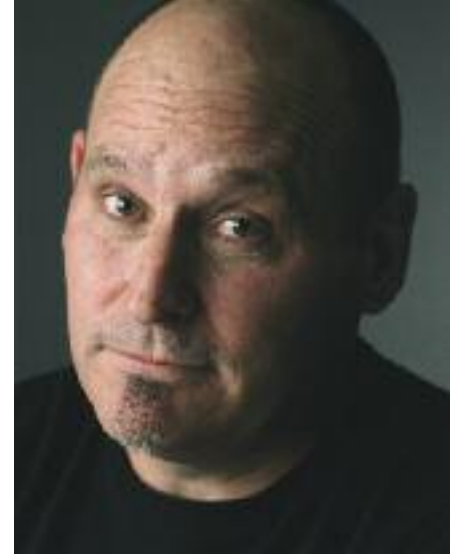


Jon Scieska

Best of Six! Jon Scieska at Large

During the winter of 1999, *Carousel* talked with Jon Scieska about his funny, 'subversive' children's picture books created with illustrations by Lane Smith - *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*, *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* and *Squids Will Be Squids* - a sort of Aesop with Attitude. Fifteen years later we caught up with him again on a promotional tour of the UK and found the same vibrant raconteur, with the delivery of a stand-up comic and an unbounded relish for a good story.

Young, and not so young, audiences in Birmingham Library and Bath Children's Literature Festival latched on immediately to this gentle, friendly man who was ever-ready to break into a warm smile. He shared with them his life story, beginning in Michigan in 1954 explaining that SHCHEH-shka which phonetically resembles Scieska, is the Polish word for path. He was the second oldest - and nicest! - of six boys. His mother was a nurse and his dad an elementary school principal. School photographs, showing each youngster wearing the same 'best' jacket, drew hoots of laughter, and everyone was off on a whirlwind, rollercoaster ride of fun. He transferred to Culver Military Academy for secondary education where he thought about becoming a doctor and studied both Science and English before graduating in 1976. Finally deciding that Medicine was not for him, he moved to New York to study for a Masters degree in Fiction Writing at Columbia University. He enjoyed the challenges there and appreciated especially the creative skills demonstrated by the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, alongside the more practical advice from the *New Yorker* magazine editors.



Earning a living from writing was difficult. Odd jobs like painting and decorating were erratic so he successfully applied for a teaching post in an elementary school. Here he found his readers. He rediscovered how smart young people can be when he shared with them the weird and funny stories he'd always liked to read and write himself. With support from his wife, Jeri, and in partnership with the illustrator, Lane Smith, he produced a first innovative picture book, *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs*. Narrated by A.Wolf in hard-boiled Dashiell Hammett style, it made everyone laugh. From this beginning Jon Scieska stories have sold over eleven million copies all around the world.

He stressed that inspiration for many of these books came from the imaginative wrestling games he and his brothers devised as children and the many strange things that happened to them while growing up. Each of the six Scieska boys had to find their own strategy for gaining individual attention and Jon's way was to crack jokes and tell raucous stories around the dinner table.

But it was as a father, and whilst teaching, that he became a nationally recognised reading advocate. It all came about after a conversation with his eight-year-old son who had been given *Little House on the Prairie* to read in school. "I asked, 'How is it going?' He turned to me and said, 'Are you kidding me! Is anything ever going to happen?' That sent him the message that if classic, dense fiction was reading, then he wasn't going to be a reader. At the same time I recognised that boys in my class were not reading for pleasure, so I founded *Guys Read*, a web-based literacy project whose mission is 'to help boys become self-motivated, lifelong readers.' It brings attention to the issue, promotes the expansion of what we call 'reading' to include materials like comic books and encourages grown men to be literacy role models."



Young budding scientists

In 2008 he was named as the first *National Ambassador for Young People's Literature* by the Library of Congress. This is the equivalent award to our British Children's Laureate. The job entailed raising awareness of the importance of books and stories as they relate to lifelong literacy. For Jon, this translated into travelling to schools and libraries far and wide. He also put in appearances at book related conferences to speak about engaging young people in reading through choice;



Illustrator Brian Biggs

to discuss an expanded definition of reading, to encourage positive role models and, finally, to embrace new technologies. He enjoyed every moment of his period in office and joked that, although hard work, it did get him out of paying parking fines!

Descriptions of Jon's preschool series, *Trucktown*, where all the characters are crazy, wild vehicles, evoked many giggles but it was Brian Biggs's fabulous, two-tone illustrations from *Frank Einstein and the Antimatter Motor* that captured everyone's attention – both children and adults. This is Jon's latest publication and links brilliant storytelling with real science. Frank Einstein is an inquisitive, schoolboy genius who loves to observe, hypothesise and invent unusual contraptions that are part-science and part-imagination. He enjoys working out how the world works and has free access to his Granpa Al's garage-cum-laboratory where there is a mass of Fixit Shop junk to plunder. With support from his friend, Watson, he has created two robots: Klink is a self-assembled, artificial-intelligent entity and Klank a mostly-self-assembled, artificial-almost-intelligent entity. Working altogether they create an Antimatter Motor using solid, liquid and gas. They feel confident that this presentation will win the Midfield Science Prize and help to save Granpa's livelihood. But will they be thwarted by arch enemy, T.Edison and his sidekick, Mr.Chimp? A very, very funny story that integrates entertainment with education, slapstick comedy with science and boisterous with brainy.

Over lunch Jon stressed, "This is not a jazzed-up textbook. I just threw the kitchen sink in!" He continued, "The great crime writer, Elmore Leonard, once explained his writing by simply saying he just skips over the boring bits. I've always felt science should be like that for children. We make them slog through everything. Every youngster who ever signed up for an astronomy class signed up thinking stars were cool and then got five weeks of mathematical calculations! I wanted to lay

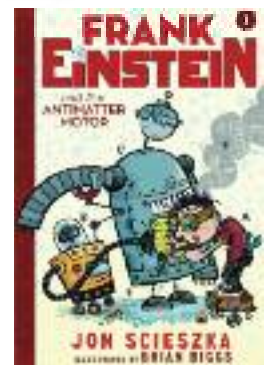
out all the fun science bits, even if it often makes no practical sense."

There was a firm undertow of unforced seriousness in author Jon Scieszka's voice now. Shrewdly considered thoughts have underscored the text in this story that will open young minds to a world of science and definitely encourage young readers – both boys and girls – to think and read for pleasure.

Jenny and David Blanch



Who's in disguise?



Frank Einstein and the Antimatter Motor
Amulet/Abrams £6.99 ISBN: 978-1419715068

Frank Einstein and the Electrofinger
Amulet/Abrams £6.99 ISBN: 978-1419716669