soldiers set in China's ancient Qin dynasty.



In this Feb. 25, 2009 file photo, Hong Kong action star Jackie Chan smiles during a press conference in Hong Kong. Jackie Chan, 55, has celebrated a milestone with the announcement of his 100th movie project - a collaboration with "Rumble in the Bronx" director Stanley Tong. The "Rush Hour" star said on his Web site he will co-direct the film tentatively called "Chinese Zodiac" with Tong, with shooting to take place in China, Austria and France. The brief statement seen Wednesday, April 29, 2009 did not give further detail. (AP)



HIP CHECK
Kim Kardashian goes on a bender while demonstrating fitness moves during a pre-taped appearance for New York's Morning Show with Mike and Juliet on Monday, where she promoted her new workout video, Kim Kardashian: Fit in Your Jeans by Friday. The reality star's fitness segment airs Wednesday.



FASHIONABLY FIERCE
Obsessed star Beyoncé Knowles turns the streets of Vienna, Austria, into a catwalk Tuesday as she heads out to do some shopping in a fashion-forward ensemble of J Brand jeans, YSL shoes and a Valentino bag. Knowles is in Europe for her "I AM..." world tour.



SAFE CROSSING
While Katie Holmes played host at the Independent Filmmaker's dinner in New York City, hubby Tom Cruise is on daddy duty, enjoying a stroll with 3-year-old daughter Suri in Beverly Hills on Monday.



'LE FILM' STAR
She's been exploring the city on her downtime - but Miley Cyrus knows when it's time to get to work! The Disney star (in D&G) says bonsoir to her fans at the premiere of Hannah Montana: The Movie Monday at Paris's Gaumont Marignan theater.



SIDE SHOW
Leaving her little girls at home, a glowing Jennifer Garner hits the red carpet (in a Rachel Roy dress and Neil Lane jewels) for the L.A. premiere of her new flick, Ghosts of Girlfriends Past at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood on Monday. The proud new mom to 3-month-old daughter Seraphina shared cell phone shots to pals on the red carpet, gushing, "She's so smiley!"



VIOLET FEMME
Showing off her sexy, slim figure, a dressed-up Megan Fox arrives at L.A.'s Shutters on the Beach hotel in Santa Monica to promote her action movie Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen on



THE BIG CHILL
Rihanna makes a perfect match with a young fan at the Reggae on the Hill festival Monday in Barbados's Farley Hill National Park. The R&B singer has been vacationing in her native country - and recently clocked some beach time with pal Katy Perry.