# HORRID WARNINGS:

## VIOLENCE IN FAIRY TALES

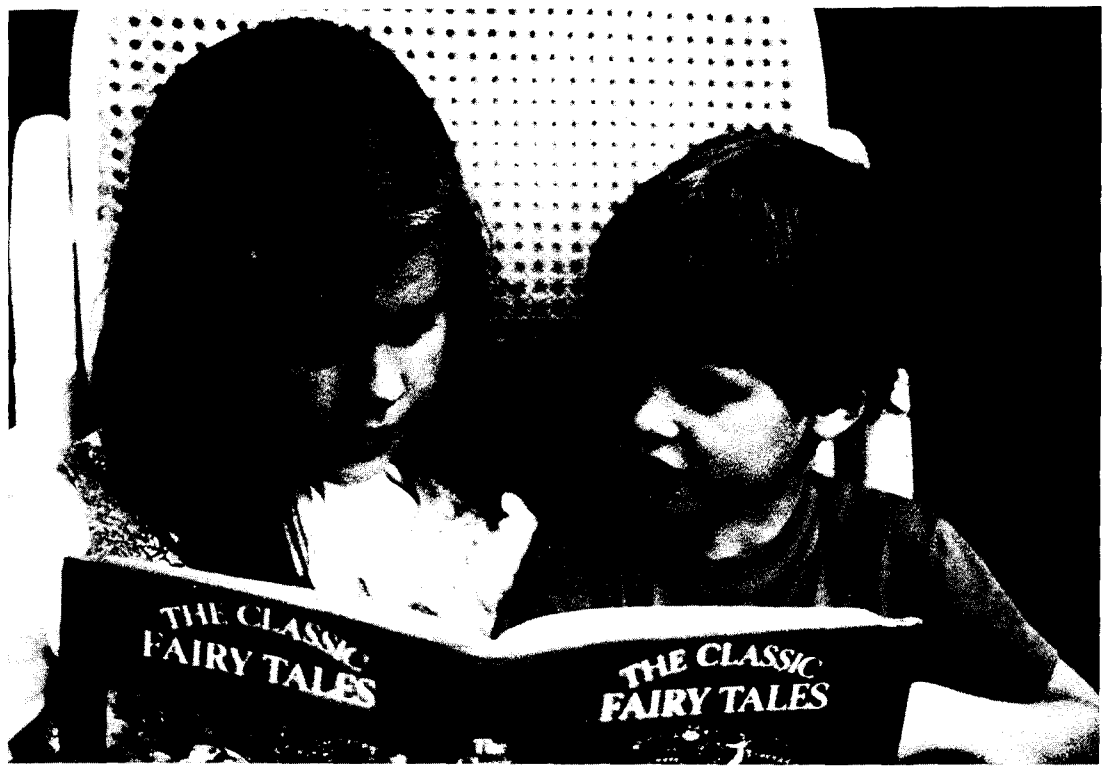


Photo: Margaret van Dijk

*Margaret van Dijk*

*Les idées et les concepts que nous recevons dans notre enfance forment l'image que nous avons de nous-mêmes. Les contes de fées doivent donc avoir une influence: la victime patiente (en général une femme), qui survivra aux épreuves, atteindra le bonheur, tandis que la méchante sorcière (ou l'ogre) périra. L'ordre social des contes de fées est celui de l'obeissance à l'autorité, du respect pour les aînés, et de la lutte pour survivre. Les jolies filles, gentilles, obeissantes et tolérantes sont bonnes et sont bien récompensées, souvent par le mariage. Les filles laides, cruelles, rusées et volontaires sont méchantes et sont punies comme elles le méritent. Violence et horreur abondent dans les contes de fées, mais toujours, à la fin, le bien triomphe du mal et "justice" est faite.*

> *"She deserves no better fate than to be stripped entirely naked and put in a barrel which is studded inside with painted nails, and two white horses should be harnessed to it, which will drag her along through one street after another, till she is dead."*

> *"Then she was forced to put on the red-hot shoes and dance until she dropped down dead."*

Gruesome fates indeed! The first is the sentence suffered by the false bride in "The Goose-Girl"; the second is the fate of the wicked stepmother in "Snow White." In each tale, told by the Brothers Grimm, the heroine marries the handsome prince and lives happily ever after. What more could a girl wish for? Is that not the fate awaiting good girls? Our feelings about ourselves are mostly learned through the ideas and concepts we are exposed to in our early years. What feelings and values are learned, then, through those tales

of violence, the fairy tales heard in childhood?

We learn that a patient victim who survives the trials imposed by a wicked, greedy villain or witch will achieve prosperity, peace, and happiness, while the wicked witch or ogre will be outwitted by the victim and will perish quickly and completely.

Fairy tales, recounted often by an old nurse or grandmother, reflect a social order where it is important to obey authority, to respect your elders, and to make an effort to survive. Good girls are always gentle, forgiving, obedient, and, of course, beautiful. They get rewarded in the end. Bad girls are cruel, cunning, strong-willed, and ugly, motivated by pride and greed. They get fittingly punished. The false bride in "The Goose-Girl" has tried to usurp the rightful bride and marry the king. The stepmother in "Snow White" is proud and haughty, "and she could not bear that anyone else should surpass her in beauty."

