

## Irony as Liberation in the Stories of Louis Sachar

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I have been researching the topic of modernity, irony, and children's literature for about ten years. My interest has been in the ways that Western children's and YA literature have been changing, moving away from the secure world of classical writers like Milne, Lewis, and White and towards a world in which children and young adults sometimes know more than the hapless adults around them. The gap between the traditionally secure world of the child and the actuality shown by recent writers serves as one meaning of the word *irony*.

Irony has been the companion of modernity; wherever modernity makes its way, eliminating the non-scientific and installing the rational, irony has also made its home, mocking older institutions and beliefs. I like to think of modernity and its companion irony in terms of the cage Max Weber invoked as an image of the modernity that creates the over-determined lives of the inhabitants of developed countries. While modernity is the cage itself, irony is the consciousness of better possibilities that might liberate the spirit from the cage.

An example of how this works can be found in a scene from the first of the Harry Potter series, the scene in which Harry is dragged along to Dudley's birthday outing at the zoo. The Dursleys take Harry along unwillingly and so Harry is witness to his uncle's persistent tapping on the window of the reptile cage to get the boa constrictor to move for his pampered, indifferent son.

Harry approaches the cage when his uncle has finally given up his efforts, and an empathetic exchange occurs between the suddenly responsive snake and the neglected boy. The nature of the exchange is ironic, I want to emphasize here, and that irony marks the approaching escape of the snake from its cage and of Harry from the tedious world of the Dursleys: "The snake jerked its head towards Uncle Vernon and Dudley, then raised its eyes to the ceiling. It gave Harry a look that said quite plainly: 'I get that all the time.'" (25) The empathy between the snake and the boy works a magic that dissolves the front glass of the cage, liberating the snake and providing a prophetic metaphor for Harry's own upcoming liberation from the world of the Dursleys.

The Dursleys, and Rowling's "Muggles" in general, serve well as illustrations of the cogs-within-a-wheel that Max Weber described as the passive workers in a rationalized system. Ritzer (2011) provides us with a sketch of what Weber meant by his "iron cage" metaphor:

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Despite the advantages it offers, bureaucracy suffers from the irrationality of rationality. Like a fast-food restaurant, a bureaucracy can be a dehumanizing place in which to work and by which to be served. Ronald Takaki characterizes rationalized settings as places in which the “self was placed in confinement, its emotions controlled, and its spirit subdued.” In other words, they are settings in which people cannot always behave as human beings—where people are dehumanized. (26)

Weber’s original description of the iron cage of modernity comes near the end of his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber’s thesis is that the Reformation created a new work ethic, fueled by the fears and hopes concomitant with the doctrine of predestination. Withholding his own judgement on the matter, Weber explains how the religious spirit of Puritanism which urged upon the individual the *proper performance of duty* has fled the iron cage which continues to confine him in his work nonetheless:

the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfillment of calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand need not be felt simply as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempt to justify at all ... . No one knows who might live in this cage in the future . . . . (182)

Weber is equally famous for his use of the word *disenchantment* as an effect of modernity. Patrick Curry (2008) suggests that it was Weber “who was responsible for introducing the idea of ‘the disenchantment of the world’ into modern discourse” (99). Curry sees Weber’s description of this disenchantment as “crucial”:

. . . the unity of the primitive image of the world, in which everything was concrete magic, has tended to split into rational cognition and mastery of nature, on the one hand, and into ‘mystic’ experiences, on the other. (100)

Rowling’s work establishes a dualistic world in which Muggles are satisfied with the rationalized, bureaucrat world they inhabit, while the world Harry inherits from his parents is an enchanted world of magic.

While Rowling’s worlds exist along parallel lines that rarely intersect, other writers for children and young adults attempt an escape from the iron cage of rationalized bureaucracy via the tool of irony. This paper will examine the work of children’s book writer Louis Sachar and show how the protagonists in his books escape the tedium of overdetermined bureaucracy through irony. The

irrational cage of adult supervision is left behind through an irony that deflates the power held by adults. This paper will also suggest that irony used in the manner of Sachar can be a tool for the re-enchantment of the child's world.

Curry takes some pains to fully describe what enchantment meant for Tolkien; it is pertinent to the main thrust of this paper that Curry sees Weber and Tolkien as fundamentally similar in their association of *iron* as signifying a debased world: in Weber's case, the iron cage that the rationalization of modernity has created; in Tolkien's the departure of the Elves from a more pastoral world to an Iron Age associated with modernity.

