

Why good old children's stories, close up, are as scary as anything

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Children's stories aren't all pudding and pie. Look closely at the popular nursery rhymes, for instance, and you'll notice patterns of plague, prostitution, human sacrifice and burning at the stake. The Hundred Acre Wood is a forest of mental illness. And many of the old-school fairy tales reflect bestiality, murder and incest.

So, what are modern parents to do? Abandon the classics? Impose a Disney-version-only culture? Or find a happy middle ground, if one exists? (Spoiler: I think a compromise can be found. But first, let's look at what we're actually dealing with.)

Nursery rhymes

Goosey Goosey Gander has been one of my daughter's favourite nursery rhymes since she started talking. But it's pretty macabre that a song exists in celebration of a large bird flinging a geriatric down the stairs, in retaliation for religious apathy. And this – if you can believe it – is one of the tamer nursery rhymes of old.

Think about Three Blind Mice and their chopped-off tails; Rock-A-Bye Baby and his/her tumble from the treetop; Humpty Dumpty with his irreparably crushed skull.

Then there's the royal maid in Sing a Song of Sixpence, whose nose is pecked off – Hitchcock-style – by a retaliatory blackbird, after its brothers are baked into a pie.

There's Peter Peter Pumpkin Eater, the protagonist of a popular rhyme that served to warn young girls about infidelity. Peter's wife, supposedly a harlot, was murdered by her cuckolded husband and her dead body hidden inside a giant pumpkin shell.

How about Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary? This rhyme is a reference to Bloody Mary, Queen of England in the 1500s and notorious executioner of Protestants. Her growing garden refers to expanding cemeteries, silver bells and cockle-shells were instruments of torture, and 'maids' (maidens) were devices used in beheadings.

Charming stuff, really.

Folklorists Iona and Peter Opie, in their Oxford English Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, refer to "fragments of ballads or of folk songs, remnants of ancient custom and ritual [that] may hold the last echoes of long-forgotten evil" (in Songfacts.com, 2018).

Indeed, my research has yielded the discovery that most traditional nursery rhymes weren't intended for children at all – they began as political or religious statements, couched in enough silliness to protect the singer from prosecution for treason and set to a catchy melody that was easy to remember. If children overheard, no big deal.

But, over time, adults began to fear that toe-tapping tunes about violence, adultery, execution and fatal illness could have a negative effect on the playground. So, as early as the nineteenth century, authors began altering popular nursery rhymes to make them more palatable. And now you can only find the original verses online.

Winnie-the-Pooh

What hasn't changed with time is the Hundred Acre Wood, where several neuro-developmental and psychosocial problems go untreated; where Winnie-the-Pooh and friends exhibit a staggering array of personality disorders (Shea, Gordon, et al, 2000).

Let's begin with Pooh Bear, who seems to suffer from several mental disorders; the most obvious of which are Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) – exhibited in his disordered thoughts, random remarks, and forgetfulness – and binge eating.

Then on to Piglet, who is cripplingly anxious and jumpy. Anything that happens, or might happen, is cause for alarm. Piglet displays Generalised Anxiety Disorder.

Eeyore, under his perpetual cloud of sadness and depression, is likely to have chronic dysthymia, characterised by a loss of interest in normal daily activities, a feeling of hopelessness, a lack of productivity and low self-esteem.

Consider Rabbit, who must have everything organised at all times and who expends vast amounts of energy counting, recounting, arranging, and rearranging. Rabbit's world is a blur of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

Tigger is perhaps the easiest to diagnose, as a classic case of ADHD with an emphasis on hyperactivity. Gregarious and affectionate, he has a recurrent pattern of risk-taking behaviour and poor impulse control, bouncing where he isn't wanted and assuming that everyone around him wants to do what he is doing.

Finally, to Owl: extremely bright, but clearly dyslexic and a consummate narcissist.

We can't know whether AA Milne created the Hundred Acre Wood with these disorders in mind. But, in the 2017 biopic *Goodbye Christopher Robin*, there is considerable focus on Milne's struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after the First World War – said to be immortalised in the character of Eeyore (Greig, 2017).

Fairy tales

If you're finding, now, that nursery rhymes tend towards the dark and twisted, and that Winnie-the-Pooh stories contain enough unmanaged neurosis to jangle your own anxiety bells, it mightn't be a good idea to look into the origins of popular fairy tales.

Instead, allow me to share the highlights, having delved into that cauldron myself.

In the early 1800s, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collected stories that depicted the unforgiving life circumstances experienced by central Europeans. These were largely oral folklore, based on actual gruesome events. But lighter interpretations were needed to actually sell books, so the Brothers Grimm turned to the 'fairy tales' of Frenchman Charles Perrault (Ogden, 2014) – and what we now call the 'fairy tale' was born.

Still, they're dark. Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* is a story of agonising pain, loss and betrayal. Doyle (2018) tells us that the original mermaids were soulless creatures destined to dissolve into sea foam when they died, while humans were promised a beautiful afterlife. The *Little Mermaid* wanted a human soul, but to get one she would have to wed a man who loved her more than anything – or die.

The Sea Witch offers the Little Mermaid a draught that will give her legs: “Your tail will disappear and shrink up into what mankind calls legs, and you will feel great pain, as if a sword were passing through you...every step you take will feel as if you were treading upon sharp knives... If you will bear all this, I will help you.”

If the pain of the sword isn't enough, the witch cuts off the Little Mermaid's tongue as her payment. But there's no Disney ending here. The prince doesn't love her more than anything and marries another woman, while the Little Mermaid dies in agony.

Beauty and the Beast, at its essence, is about bestiality and sorricide. The Pied Piper tells of an enraged madman who systematically murders a town's children. And Sleeping Beauty (originally titled, Sun, Moon and Talia) is perhaps the most unimaginably gruesome of them all (Doyle, 2018). I beg you: don't google it.