The victims of the bad girls really suffer. In "The Goose-Girl" the real bride must tend a flock of geese in the ravaging outdoors, so that "she may not remain idle." Snow White must "cook, make the beds, wash, sew and knit, and keep everything clean." Poor Cinderella has to "get up before daybreak, carry water, light fires, cook, and wash."

Still, the good girls pass their tests of endurance; they show that they will make suitable wives and they get to marry the titled hero. Children note that the beautiful one who shows patience and obedience gets to live happily ever after, while the bad girls get their eyes pecked out, are dragged through the streets, rolled down hills in barrels, or danced to death.

With such reinforcement of social order and such careful conditioning, why do some people harshly condemn the telling of fairy tales to children?

"Bluebeard" gives many adults the horrors. Even students studying fairy tales and delving into their Freudian ramifications by reading Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* shudder at the thought of inflicting this story on an immature mind, in spite of Bettelheim's assurance that deep down it teaches a higher morality. My daughter's reaction to the forbidden room where the wife "began to observe that the floor was all covered with clotted blood, on which lay the bodies of several dead women ranged against the walls" was simply "Ugh, gross, barfitating." The blood which cannot be washed off the key gave my daughter butterflies in her tummy, and the poor afflicted heroine's cliffhanger fate, where her sister Anne keeps seeing only dust and green grass instead of help on the way, where a cutlass is held over her head, even her "dying eyes" were merely, said my daughter, "like in a movie." The good bourgeois ending, telling how the wife uses Bluebeard's money:

> to marry her sister *Anne* to a young gentleman who had loved her for a long while, another part to buy captains' commissions for her brothers, and the rest to marry herself to a very honest gentleman, who made her forget the ill time she had pass'd with the *Blue Beard*

was accepted tranquilly.

*The ogre about to cut the throats of his seven daughters, an illustration by Gustave Doré.*

The most interesting response to this version of the tale, found in Iona and Peter Opie's *The Classic Fairy Tales*, came in the quiet talk at the end of the tale.

"What was bad," said eight-year-old Beatrice, "was that she couldn't trust her husband. But she *could* trust her brothers, even though they were of the same sex. It just goes to show that you can't trust all males, even though they say they love you. You should give people a trial before trusting them." Not one word about blood and guts or even blue beards!

If clotted blood and dead bodies are treated with equanimity by children, what about the nightmare vision of vampires? "Little Poucet" or "Hop o' My Thumb," first published in English in 1729 in *Histories, or Tales of Past Times*, might serve as an introduction to vampirism, for the ogre in it eats up little children. On meeting Little Poucet and his brothers, the ogre "devoured them with his eyes and told his wife, they would be delicate eating when tossed up with an anchovie and caper sauce." The seven little ogresses in the story have "all of them very fine com-

plexions because they used to eat fresh meat like their father." Their father, who is, we are told, "a very good husband, though he used to eat up little children," in a drunken fit of mistaken identity arranged by Little Poucet, eventually "without more ado, cut the throats of all his seven daughters."

If vampire tales really do reflect the unspeakable thoughts of very small children which haunt them in nightmares, how could we inflict such a horrifying tale on the sensitive minds of the young? Children are reassured, not by the fact that the ogre was a good husband, but that Little Poucet, "no bigger than one's thumb," who bore the blame for everything that was done amiss in the house, who was always in the wrong at home, outwits the dreadful ogre and gains a great deal of money:

> He made the whole family very easy, bought places for his father and brothers, and by that means settled them very handsomely in the world, and in the mean time made his own court to perfection.

The message that fairy tales get across to children, according to Bruno Bettelheim, is "that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence — but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious" (*The Uses of Enchantment,* Vintage Books, p. 8).

Violence and horror there are. The Queen in "Snow White" instructs the huntsman, "Kill her, and bring me back her lung and liver as a token"; the King of Colchester's daughter washes and combs three severed heads; Jack the Giant Killer comes across Bones and Skulls, Hearts and Livers, and discovers "three fair Ladies, tied by the Hair of their Head, almost starved to death"; in "Bluebeard" dead bodies lie in a forbidden closet; a wicked witch kills, cooks, and eats children in "Hansel and Gretel"; in "The Juniper Tree" a little boy is chopped in pieces, put in a pan, and made into black puddings; and an ogre drools at the thought of being able to treat his friends to a meal of fresh children in "Hop o' My Thumb."

But in the end the wicked are punished, and social order, even bourgeois comfort, prevails; good triumphs over evil and justice is seen to be done.

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## Thanks to Nameless Psychotic Killers

I stand
14 floors above the heated city
and you, whoever the hell you are
with your straggly reddish beard
and bloodshot eyes
stand with me
in the elevator box.

You speak
of the heat
the cost of gasoline
and the sluggishness of the elevator.

As I listen,
I quietly place a quarter
between each of the knuckles
on my right hand,
and close my fist.

*Virginia Lovering*
Downsview, Ontario

**Je travaille avec des groupes composés de femmes depuis 6 ans; j'ai rencontré des centaines de mères-poules, donc, des centaines de femmes violentes.**

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**Les mères-poules sont souvent des violentes portant le masque généreux de la compassion et surtout (méfiez-vous) de la pitié!**

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**Quand une femme se rend indispensable, quand elle fait tout pour son (sa) conjoint(e), ses enfants, ses ami(e)s, elle leur signifie sa force et leur faiblesse, elle les invite à l'impuissance et elle les prépare à subir.**