



THE FUNNIEST BOY IN THE WORLD is Helen's third novel. Helen's first book, THE BOY WHO MADE EVERYONE LAUGH, was one of the bestselling debuts of 2020, and shortlisted for the Costa Children's Book Award, the Blue Peter Best Story Book, the Branford Boase Award, among many other prizes. Her second book, THE BOY WHOSE WISHES CAME TRUE, was chosen as a Sunday Times and Times Children's Book of the Week. Helen lives just outside Sheffield and has worked as an actress for many years. The idea for her stories starring Billy Plimpton came from her son, Lenny, who has a stammer: she wanted to write a book that he would love to read, starring a child like him.

@HelenRutterUK

OTHER BOOKS BY HELEN RUTTER

The Boy Who Made Everyone Laugh

The Boy Whose Wishes Came True

THE FUNNIEST BOY IN THE WORLD

Helen Rutter

 SCHOLASTIC



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*To the sixty seventh Rob.
The funniest boy in my world.*





CHAPTER 1

What happened when the tiger ate the comedian?

He felt funny.

I close my eyes and I'm right there again, looking out at all the laughing faces; people are cheering, shouting my name, tears streaming down their cheeks. I can feel the velvet curtains and hear the rustle of sweet packets and the applause. The applause was the best part. The part that made my head go buzzy and my face go numb and my hands get pins and needles. That's what I want again. APPLAUSE. It's like I NEED it. Everyone needs air and water to live – I also need laughter.

I dream about the end-of-term talent show at least



once a week, even though it was months ago now. I always feel amazing the morning after one of those dreams. I get up whistling and don't even try and wind my little sister Chloe up at breakfast by building a wall of cereal boxes between us and telling her ponies are evil.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the talent show dream last night. Therefore, the wall of cereal was firmly in place at breakfast, in spite of Chloe's moaning on the other side of the Weetabix.

Last night's dream was bad: it was about the baby again. This time the baby was massive and chasing me through a dark forest with a dummy in its mouth.

The baby's not even here yet, and it's already annoying. It makes Mum cry all the time. I walked into the living room yesterday and she was blubbing over a property programme. How two couples choosing a really expensive house can make you cry, I don't know.

"Sorry, love, I'm hormonal – it's the baby," she said, patting her massive bump, as if that explained it all. That's what she says every time she cries or shouts or has a massive laughing fit and nearly pees her pants.

"It's the baby."

She's at it again now. I'm helping her paint the





baby's room and I can see the tears rolling down her cheeks as we put yet another coat of yellow paint on the walls. Who knows what set her off this time?

The only reason I'm helping is because she said she would give me a fiver, and I knew she'd cry if I said no. It started off quite fun; we played really loud music and she let me paint my name on the wall. Then I did a mural of us all, but when I painted Mum I did her as a massive beach ball with a tiny head. I thought it was funny, but she got annoyed and turned the music down. Now we're on our third coat and there's no music at all. It's really boring and a fiver is not worth it.

I could be earning my own money if Mum and Dad would just let me do some comedy gigs. I could be famous by now. I could have bought them the stupid yellow paint and even paid a decorator to put it on the walls. They don't understand that I should be building my comedy career, not covering my face in splashes of "Pantofle Yellow".

"Pantofle" is a stupid name for paint, if you ask me. When Mum and Dad were choosing the colour, all the paints had ridiculous names like "Baboon's Breath" and "Pale Dog" – who comes up with these things? Baboon's breath is obviously see-through like





anyone else's breath, although apparently, according to the fancy paint company, it is paler than "Shrew's Breath" – yet another daft colour. What kind of pale dog are they talking about? It makes no sense. "Pale Brown Dog" I would understand but just "Pale Dog" is meaningless.


I asked Mum what a Pantofle was, and she didn't know so I googled it. It's a slipper, for goodness' sake, and not even a yellow slipper. I think the paint people are having a laugh, seeing what they can get away with. Like when Harry Wilson put the word anchovy in his English homework five times to see if the teacher would notice. They didn't. He got a smiley face stamp and two green ticks, which makes me wonder if any of the teachers ever read any of our homework.

I wrote a list of the most stupid paint names I could find and stuck it up on my pinboard. Here are my current top three:

STUPID PAINT NAMES


1. Cabbage Brown. Last time I checked, cabbage definitely *was not brown*. Unless it's gone bad. Who would want a rotten vegetable on their walls?




- 
2. Dead Cod. I sincerely hope that no fish were harmed in the making of this paint.
 3. Barbara's Blushes. Who is Barbara, and what on earth has she done?

Another splash of paint flicks off the brush and hits my nose. This is such a waste of time. I should be performing, not painting!

After the talent show and the news interview, I was offered loads of stuff: gigs in real-life comedy clubs and slots on TV and everything, but before I could say yes, Mum and Dad insisted we all “discuss this properly”.



I always know it's going to be bad when they say we have to discuss something properly. It means they're definitely going to say no, we just have to talk about it a lot first. The time they wouldn't let me have a telly in my room; the time I was not allowed to go to Laser Quest with Alex because it was in a “dodgy” bit of town; the time I HAD to do our “traditional” Easter egg hunt with Chloe instead of just getting cash from the Easter Bunny. All of those were “discussed properly” first and the answer was no for every single one.



The discussion about my gigs went the same way.