One interesting aspect of Curry's paper on Tolkien and enchantment lies in his identification of the *lyric* as one element in the world of enchantment. He quotes Jan Zwicky's (1992) *Lyric Philosophy* to the effect that

Lyric coherence is not like the unity of systematic structures: its foundation is a heightened experience of detail, rather than the transcendence (excision) of detail. (108: 120)

As we shall see below in our examination of Sachar's ironic re-enchantment of the elementary school classroom, a "heightened experience of detail" is an essential part of his technique.

My idea that irony offers a way to the re-enchantment of the child's world derives in part from the positive definition of irony and the ironist developed by the philosopher Richard Rorty in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). I have explicated the unusual significance of irony for Rorty in a previous paper (2007):

Rorty describes the "ironist" as a person who doubts the ultimate validity of the "final vocabulary" which he/she has acquired by growing up in a certain locality where values are quite fixed. The ironist suspects that there are other vocabularies equally as valid as the one he/she acquired in the process of growing up. (74)

In other words, Rorty sees irony as an invitation to spiritual and intellectual growth, as a chance to develop beyond the boundaries of what the *local* has instilled in us. The opposite of irony, he maintains, is common sense, in the manner of the Muggles' satisfaction with their daily lives, never wishing for anything more "stimulating." Common sense, Rorty tells us, "is the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated" (74). Irony provides the invitation to remove oneself from this commonsensical world, the very "iron cage" of overdetermined values.

Thus Rorty sees in irony a key to intellectual growth, a positive force in personal development. This is very different from other commentators on how Western society has, as Michael Roth (1995)

puts it, “become a culture of irony” (148). “People and institutions with power are often as ironic about themselves as their critics are about them,” he suggests. Far from having any positive influence, “the ironist undermines our ability to take his or her object seriously” (74).

Like many philosophical commentators upon the rise of irony as a result of the failure of Western metaphysics, Roth links Weber’s cage with that failure: “Heidegger’s description of the history of Western metaphysics as a slippery slope on which we fell away from a memory of Being hooks in well with the Weberian description of the iron cage” (155). Falling away from “a memory of Being” is tantamount to the disenchantment which both Weber and Tolkien describe and lament.

Before proceeding to an examination of Sachar’s stories and suggesting that he takes the positive cast of Rorty’s “ironist” several steps further, we need to look at a clarification of the idea of enchantment vs. magic reported by Curry in examining the essays of Tolkien;

he suggested that ‘magic’ should be reserved for the exercise of power and domination, using the will, in order to bring about changes in the ‘Primary World’. Whether the means employed are material or spiritual is ultimately a secondary consideration. Sauron is “the Lord of magic *and* machines.” (*Letters*, 146) in Curry 100).

Enchantment, on the other hand, “produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter.” Curry reports that it is “artistic in desire and purpose,” and that its purpose is “the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder” (OFS 49–50, 18). Putting the matter simply, Curry sums up like this: “the hallmark of magic is *will*, whereas that of enchantment is *wonder*” (100).

Several of these elements will prove useful in discussing the ways in which Sachar constructs his stories in *Sideways Stories from Wayside School* (1978), a collection of thirty stories about the children enrolled in a very unusual elementary school with thirty classrooms stacked on top of each other rather than in a more accessible way.

The very first story, “Mrs. Gorf,” is about a teacher with a reputation for being “the meanest teacher in Wayside School” (3). She uses her magical power to punish students and turn them into apples. By the end of the story there are twenty-four apples on Mrs. Gorf’s desk and she is glad to be able to go home. “I don’t have to teach any more,” she murmurs to herself, “I won’t have to walk up thirty flights of stairs ever again” (6).

Not only has she taken advantage of the powers associated with her job as well as those derived from her magic; she has no desire to teach to begin with, a fact that puts her in that desolate cage of Weber’s, a place where “the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs” (182).

Things do not go as easily for her as she imagines, though; the apples revolt and jump on her,

forcing her to turn them back into children. When they head for the door to report her, she starts her magic up again, intending to turn them back into apples. The children hold up a mirror, turning her magic back upon her, and the mean teacher herself is turned into an apple.

Louis, the yard teacher, who has worried about Mrs. Gorf's children because of her reputation as a mean teacher, comes into the room and finds only the children and a single apple on the teacher's desk. Last time he looked in there were twenty four, and in an ironic act of misinterpretation he decided that his fears were groundless, as so many children had brought Mrs. Gorf an apple. Now, as he looks at the single apple on her desk, he feels hungry and decides "I don't think Mrs. Gorf would mind if I ate this apple. After all, she has so many" (6). The irony of Louis's misinterpretation liberates the children from the terror of Mrs. Gorf's regime.

