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GRIM FAIRY TALES AND GORY STORIES

Children will always be drawn to violence. . . . What we should try to do is steer children away from sterile trash and toward the creative violence we find in works of art. . . .

There has been a mounting crusade against violence lately—violence on the streets and in the subway, violence in hockey, violence in the media. The issue is a relatively clear-cut one. Who in his right mind could possibly condone violence? Recently, however, there has been an outcry against a form of violence in which the issues are most definitely not so clearly defined—violence in children's literature. Within the last few weeks strong objections have been raised against a picture book used in some schools in which a man called Mr. Miacca lies in wait for bad boys, catches them and then proceeds to dine off their various limbs; and also against two reading texts, *Thrust* and *Focus*, used in junior high schools in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke.

Librarians are getting into the act too. Last week I called my local library (one of the largest and newest in Toronto) to ask if they had a certain picture book based on an Australian aboriginal legend. The librarian supplied me with the title I wanted plus a piece of gratuitous information—namely that the book is "frightening," "disturbing," "menacing," "tasteless." This "frightening" book was, incidentally, unobtainable for well over two weeks. Some child somewhere was obviously having a whale of a time with it.

Could it be that things haven't changed much since those far-off days in 1945 when a librarian of the New York public library refused to give shelf room to E.B. White's *Stuart Little*, having decided that the statement that Stuart Little was born "looking very much like a mouse" would prove too traumatic for the tender sensibilities of Manhattan children? Or when librarians reacted negatively to Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* on the grounds that it would produce similar traumas? This prompted one reviewer to remark, "Boys and girls may have to shield their parents from this book. Parents are very easily frightened."

If we wish to eliminate violence from children's literature, we must eliminate by far the greatest part of children's literature. If we are to give the boot to

Mr. Miacca, then we must immediately purge our libraries of the English folklorist and anthologist Joseph Jacobs from whose famous and well-loved book, *English Folk and Fairy Tales*, Mr. Miacca was reprinted. But of course we can't stop there. The aptly named Brothers Grimm must go, as must most of Andrew Lang's fairy books and a large number of Greek and Roman myths. While we are at it, we should severely censor the Osborne collection of early children's books. Many of the books in this famed collection contain tales of sheer terror, both physical and mental, which could have curdled the minds of previous generations of children—and, who knows, probably did. In fact, all fairy tales and myths and legends—Italian, Japanese, Danish, Celtic, Slavic, Asian, Australian, Arabic, Yiddish, French—must be done away with.

I spent an afternoon in the library recently and I was hard put to find a classic children's story without violence. Within the space of a couple of hours I found the following foul deeds described in minute and exquisite detail: victims were flayed alive, buried alive, scalded; they had their throats slit, their bodies dismembered, their mouths stuffed with red-hot embers; they were thrust into ovens, into vats of burning oil, cauldrons of boiling water, tubs of bubbling pitch; parents abandoned their luckless offspring in burning deserts and raging blizzards, ate them alive and dead (after cooking them, that is), committed incest with them, poisoned them, tore out their hearts, their tongues, their nails, gouged out their eyes. Hills opened up and swallowed children whole; horned witches made cakes with blood drawn from sleeping families; monstrous spiders, sea monsters, werewolves, ghosts and goblins leapt out from every page. And this, believe me, is just a partial list.

Why, then, are these stories read? Why have they endured, some for thousands of years, and why do they continue to enchant and fascinate children and adults of all ages? Two stories, one true, the other fiction, describe but do not explain this fascination for and attraction to violence. The true story is told by a British psychoanalyst, Anthony Storr, and it concerns a five-year-old girl who burst into tears at the point in one of the stories in Andrew Lang's *Brown Fairy Book* when a rescue ship appears on the horizon just as the boy-hero is about to be tossed into a cask of bubbling black pitch. The mother, trying to comfort her, assured the little girl that the hero gets saved in time. "But I want him to be thrown into the pitch," sobbed the child. The second story is told by the English short story writer, Saki. Called "Toys of Peace," it is about "enlightened" parents who buy their children a model of a city hall with figures of aldermen, doctors, et cetera, instead of a fort with soldiers and guns. Hours later they come upon their children playing with absorption. They have transformed the city hall into a fort, the aldermen into soldiers, and are having a great time with their "toys of peace."

