

## Fifth Grader Smart

When I was a kid the game show *Are You Smarter Than A Fifth-grader* had been a pretty big thing. The entire premise was simple yet compelling; a bunch of grown-ups go up on air in front of millions of viewers, try and fail to answer a bunch of elementary level questions, and inevitably make a fool of themselves while doing so. All the kids loved it. It was empowering. Some schmuck adult could try to order you around like usual, and finally, you could roll your eyes and purse your lips. You could bet that fool didn't even know how many sides a hexagon had.

Because as it turned out, not many people were smarter than a fifth-grader. Only two people have ever won the \$1,000,000 prize: Kathy Cox, superintendent of public schools for the U.S. state of Georgia; and George Smoot, winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Physics and professor at the University of California. In other words, only two people could officially claim their superiority over ten years olds, and they were already so far beyond normal that they didn't even count.

In any case, the game show was a big eye-opener for me. I had realized that adults were stupider than I thought.

Now, I was only a third grader, but I played *Are You Smarter Than A Fifth-grader* all the time online, and I was pretty good at the game. Plus, I knew a few fifth-graders, and so I was sure; I was definitely smarter than a fifth-grader. And if I was smarter than a fifth-grader, that meant I was smarter than most people.

There were still people I thought were smarter than me, of course. I had a special place in my heart for my third-grade teacher, Mrs. Moore.

Mrs. Moore wasn't a very strict woman, but she had her traditions. Every day we'd get a sheet of paper with a long list of phrases on it. Each person would have to say one of the phrases out loud. When it was your turn to speak, Mrs. Moore would make sure to lean in real close to you, ears perked. Pandemonium would be released should you dare mispronounce a single one of her precious proverbs.

As per usual, it was completely silent in the classroom, save for the kid whose turn it was to speak. Mrs. Moore was looming over the boy ominously. Everyone's head was bowed towards the paper as if it contained the meaning of life.

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away." He said.

At this point, I glanced up, a smirk on my face. "Why?" I threw out for the heck of it. "Do you throw them at them?"

Not even a second had passed before Mrs. Moore burst into laughter. It wasn't the "Haha okay.", kind of laughter either. It was a full-blown slap-the-desk cackle. She laughed so hard and so long that the sound began to venture into mad scientist territory. Maniacally she clawed at her cheeks, trying with violence to force herself to stop. Her face was dyed in red, her body was trembling, and her eyelids were quivering.

I stared, utterly astounded. Now, I wasn't the funniest kid, but I was a smart one, and I knew what a good joke was. A good joke was "Why was six afraid of seven?". It was clever, sophisticated, and expertly said.

"Do you throw them at them?" Was not a good joke. Certainly, it wasn't good enough to make a person convulse where they sat.

When she finally finished, she was a panting, slobbering mess. She shook her head at me before gesturing for the next kid to say their phrase. They did so cautiously as if she could snap again at any moment.

By the time she reached me, Mrs. Moore the Mad Clown was gone, having reverted back to the woman I thought I knew. I said my phrase, and the class moved on. For some reason, no-one said anything about the psychotic laughter. Maybe the rest of the class, like me, was afraid to ask.

The mystery of the crazy laugh plagued me for the next couple of years. I habitually analyzed the details of the scene every few months, only to come out just as puzzled as before. The truth actually only came to me as I was sitting on my couch one day, thinking about nothing in particular.

Mrs. Moore had thought I was serious! She thought that I thought that people really threw apples at doctors for sport. Finally, it all made sense. She wasn't laughing at the joke, she was laughing at my idiocy.

The realization flipped my worldview. There I was, secure in my superiority as someone who was smarter than a fifth-grader, but Mrs. Moore came smashing down on my assumptions with her hammer of But You Seem Stupid To Me.

Sure, I was intelligent, but did being intelligent matter if people thought you were dumb? Doubt boggled me for all of a minute before it registered: if people thought of me as dumb, I could at least take some reassurance that the feeling was mutual. The difference was that while I was only thought as stupid, they actually were.

And honestly, that was the only lesson I could get behind. Because otherwise, who was I? What was I? Just another idiot dancing on the edge of a rigged stage like an

ant without wings, making a fool out of myself in front of a world that continued its mad  
laughter?