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Opening extract from  
**If You Could See  
Laughter**

Written by  
**Mandy Coe**

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MANDY COE  
*If You Could See Laughter*

MANDY COE is an award-winning poet and artist. She has published six books including three collections of poetry for adults and one for children. Her work has been featured on BBC television and radio and she reads at literature events across the UK.

As a freelance writer, Mandy works with community groups and inner-city schools. Her guide to the work of writers in schools *Our thoughts are bees* (co-written with Jean Sprackland) was described by Andrew Motion as 'inspiring, enlightening and far-reaching'.

Mandy Coe's first collection *Pinning the Tail on the Donkey* was shortlisted for the Aldeburgh First Collection Prize. Her poetry for children is anthologised by Macmillan, Oxford University Press and Bloomsbury. Mandy is a Hawthornden Fellow.

Also by Mandy Coe

POETRY FOR ADULTS

*Pinning the Tail on the Donkey* (Spike 2000)  
*The Weight of Cows* (Shoestring Press 2004)  
*Clay* (Shoestring Press 2009)

NON-FICTION

*Our thoughts are bees: Writers Working with  
Schools* (Wordplay Press 2005)

GRAPHIC NOVEL

*Red Shoes* (Good Stuff Press 1997)

MANDY  
COE

*If You Could  
See Laughter*

*Illustrated by Mandy Coe*



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*For Frank and Doris Childs  
who made our childhood shine ...*

*... and for all the children and teachers  
who share their poems with me.*

*'Day by day I float my paper boats one by one  
down the running stream.  
In big black letters I write my name on them and the name  
of the village where I live.'*  
—RABINDRANATH TAGORE



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*If You Could See Laughter*

ADVICE FOR . . .

PONIES

let the pictures flow  
what do you see?  
taste every sound  
    neat?  
    tidy?  
    no  
look at apples  
without saying apple  
be brave  
thoughts can interrupt thinking  
run fast  
learn to stand still

POETS

dream of a land without fences  
never show anyone how high you can really jump  
accept kindness softly  
between the stars and each sweet blade of grass  
lie secrets that sound like grasshoppers  
let frost make your breath white  
know that you are the creator of all rhythms found  
    between stillness  
and the rare moments you run so fast  
you no longer touch the ground

MANDY COE

SEASHELL

Have you seen it? A pink-tinted  
coil of air . . . about  
so big?

At one end can be heard  
the open roar of sea, the other  
narrows to silence and infinity.  
In between is nothing,

shaped like a ringlet  
or honeysuckle twine, and  
(before the orange grip  
of oyster-catcher's beak)  
it was the exact shape of me.

Have you seen that coil of air  
where my soft self should be?

*If You Could See Laughter*

## FELT FUNNY ALL DAY

There was a man  
who left his house in such a rush  
he shut the front door on his shadow.

The shadow knocked, the shadow called  
though its knuckles made no noise  
and its voice stirred no air.

The man walked for a while  
but his footsteps sounded loud.  
He sat on a bench

but the bench felt hard.  
He read his newspaper,  
but the words seemed to dance.

The man scratched his head  
wondering what  
he had forgotten.

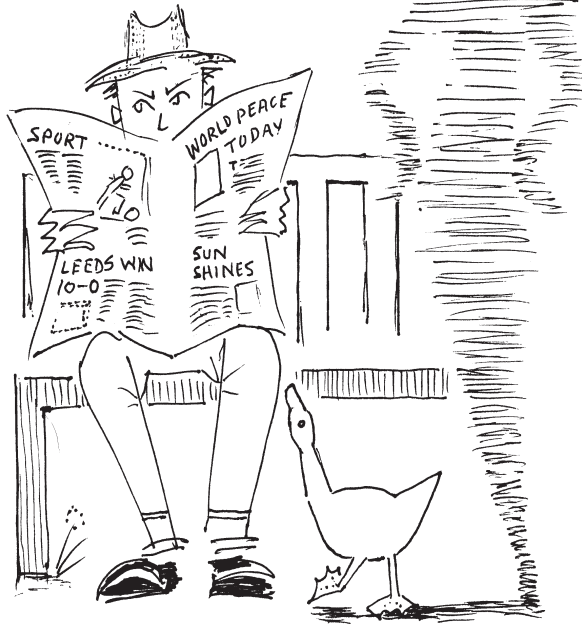
At home the shadow  
zigzagged itself on the stairs,  
flattened itself against the window.



