

'Jester' defied odds to become grass-roots phenomenon

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Sometimes a chuckle gets through despite a thick gloom. And sometimes a story gets published and captures readers despite expert advice to the contrary.

The publishing history of "The Jester Has Lost His Jingle" (The Jester Co., \$20 hardcover), written by David Saltzman before his death from Hodgkin's disease in 1990, curiously parallels the story it tells — overcoming the odds with laughter and love:

"So when you're feeling lonely, or sad, or bad, or blue, remember where laughter's hiding. . . . It's hiding inside of you!"

The tale tells of a medieval jester banished from a kingdom

because no one could laugh anymore. His exile fast-forwards him and his sidekick, Pharley (or side-stick, for Pharley is a piece of wood), to the grumbly present, searching for the missing laughter.

Saltzman's parents promised him his book — a senior project at Yale — would be published and that it would be given free to children diagnosed with cancer.

But mainline publishers weren't interested, according to Barbara Saltzman, a former Los Angeles Times editor. It was too long and written in verse. So she and her husband, Joe Saltzman, a journalism professor at the University of Southern California, borrowed against their house and published it themselves. And promoted it themselves. They sent it to renowned children's book author Maurice Sendak, who offered an afterword for the book. And it began to take off.

"Against all odds, 'The Jester Has Lost His Jingle' has become a grass-roots phenomenon," says Barbara Saltzman. "Since its release in late 1995, it has sold nearly 250,000 copies, reaching

the best-seller lists of the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, USA Today and Publishers Weekly — major achievements for a children's picture book from a new press."

She adds that nearly 30,000 copies of the book have been donated to children with cancer and special needs.

The author himself recalls in a note published at the end of the book that his Jester character pulled him out of his grief after his fatal diagnosis:

"He literally walked over to me, put his hand on my shoulder and with a concerned look said: 'David, how come you're not laughing? Your cries sound just like laughs, so why not laugh instead of cry?'"

"He came to help me in my time of need, and my hope is that, if you let him, he will come alive within these pages and help you, too."

The Saltzmans also have produced tie-ins to the book, including a 21-inch Jester & Pharley doll set (\$25) and the set with the book (\$50). For information or orders, call (888) 9-JESTER.