And what replaces Mrs. Gorf is the reign of irony itself. The teacher who replaces her, is introduced as having "a terribly nice face" (7). The ironic note is repeated in the description of the children's anticipation of the new teacher:

They were afraid of what their new teacher would be like.

They had heard she'd be a terribly nice teacher. They had never had a nice teacher. They were terribly afraid of nice teachers. (7)

The verbal irony plays out on the edge of the educational bureaucracy whose power Mrs. Gorf had used so relentlessly. Mrs. Jewls, the new teacher, refuses at first to enter into the relationship of power and discipline that marks the norm at the school:

She was also afraid. She was afraid of the children. She had heard that they would be horribly cute children. She had never taught cute children. She was horribly afraid of cute children. (8)

The irony of "terribly nice" and "horribly cute" maintains an anticipatory distance between teacher and students, and the gate of possibility is left wide open as to how the lessons will start. Louis had delivered the children from tyranny with his ironic consumption of Mrs. Gorf, and irony will keep them free a bit longer as Mrs. Jewls decides "they were much too cute to be children" and declares that she has before her a class of monkeys, as only monkeys could be *so* cute. She explains her confusion:

"Please don't get me wrong. I have nothing against monkeys.

It is just that I was expecting children. I like monkeys. I really do. Why, I'm sure we can play all kinds of monkey games." (8)

The children do their best to convince her that they are not monkeys, only to be offered bananas

and peanuts. When one of the pupils finally convinces Mrs Jewels that they are children and not monkeys, the bureaucratic cage descends again as the teacher declares, “We will have a test now.” One boy confesses to another, “Do you know something? I liked it better when we were monkeys.”

Mrs. Jewels hears him talking out of turn and scolds him. Then she writes his name on the board under the word DISCIPLINE. The iron cage of bureaucracy has descended again, but the ironic hiatus has left its stamp. Mrs. Jewels will continue to work both sides of the line: she will be the unreasonable tyrant who adds names to the list of pupils to be disciplined, but she will also sustain the irony that returns to the class regularly, fostering a realm of enchantment.

Irony marks the very next story in the series of stories, each of which bears the name of one of the pupils. “Joe” presents a confrontation between Mrs. Jewels as representative of school learning, and Joe, a boy whose knowledge comes from experience.

The dialogue starts when Mrs. Jewels asks Joe to tell her exactly how much hair he has. “A lot” and “Enough to cover my head” are his reasonable answers, but Mrs. Jewels, one of whose responsibilities is mathematics, wants to be exact. She knows that Joe cannot count, and sets out to teach him.

Joe’s problem is that he can always get the right answer, but his way of counting is wrong. Mrs. Jewels forces him to count properly, which leads him to get the wrong answer every time.

The ironic situation is peppered with even more ironic exchange between them. The exasperated Mrs. Jewels finally tells Joe not to worry, that one day he will wake up and find that he can count. That leads him to ask, “If all I have to do is wake up, what am I going to school for?” The irony is dense when Mrs. Jewels replies, “School just speeds things up” (15). When Joe wakes up the next morning, he suddenly knows how to count and takes on the job of counting the hair on his head. While the story reports that he has around fifty-five thousand hairs, it ends with an ironic note that again muffles the pedagogic thrust for accuracy: “They were all curly” (15).

In the next story, “Sharie,” Mrs. Jewels is back in the ironic camp as she makes statements about a girl who only stares out the window and sleeps in class. We read that “Mrs. Jewels said that a lot of people learn best when they stare out a window” (16) and that “She said that a lot of people do their best learning when they are asleep” (17).

It is due to this ironic dispensation that the story is marked by enchantment. Restless in her sleep at the open window, Sharie falls out, but her sleep is hardly disturbed as she plunges down thirty stories. She briefly wakes up ten stories down, but just feels confused and goes back to sleep. Louis, the yard teacher, catches her and is given a tongue-in-cheek scolding by the girl for waking her up. Wayside School is an enchanted place where girls can fall out windows and suffer not even the slightest of bruises.