MANDY COE

In the end it hung itself on the hat-stand,  
neat as an ironed shirt. *I've felt funny all day,*  
said the man as he let himself in.

He hung up his hat, tapped his chest  
with his fist and burped:  
*must have been indigestion.*



*If You Could See Laughter*

‘FLOWERS GO TO SCHOOL  
UNDERGROUND’

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Flowers beneath snow,  
inside the earth,  
within the seed.

Flowers in honeycomb,  
girls’ names,  
the scented foam of soap.

Flowers in the thread,  
a swift needle’s tip,  
the dancing swirl of skirt.

Flowers in the paint,  
the bristles of the brush,  
hummingbird dreams.

Flowers in fireworks,  
deep in flowerpots, flowers  
humming to the bees.

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## MOORHEN

She is the clown of all waterfowl,  
stubby and black,  
plastic yellow feet, bright red nose.  
The eggs — her treasures — are carefully  
raised from dog-brown water  
on a flimsy throne of twigs.

Her partner honks a warning  
at reeds, rats, ripples, sky.  
Through park railings  
a toddler drops a fistful of white bread.

The eggs are alive with tiny vibrations.  
Like nightfall, black feathers  
settle and still them.

*If You Could See Laughter*

RAW

We always tiptoe up to rhubarb  
and braving the prick of leaves,  
kneel in muck  
bending the angled stem  
until the glassy *snap*.

Something draws us to it,  
the sly creak of its shine,  
the rawness  
that strips spit, making our teeth  
feel coated and sharp.

We push out tongues  
in gargoyle astonishment,  
let half-chewed dollops drop  
between our feet. How could the sweet  
pink of rhubarb and custard come from this?

Behind splintered sheds  
where old men tip rumbling wheelbarrows,  
we prepare to bite into onion.

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## RECIPE FOR GOOD NEWS

I want to make news  
the way a baker bakes a cake,  
because the news I'd bake  
won't make grandma's smile  
turn upside-down  
while she sighs at the radio:  
*What's the world coming to?*

I want to make news  
the way a baker bakes a cake,  
because the news I'd bake  
won't make mum bang shirts with the iron  
while shouting at the telly:  
*Tell the truth for once why don't you!*

I want to make news  
the way a baker bakes a cake,  
because the news I'd make  
will have everyone cheering  
for dark red cherries and chocolate icing.

My news will be so good  
we'll gather round to share it,  
lick the crumbs off our fingers.

*If You Could See Laughter*

## IF YOU COULD SEE LAUGHTER

Hey, it is blue! No, surely red  
— the colour of each breath  
pumped out by the joy of running  
or the jumpstart of a joke.

Tickle-breath is long and spiral.  
Pink  
I think.

If you could see laughter  
it would look like balloons,  
the sort magicians knot in squeaky twists.  
Laugh a giraffe, guffaw a poodle.

A belly-laugh creates balloons that float,  
at the pantomime, the air of the theatre  
jostles with colour.  
See this baby reaching for your smile?  
A yellow hiccup of laughter pops out,  
bobs above us for days.

We could rise off the ground with laughter,  
tie strings on it and sail around the world.

MANDY COE

## TOO YOUNG TO KNOW

In town the shutters stay closed.  
We sleep with our clothes on.  
The hall is full of bags.  
Everyone goes quiet  
when an aeroplane passes.

Uncle's shop is empty.  
No warm smells of seedcake,  
no queuing women to ruffle my hair.

From my bed I hear my family talking,  
but when I dare to ask, when I dare  
to touch my mother's hand and ask,  
she says I am too young to understand.

Even the dog senses something,  
creeping under the table, tail held low.  
I hug his neck and whisper into his soft ear,  
*What is to happen?* He licks my cheek.