The truth of the matter is that violence in children's literature is neither good nor bad in itself. There is an enormous qualitative difference, for example, in the experience of a child watching a TV program about a man who has slit the throats of his many wives and hung up their corpses in a locked closet and that same small child curled up in an armchair reading *Bluebeard*. What is the nature of this difference? In the former case the violence is vulgar and exploitative. It heightens fear and tensions; it creates anxieties. In the latter case the violence is what I call creative violence. Far from heightening fear and tensions, it alleviates them; far from creating anxieties, it helps resolve them. I mean the violence that has surrounded man since his beginnings—death, decay, and destruction.

Children's inner fantasy lives, like our own, are rampant with sexuality and aggression. Adults usually manage to subdue these forces. Children are far less able to. Creative violence provides an imaginative embodiment of those fears and tensions, a channel through which subconscious desires can find relief. This is why, instinctively, children will always be drawn to violence. We cannot and should not try to legislate it out of existence. What we should try to do is steer children away from sterile trash and toward the creative violence we find in works of art in which the chaotic fantasies of the child's mind can be given an order, a shape, a structure.

That librarian I spoke to did not understand what every primitive society recognizes—the importance of acting out in a ritualized art form the anxieties, mysteries, ambiguities, and perplexities which every human being carries within himself. Thus the corroborees, the Australian tribal ceremonies in which an awesome or overwhelming event is acted out in controlled ritual; thus the myths and fairy tales which find their counterpart in every culture in every time. This is why a Mr. Miacca who eats children alive is a familiar and even a reassuring figure. He appears over and over again in myths and fairy tales. His forebear is Cronus who ate his newly born sons for fear they would supplant him. A closer counterpart is the stepmother in *The Juniper Tree* who stewed her stepson and served him to the boy's father who smacked his lips over this tasty meal and exclaimed, "How truly delicious." *The Juniper Tree*, it should be noted, was one of Pamela Travers' favourite childhood stories. It didn't seem to do her too much damage—she grew up to write *Mary Poppins*.

The recurring motif of cannibalism, of being eaten and of eating, is a common fantasy among children. They are, in fact, eaten up many times in the course of an average day—by a smothering mother, an oppressive teacher, an insensitive father, or a rival sibling—and it is folly to assume that the little darlings aren't itching to return the favour. It is the aesthetic embodiment of these secret and unacceptable fantasies which enables the child to free himself from them.

Uncreative violence, on the other hand, vulgarizes these fantasies. Making no demands on the creative imagination, it exploits when it should explore and it throws back to the child, without the refining filter of art, the unadged rawness of his emotions. It is not the demons, the hobgoblins, the hideous unnamed horrors of the dark forest or the bestiality of man which hurt a child's mind. As C.S. Lewis has expressed it, "The dangerous fantasy is always superficially realistic." Thus it is badly written tripe we have to beware of, the relentless vulgarity of, for example, TV sitcoms.

As for the recent fuss over the two school readers, *Trust* and *Focus* (their names must have been thought up by either a very dense editor or else one with a surpassing sense of irony for they have as much thrust and focus as a couple of limp dandelions), compared to what goes on in a Grimm Fairy Tale, the so-called violent stories read like a mild version of Goody Two-Shoes. What is hideous and unforgivable and infinitely more dangerous and corrupting is the numbing mediocrity which they offer. They are also so hopelessly old-fashioned, Midwestern, small-town American that you can positively smell the stale apple pie when you open the covers. I cannot imagine either book being tolerated in any major city school in the United States.

If parents and educators are going to protest against books such as these, and if they are going to present briefs before royal commissions, then let them do these things for the right reasons. It is the dissemination of mediocrity and vulgarity that does the real violence to the minds of children. May those who are responsible for those two wretched and unutterably silly reading texts being foisted on the poor unsuspecting children of Ontario be gobbled up, in the best tradition of fairy tales, by good old Mr. Miacca. They richly deserve it.

ESSAYS

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PERSPECTIVES

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