

Green Eggs and Salmonella?

Beware the hidden hazards lurking within popular children's books

BY ABIGAIL GREEN

“THESE STORIES are suffused with the same purity that makes children appear so marvelous and blessed,” wrote Wilhelm Grimm in the preface to his volume of fairy tales. If true, then life in the 19th century was worse than I’d ever imagined. Reading these stories today is like sitting through a Quentin Tarantino movie. Have you ever added up the body count? One poor girl is transformed into a

block of wood and thrown into a fire. A father risks his daughter’s life by boasting she can weave straw into gold. An evil queen tries to off her stepdaughter with a poisoned apple.

I used to think we lived in more enlightened times. But as the mother of two young boys—and a nightly reader of bedtime stories—I’ve come to realize that many popular children’s books are rife with malice and mayhem. Do you have any idea of the dangers that may lurk on your little ones’ bookshelves?

Let’s start with *Goodnight Moon*. Margaret Wise Brown’s beloved bedtime tale is a veritable hotbed of child safety hazards. First of all, the child’s—excuse me, bunny’s—great green bedroom contains an open fireplace filled with dangerous tools like tongs and poker. The bed has no side rails. And what about the grandmother—a careless caretaker if I ever saw one. Why, she leaves knitting needles unattended in a child’s bedroom!

It’s bad enough that in Robert McCloskey’s award-winning *Blueberries for Sal*, the child eats unwashed produce. I shudder to think of her pesticide intake. But far more alarming is the mother’s negligence in leaving the girl unattended on a hillside populated by bears. Little Sal and Little Bear get distracted and inadvertently follow each other’s mothers. The mix-up is discovered, no harm is done and each party goes on its merry way. But the tale easily could have had a much different ending.

In McCloskey’s *Make Way for Ducklings*, it’s the father

who neglects his family. Mr. Mallard leaves his poor wife to fend for herself with eight baby ducklings—in traffic-ridden downtown Boston, no less—while he takes off to explore the Charles River. Who knew that ducks could be deadbeat dads?

Speaking of inattentive parents, the *Good Dog, Carl* series by Alexandra Day depicts a Rottweiler caring for a baby while his mother runs errands. On Carl’s watch, the baby rides on

his back, swims in a fish tank and slides down a laundry chute. A Rottweiler as baby sitter? I won’t even hire a human sitter unless she knows CPR and passes a background check!

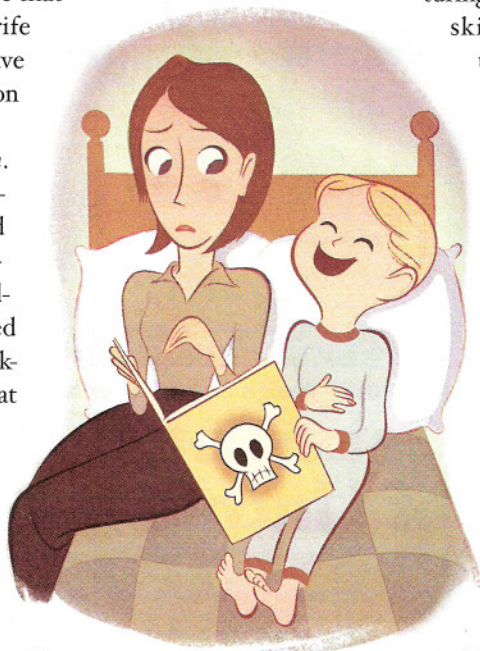
Canines also romp through P. D. Eastman’s *Go, Dog, Go!*

At first glance, the book is a whimsical tale featuring dogs on roller skates and bicycles and skis. But when the dogs get into cars, there’s not a seat belt in sight. Then the dogs all drive in separate vehicles to a big dog party in a tree. Have they never heard of carpooling? Even dogs need to consider their carbon pawprint.

In Dr. Seuss’ *Green Eggs and Ham*, health concerns abound. Sam-I-am pushes discolored pork products on the protagonist, encouraging him to eat them with a mouse and a goat. There’s no hand sanitizer in sight; I guess salmonella and swine flu are on the menu as well.

Even a picture book about cute bugs reveals insidious undertones. Eric Carle’s *Very Hungry Caterpillar* binges on junk food, then starves himself to turn into a beautiful butterfly. As if our kids don’t already have enough problems with body image.

Safety hazards, parental negligence, eating disorders . . . It almost makes me nostalgic for the attempted cannibalism in *Hansel and Gretel*. ○



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