*If You Could See Laughter*

## ONE PAIR A YEAR

And as they wear out  
you tie string around the toes  
as if to silence a flapping mouth.  
Line them with paper: headlines, local news.

You try to walk even, walk light.  
Hammering nails into heels  
you click and clack.  
Every day you slip them off to save them,  
side by side on the porch step,  
in the shadow of a chair.  
All dancing is done with bare feet.

Stones bruise, jute cuts,  
it hurts you — or wears out the shoes.  
Your decision, each journey,  
each time you rise from chair or bed.  
You walk to work, shoes bumping your chest,  
the laces biting the back of your neck.



MANDY COE

## THANK YOU

Danke, merci, gracias  
for the heat of the sun,  
the kindness of teaching,  
the smell of fresh bread.

Diolch, nkosi, shur-nur-ah-gah-lem  
for the sound of sand,  
children singing,  
the book and the pen.

Dhannyabad, blagodaria, hvala  
for the blue of small flowers,  
the bobbing seal's head,  
the taste of clean water.

Shukran gazillan, yakoke, nandi  
for the stripe of the zebra,  
the song of the chaffinch,  
the gentleness of snails.

Mh goi, abarka, mille grazie  
for the length of time,  
the loveliness of eyelashes,  
the arc of the ball.

*If You Could See Laughter*

Dziekuje, bhala hove, shakkran  
for the excitement of falling,  
the stillness of night,  
my heart beating, thank you.



MANDY COE

## FROG

The frog has neatly folded legs.  
Jaw of bulldog,  
pond-skinned, up-eyed. This frog  
has a double chin that throbs:  
*frog*, he sings, *frog*.

Now he fans his toes and leaps  
into a ring of ripples.  
He grew himself, this frog,  
from a black dot  
in a see-through blob.

He measures time  
in tongue-lengths and hops,  
this damsel fly: gone!  
Only a blink-of-an-eye gulp revealing  
what occurs between verses of his song.

*If You Could See Laughter*

## ROW FLOW BLOW

*For Matt Simpson*

an old man in a boat asked me  
asked me how to go  
I know, I said, I know  
row, you've got to row  
*row, flow, blow*  
*row, flow, blow*

the tides of the sea they asked me  
asked me how to go  
I know, I said, I know  
flow, you've got to flow  
*row, flow, blow*  
*row, flow, blow*

The wind behind the sails asked me  
asked me how to go  
I know, I said, I know  
blow, you've got to blow  
*row, flow, blow*  
*row, flow, blow*

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## SENSING MOTHER

Dad keeps Mum's favourite dress  
deep in the bottom of the ottoman.  
Sometimes, when he is at work  
I stand listening to the tick of the clock  
then go upstairs.

And propping up the squeaky wooden lid,  
I dig through layers  
of rough, winter blankets  
feeling for that touch of silk.  
The blue whisper of it, cool  
against my cheek.

Other times, the school-test times,  
and dad-gets-home-too-late  
to-say-goodnight times —  
I wrap the arms of the dress around me,  
breathing in a smell, faint as dried flowers.

I remember how she twirled around  
— like a swirl of sky.

*If You Could See Laughter*

When I am old enough I will wear it.  
Pulling up the white zip,  
I'll laugh and spin,  
calling out to *my* daughter:  
*How do I look?*

MANDY COE

## SUN LOVES MOON

**Monday, small ads:**

Hey Moonie-La, meet me at dawn S x

**Tuesday, text:**

c u l8r :-)?

**Wednesday, diary extract:**

I will never EVER call her again.

**Thursday, voicemail:**

Hi M, it's me. Did you get the flowers?  
Sorry about the chocolates,  
I put them in my pocket and they got . . . runny.  
Listen — is there any chance of us meeting?  
Please, *please* call me.

**Friday, graffiti:**

*Sun ♥ Moon*

*If You Could See Laughter*

**Saturday, singing telegram:**

*Greetings Miss, I love your face.*

*Please stop this eternal chase.*

*Will you be mine and let me shine?*

*My palest, roundest, Valentine.*

**Sunday, invitation:**

*Engagement party! Bring a friend. RSVP*