

ON OGRES AND OTHERS

What We Read to Our Children

(Written for "The Listener" by
"SEAFORTH")

EVERY now and again a controversy starts up as to the suitability for children of certain radio serials, certain books, magazines, comic strips, and films. I have followed these with mild interest, and have quietly decided in my own mind what is suitable, and what isn't suitable for my particular family—and that is that! But I had a rude awakening lately when I started reading regularly to my three-and-a-bit. He sits down quietly by my side, and I start reading him a story from one of the books on our shelves. Every now and then I pause for a minute, and then go on—tempted to make up bits here and there to "improve" on Grimm or Andersen or whoever wrote the unauthorised stories which have been told to children since Alfred burned the cakes—and before that.

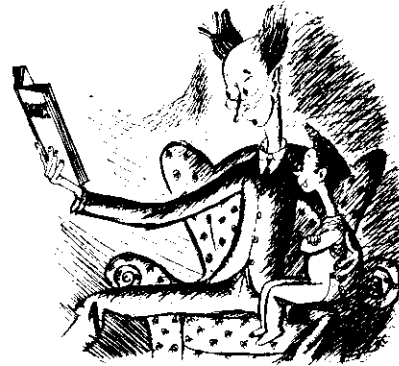
A few extracts from some of these books will show what I mean. For instance, "Hop o' my Thumb" tells of a

terrible ogre who liked to eat little boys—by particularly "fat, juicy boys." "This Ogre," the story relates, "was the most cruel of all ogres and he began to think how sweet and tender their flesh would be; so he told his wife they would be nice morsels if she served them up with plenty of sauce. He then fetched a large knife and began to sharpen it on a long whetstone, and all the time he came nearer to the bed."

A good healthy bedtime story!

THEN, of course, there is the old reliable, featuring the wolf eating up poor old grandmother in "Red Riding Hood," and a story right next to it about "Bluebeard" who had a cupboard he didn't want anyone to enter. When Fatima finally satisfies her curiosity she sees "five princesses hanging up by their hair. Bluebeard had killed them. In her fright Fatima dropped the key and it fell into some blood on the floor." Human blood, of course!

Some years back now I seem to remember enjoying the story of "Cock Robin"—but on re-reading it in the



cold light of fatherhood, I find it depressing and morbid:

Who killed Cock Robin? . . .
Who saw him die? . . .
Who caught his blood? . . .
Who'll make his shroud? . . .
Who'll carry him to his grave? . . .
Who'll dig his grave? . . .

Who'll be chief mourner? . . . (and so on, finishing with the birds "a-sighing and a-sobbing"). Not that I object to this—but it is all part of a very distressing series which happens to be a hot favourite at the moment.

Ali Baba comes romping home with the plunder after saying "Open Sesame" to the door in the rocks, and adventure comes suddenly into his life. When the robbers try to get into the castle they

hide in jars, and the slave girl, Morgiana, obligingly pours boiling oil over them—"killing them at once. Soon after that the robber chief, disguised as a merchant, tries to kill Ali Baba, but Morgiana stabbed him, and he, too, died."

Naturally Ali Baba married Morgiana.

In "Jack the Giant Killer," Jack has a novel idea. He fills his pouch with porridge, then stabs himself. The giant thinks this is a good idea, and does the same thing, but the poor fool dies. The author takes a fresh slant in "Snow White" and introduces jealousy, strangulation, and poisoning, ending up with the prince dragging Snow White out of a coffin and taking her to his castle to live happily ever afterwards.

THIS is only a small sample. My library of fairy stories is not extensive—thank goodness!—but after receiving training like that from three years and upwards any child should be ready for anything, even radio thrillers.

Here he is again: "Read me a story, Dad."

I turn over the pages of the nursery tales and read another bedtime "thriller." He sits there and loves it . . . every murder, every single drop of blood!

For those interested in pursuing the subject of nursery literature further, 3YA will broadcast the BBC Book of Verse programme on nursery rhymes at 2.30 p.m. on Sunday, October 6.

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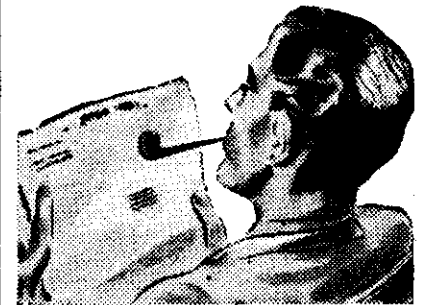
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