

Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania
North University Centre of Baia Mare
Faculty of Humanities; The Department of Philology and Cultural Studies

4th International Conference on Children and Young Adults' Literature

Nonsense and the Absurd in Children's and YA Literature

(<https://litere.cunbm.utcluj.ro/kidlit/>)

21-24 May, 2026
Baia Mare, Romania

Keynote speakers:

Michael Heyman, Berklee College of Music, Boston, Massachusetts

Bootheina Majoul, ISLT, University of Carthage, Tunis

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Children's and young adult (CAYA) literature has long embraced elements of nonsense and absurdity, weaving them into stories that challenge logic, subvert norms, and broaden imaginative boundaries. From Lewis Carroll's surreal wordplay to the zany plots of modern graphic novels, nonsense and the absurd are not just for entertainment but also serve as powerful tools for exploring deeper themes of identity, authority, and meaning. Defined as "a genre of narrative literature which balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning¹," nonsense plays with the "rules of language, logic, prosody and representation, or a combination of these," referring back to "a sense that itself cannot be assumed²."

Nonsense literature depends on illogical sequences, invented language, and fantastical events that challenge real-world expectations. However,

¹ Tigges, Wim. *An Anatomy of Nonsense*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988, p.47

² Stewart, Susan. *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U Press 1978, 1979, p.4



nonsense and fantasy are two distinct categories³. Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) remains the classic example, where Alice's journey through a world of talking animals, riddles without solutions, and conflicting rules forces readers to question the rigidity of language and logic. Edward Lear, another pioneer, used whimsical verse in works like "The Owl and the Pussycat" to create cheerful confusion and celebrate the unpredictability of imagination.

Language as a means of communication can be the very source of countless misunderstandings. Meaning is "so vague, insubstantial, and elusive that it is impossible to come to any clear, concrete, or tangible conclusions about it."⁴ In a well-known passage from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Humpty Dumpty comes up with a surprising idea, i.e., the meanings carried by words may be affected by a speaker's will. "*'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'*" Obviously, we will take Alice's side and agree that words carry meanings that are independent of the will of their users, but we cannot entirely dismiss Humpty Dumpty's remark. Speaker meaning and sentence meaning are two different things, and they invite various interpretations.

Music can also be used in connection with the category of nonsense. Let us not forget that the earliest known lullaby was written on clay about 5000 years ago in Babylon. It depicts house gods and how a crying baby disturbs them. Some other lullabies warn that children will be eaten by hyenas if they keep crying (in Kenya). Others, however, have no logical sense. For example, in Romania, we sing a song about a snail that should go to the Danube and drink muddy water. These are old forms of folklore that have lost their original meanings and reasoning. The same is true for other types of folklore, ranging from trickster stories to bedtime stories with strange characters and adventures, humorous legends, mocking verses, limericks, fables, and funny stories, many of which include elements of absurdity, nonsense, puns, and comic twists. Sometimes, the boundaries of what adults call 'reality' and 'rationality' are shattered, and the story becomes deconstructed, lacking clear character portrayals or any consistent, chronological plot.

³ As far as Michael Heyman is concerned, "talking animals and spell-casting wizards are fantasy - not nonsense. If a nonsense story happens to have talking animals (thereby making it a nonsense fantasy), these animals are not what make it nonsense." (On Fantasy and Nonsense.

<https://www.nonsenseliterature.com/nonsense-resources/definitions-of-nonsense-literature/>)

⁴ Hurford, J. R., Brendan Heasley, and Michael B. Smith. *Semantics. A Coursebook*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.



Children love absurd tales; they are less constrained by concepts such as 'reality', the 'possible', the 'probable', their minds moving more freely in time and space. From the very beginning, from the way they learn how to speak, they use a de-structured type of approach to communication, they are used to jumping from one thought to another or making surprising associations of ideas, they are perfectly content to speak to objects and consider them their friends, they appreciate stories that make them laugh, or present images that show them a world upside down, be they strange, wild, nonsensical or even absurd.

In a way, literature for children does not necessarily mean literature that is written in a certain manner, but a manner of reading literature that is preferred by children. However, this does not exclude the adults. For children, teens, and even adults, encountering the absurd can be liberating. It allows for creative exploration without the usual, rigid constraints of realism. Laughter and surprise help people cope with fear, disappointment, or the perceived limitations of their reality. As Heyman states, "we not only laugh at the absurd creations within the text, but also at our own imaginations' courageous attempts to grapple with them, and, most significantly, at our inability to escape our fundamental nature as meaning-making machines."⁵

From Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll to Sidney H. Sime and Joseph Holbrooke, from the Avantgarde poets like Urmuz and Grigore Cugler to Dr. Seuss, or *The Tomfoolery Show*, from Ionesco "silly stories" and Flan O'Brien to Roald Dahl, Bob Dylan and "Weird Al" Iankovic, a plethora of authors wrote nonsense and absurd stories, which were either addressed to children from the beginning, or liked by children especially. The field of absurd and nonsense stories is vast, especially as the carnivalesque quality of such literature exists in all cultures, from Native America to India, from Romania to Kenya, from North to South, and from East to West.

The absurd and/or nonsense we invite you to investigate can be the result of a multitude of factors, from various circumstances or contexts in which characters are placed by their authors to the dialogues in which they engage.

The organizers of this conference intend to offer the framework for many scholars from many academic walks to come together and speak about stories that have elements of the absurd or nonsense in their cultures, or to show the aesthetic, social, psychological, artistic, or philosophical value of such stories.

The participants can address such themes as:

⁵ Heyman, Michael. "How to Juggle: An Introduction" in *This Book Makes No Sense: Nonsense Poems and Worse*. Scholastic, 2012.



- Roots of the nonsense in children's literature;
- The literary and artistic avantgarde in nonsense forms of literature for children;
- Cultural/ethnic definitions and differences between nonsense and the absurd in children's stories;
- The counter-cultural quality of nonsense and the absurd in the literature for children and YA;
- The absurd and nonsense in picture books, comics and graphic novels;
- Translating the nonsense in children's and YA stories;
- Philosophical references and implications of the absurd and nonsense;
- Educational values of reading nonsense poetry and stories to children;
- Social commentaries and political insights of the absurd drama and stories for children;
- Popular culture for children and YA that is based on nonsense and the absurd (video games, anime, etc.);
- Pragmatic interpretations of nonsense/absurd discourse;
- Elements of nonsense and the absurd expressed in music.

Presentations will take place in the period 21-23 May, and on the 24th a trip will be offered to Maramureș, villages in the mountains.

Participation fees:

- The conference fee is **€150**, except for Romanian, Ukrainian, and Albanian participants for whom the conference fee is 200 lei (€40).
- The fee for the trip is **€75**.

The fee will cover participation, printed program, coffee breaks and lunch, and publication of selected papers.

Important dates:

The **submission form** (name and surname, scientific title, institutional affiliation, title of the paper, abstract (no longer than 400 words), 5-8 keywords) is to be filled in and sent (check the site of the conference: <https://litere.cunbm.utcluj.ro/kidlit/>) no later than **December 20, 2025**. The abstracts will be assessed by the scientific committee of the conference. They can be written in Romanian, French, or English. An official answer regarding the acceptance or rejection of your proposals will be sent by **January 10, 2026**.