“We have talked about this, Billy, but as it’s still your first year of secondary school, we think you should focus on that. You can’t miss school for interviews or be staying up late for gigs, it’s not sensible.”

“B-B-B-Being a comedian *isn’t* sensible, though, is it? The clue’s in the n-n-name, Mum ... comedian. As in, someone who makes people laugh, n-n-not someone who is sensible.”

“You are a twelve-year-old schoolboy, Billy. Not a comedian.”

“I’m a twelve-year-old schoolboy *comedian!* That’s my hook, my USP, my thing. That’s why those journalists and gig bookers want me! I need to strike now, b-b-build my brand.”


“Well, you can ‘build your brand’ all you like in the summer holidays. Until then, you are an ordinary schoolboy.”

“B-B-But—”

“That’s the end of it, Billy. We are not getting into one of your debates over this. We love that you have found your confidence. You can do all the school plays and talent shows at Bannerdale that you want. The other stuff will have to wait. It’s only a few months.”


My parents didn’t get it. They thought that






prancing around the stage in the drama club summer show is the same as being a comedian, but it's not. As if I would be seen dead doing a stupid dance routine from *Grease!* I wanted more than school shows. I wanted to be a proper comedian on a real stage.

I couldn't change their mind, though. I've spent a few boring months waiting – but finally my summer of real-life comedy is nearly here. And I'm going to start it with a bang. In just under two weeks, I'm going to do my first proper stand-up gig.



It all started when I walked past the King's Head last week on my way back from seeing Mrs Gibbens, an old lady I visit at her care home. I'd never really noticed the pub before, apart from having to step around people smoking outside or bottles on the pavement. Someone was up a ladder, putting up a huge sign. People say you need to look out for signs in life to tell you what to do. Well, this was an actual sign!



COMEDY NIGHT

First Friday of every month.



I emailed them straight away. I told them that I don't even need to be paid; I'm happy to do it for free until I'm famous. I need the practice. I got an email back the same night, offering me an "open spot". I looked it up. An open spot means doing a short stand-up slot for free.

They had watched the clips that I'd sent from the talent show and the news interview and said they would love for me to come and perform! Apparently, kids aren't allowed in the pub after nine p.m., though, so I am going onstage first and then will go straight home. I also have to be with an adult so Dad's taking me. There's no way that Mum would come. She's usually in bed by nine anyway: "It's the baby."

At first Mum and Dad, of course, said no.

"There is no way you are hanging around in that grotty pub, Billy."

But I was not going to let them get away with ruining my comedy career for a second longer. I knew that this gig was the best way to start my summer of stand-up. Besides, we break up for the holidays in a month so they can't use the education excuse any more. I wrote the best persuasive letter that I could:



Dear Mum and Dad,

As you know, it has long been my dream to be a professional stand-up comedian. I have put in the work, dedication and commitment that I believe it takes to make it. I have risen to the challenges and dealt with the turmoil of standing onstage with a stammer. You helped me get to where I am today, but now is the time to let me spread my wings and fly into the world of comedy.

The gig is on Friday night -- NOT a school night. I will be finished by nine p.m., so I will lose no sleep and it will not impact on my schooling. Also -- Dad, you will get a night out at the pub!

It will be a great way to start my summer of flexing my muscles in the comedy world, it will build my confidence, and if you don't let me, I will be miserable and impossible to live with -- FOR EVER.

So please, please, please, please,

*please, please, please, please, please,
please, please, please, with a cherry
on top, say yes.*

*I love you so much,
your gorgeous, cute, inspiring,
amazing and hilarious son*


Obviously they then said yes! I can't wait. The crowd, the laughter, the applause: it will all be mine!

A blob of paint drips from my brush on to my bare foot, bringing me back to reality. Mum sighs, puts her brush down and waddles out of the room for her fifth wee in the last hour – I'm counting. Apparently, as well as turning you into an emotional wreck, babies also make you wee your pants.

I look into the mirror, which is leaning against the cot, and go back to imagining my first gig of the summer. I lift the paintbrush towards my mouth.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen. G-G-Good evening, everyone. Please welcome to the stage the one and only, the best – the only – schoolboy comedian the world has ever seen ... B-B-Billy Plimpton!”

I close my eyes. The crowded room is full and the audience is hanging on my every word. Tears of joy stream down faces; people hold their sides, they are



laughing so hard; they chant my name. I need to be escorted from the pub by bouncers to protect me from my adoring fans, their hands stretching out to reach me.

I have read the email about a thousand times. I know it off by heart. It said that the room seats up to a hundred people (that's a lot of people!). I have to do exactly ten minutes and they will flash a light at me to tell me when I have one minute left. I've been practising my set every day. It's exactly ten minutes long. All my favourite jokes are in there and a couple of impressions too. Here are my current top three jokes:



TOP THREE JOKES



1. When someone tells me to stop acting like a flamingo, that's when I put my foot down.
2. Why do birds have feathers? To cover up their butt quack.
3. I said to my PE teacher, "Can you teach me to do the splits?" He said, "How flexible are you?" I said, "I can't do Tuesdays."

I've never actually been inside the King's Head pub before, so I have to do a lot of imagining. There is

a chance that in my head the stage is fancier, the audience is bigger and the laughter is louder. I *could* be slightly exaggerating what will actually be a pretty ordinary pub. But you never know, there *could* be adoring fans.

This gig *could* make me famous – couldn't it?