But in the next story Mrs. Jewels is back in the bureaucratic saddle, counting the behavioral infractions of each pupil without looking carefully or thinking logically. Todd, the most serious boy in the class, is repeatedly punished for what is really good behavior. Although he talks only to defend

himself from more aggressive pupils, Mrs. Jewls is never observant enough to notice what is going on:

Todd really tried to be good. He knew that if he talked one more time Mrs. Jewls would circle his name. Then he'd have to go home early, at twelve o'clock, on the kindergarten bus, just as he had the day before and the day before that. In fact, there hadn't been a day since Mrs. Jewls took over the class that she didn't send Todd home early. She said she did it for his own good. (21)

Todd is the first of a number of remarkable children whose wisdom and sense of duty surpass the corresponding qualities in their teachers. Mrs. Gorf, as we have seen, had no interest in teaching, and Mrs. Jewls is crippled by her blind adherence to a reign of mistaken discipline. The children in question, on the other hand—Todd, Myron, and Alicia—exhibit a keen sense of duty and generosity, as if denizens of a world prior to the one into which Weber's iron cage of modernity has descended, crippling the performance of duty; as Weber puts it in words quoted above, "the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs" (182).

When Todd is pestered by the girl behind him to tell what page he has reached in the assignment, he tells her, "It isn't a race" (20). When robbers appear in the classroom and want to extort money from the kids Todd tells them, when asked if they don't have anything valuable, "We sure do . . . We have knowledge .. Knowledge is more valuable than money" (22). The robbers are moved by his words and leave the classroom peacefully, but Mrs. Jewls remains much the same. She circles Todd's name for talking a little later, and once again Todd is on the way home on the kindergarten bus.

The chapter on "Myron" presents a case much like Todd's. Myron is elected class president. When he asks Mrs. Jewls what being a president involves, she gives an answer that is hopelessly superficial: "You must turn the lights on every morning and turn them off at the end of the day" (31). Myron doubts that this could really be all that a president is expected to do.

On his way home he witnesses an accident: a classmate's dog has been hit by a car. Myron carries the injured dog two miles to the vet and then walks home himself. He is never thanked for what he does, but he hardly minds. "He thought that was what being class president was all about" (33). The next morning Myron is late for school because he goes to check on the dog first. When he arrives at school it is completely dark. The teacher has not started the class because the president is not there to turn on the light. The situation is absurd, and it is characteristic of the way that bureaucracy often works, demanding the performance of the trivial while ignoring real service and achievement.

Mrs. Jewls declares that Stephen will be president. The story concludes with an ironic note: "Myron, who was president for only a day, was the best president in the history of Wayside School. It was just that nobody knew it" (34).

The last child in this group of duty-bound children is Allison. Behind a façade of toughness, Allison is generous to a fault. She gives the cafeteria supervisor her tangerine; she lends the librarian her

book; she gives the playground teacher her ball and she helps Mrs. Jewls with spelling. When Mrs. Jewls, impressed with Allison's knowledge, suggests that Allison has learned the secret that students are cleverer than teachers, Allison denies that it is a secret at all: "Everybody knows that," she replies (81).

It should be clear at this point what Sachar achieves in his ironic stories about Wayside School. Just as Rorty's ironist uses irony to question his/her final vocabulary, Sachar's wise children live in a world compromised by the iron cage of bureaucracy but liberated through irony; they can and do return to a state of innocence and behave as if the iron cage had never descended at all.

Louis the yard teacher is, of course, Sachar himself, and in the Introduction as well as in the last chapter assigned to Louis, he does his best to enlarge the final vocabularies of both his charges and his readers by emphasizing the relativity of one's point of view. In the Introduction, he addresses the readers, who might feel that the stories about Wayside School are unlikely:

It has been said that these stories are strange and silly. That is probably true. However, when I told stories about you to the children at Wayside, They thought you were strange and silly. That is probably also true. (2)

In the last chapter of the book, Louis attempts to tell his charges that there are schools where every classroom is on the same floor, and where enchantment is not the norm:

They don't trade names or read upside-down. They can't turn mosquito bites into numbers. They don't count the hairs on their heads. The walls don't laugh, and two plus two always equals four. (117)

"How horrible!" is the reaction of one child who cannot imagine such an unenchanted world. Mrs. Jewls tries to reassure the children with her comment: "Louis, it was a very entertaining story. But we really don't go in for fairy tales here. I'm trying to teach my class the truth" (118).

Sachar's book shows us the constructive uses of irony; the iron cage of bureaucracy cannot withstand the force of irony. As a very perceptive graduate student put it, in discussing the positive value of the book,

What is more important for children may be, rather than fantasizing about ideal teachers or friends, to learn to *find something positive in ironic realities*, to be able to take bitter comments on them from their classmates as jokes, to shrug off depressed feelings when teachers blame them when actually they are not blameworthy. (Etsuko Machida, Nagoya Gakuin University Graduate School, December 2012)



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