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Still shocking after all these years?

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Junior Arsonist Burned to Death! Anorexic Child Dies Five Days after refusing to Eat! Young Thumb-Sucker Cruelly Maimed! These are not recent headlines concerning the darker side of childhood, but summaries of three stories from a classic children's picture book first published in 1845 and still in print today. It is of course Dr Heinrich Hoffmann's *Struwwelpeter*, known over here by its translated title *Shockheaded Peter*. In Germany it remains as popular and respected as Grimms' *Fairy Tales*. Opinion in Britain has always been more divided; at a time when there were far fewer picture books to choose from, some adults remember reading it when young as a terrifying experience while others will still hear nothing against it. In 1955, during the parliamentary debates that led to the banning of American Horror Comics, *Struwwelpeter* was mentioned three times as rivalling the lurid imports in question. After reading a leader in The Times referring to this by now infamous picture book, the Earl of Jowitt told the House of Lords that when his secretary went to buy a copy he was told the book was in heavy demand.

'The rush is on because many people imagine that the publication of *Struwwelpeter* will be stopped after the Bill becomes an Act.' This extraordinary work was once again in the news with the revival on the London stage of *Shockheaded Peter*, the brilliant 'Junk opera' adapted from it. Ostensibly aimed at children over ten years old, this show followed the original text in all its gory detail. Here, once again, were the stories of Cruel Frederick (eventually savaged by his own dog), Harriet and the Matches (who ends her tale as a pile of smoking ashes), Fidgety Phil (buried underneath the loaded table cloth he pulls off while falling from his chair) and Johnny Head-in Air (almost drowned because he never looks where he is going).

Most notorious of all, whether on the stage or within the original book, is *The Story of Little Suck-a-Thumb*, in which Freud himself is said to have taken a

professional interest. It concerns young Conrad, warned by his mother not to suck his thumb when she was out. Otherwise 'The great tall tailor always comes! To little boys that suck their thumbs! And ere they dream what he's about! He takes his great strong scissors out. And cuts their thumbs clean off and then! You know, they never grow again.' Despite this warning, immediately Mamma quits the house 'The thumb was in, Alack! Alack!' Next moment, in one of children's literature's most heart-stopping illustrations, in bursts the 'Long, red-legged scissor-man' bearing huge, pantomime shears. With a quick snip, snap, snip both thumbs are off, with blood dripping from the stumps on to the floor. Mother's response, when she returns, is low key to the point of downright sinister. 'Ah!' said Mamma 'I knew he'd come! To naughty little Suck-a-Thumb.'

This story went on to fascinate horrify and intrigue generation after generation of young readers. W. H. Auden included it in his published commonplace book *A Certain World*. As he writes himself, 'Reading this poem today, I say to myself, 'Of course, it's not about thumb-sucking at all, but about masturbation, which is punished by castration!' But if so, why did I enjoy the poem as a child? Why was I not frightened? In so far as it did arouse fear, it was a wholly pleasing fictional fear. It so happened that I was a nail-biter, but I knew perfectly well that Suck-a-Thumb's fate would not be mine, because the scissor-man was a figure in a poem, not a real person.'

But at other moments, Auden took a different line, recalling a horrifying childhood nightmare in which he was pursued by this very same scisssor-man. Walter Allen, his friend and contemporary, believed that the influence of *Struwwelpeter* on Auden was never far away throughout his life. The same scissor-man, along with 'the hooded women, the hump-backed surgeon,' also features as an ever-present background threat in Auden's menacing poem The Witnesses with its final injunction, 'Be careful what you say and do.'

Biographers mention how the poet's late, traumatic circumcision at the age of seven coincided with starting off at boarding school while his father went to war. Snip, snap, snip indeed - could this be an additional reason for the way Auden kept returning to the scissor-man image in later life? Be that as it may, there must have been many other children as well as the poet equally influenced one way or another as children by this sinister, unforgettable character, so memorably

illustrated flying across the room, huge shears at the ready.

But Struwwelpeter is not merely a nineteenth century shocker. Hoffmann was also a compassionate and understanding father and doctor. He detested the type of boring picture-book available for children in the 1840s within which, in his own words, 'a bench, a chair, a jug, and many other things were drawn and under each picture neatly written 'half, a third, or a tenth of the natural size.' He got into the habit of drawing lively pictures for young patients and for his own son, and these – plus some cautionary verses – were evehtually collected into one book. Privately printed, it was soon taken up by a publishing house to become the best seller it remained for many years until the explosion in children's picture book publishing in the 1960s finally turned it into something of a museum piece.

Looking at the book now, its overall appeal at the time is no mystery. Pictures are brightly coloured, and there are plenty of visual jokes. On one page cats with black crape bows tied to their tails weep waterfalls into big, yellow handkerchiefs over the fate of burned up Harriet. On others, fish stick their heads out of the river to laugh at Johnny Head-in-Air, and Cruel Frederick's dog eats at table with a napkin round his neck while his young master lies upstairs on his sick bed. In the German but not the English version, a chamber pot stands under the invalid table. Not exactly subtle humour perhaps, but still most welcome at a time in the children's literary world where any sort of humour was in short supply.

Struwwelpeter also manages to have it both ways by ostensibly cautioning naughty, rebellious children while quietly celebrating them at the same time. The character of that erstwhile hippie Shockheaded Peter himself is typical of this general ambiguity. Standing proudly on the book's cover, he comes over as a sturdy, clean and smartly dressed child. His only departure from normality is his abundant hair and long talons. While the accompanying verse thoroughly disapproves of him, many young readers must have felt some lingering admiration for a child who not only rebels but also appears to be unashamedly getting away with it.

Other stories deal more exclusively with juvenile crime and subsequent punishment. Yet unlike other contemporary writers, Hoffmann seldom labours the moral point. Pious parent characters putting a lengthy case for the importance of

good behaviour are absent from his book. Its naughty children largely punish themselves, and to that extent stay gratifyingly centre-stage throughout. The only story that does not feature children as main characters pokes fun instead at an inept, shortsighted middle-aged hunter who ends up headfirst down a well, shot at by the very hare he is hunting. This reversal of the normal order is particularly satisfying to children who, like animals, also often find themselves at the wrong end of adult power relationships. For a young audience, the sight of a pompous patriarch ending up in such an undignified position has all the immemorial satisfaction of any story showing the defeat of the big and strong by the small and weak.

The specific warnings found in *Struwwelpeter* are also often quite sensible and on occasions ahead of their time. Sulphur matches, only on sale from 1829, were indeed a potential danger in children's hands. If that particular lesson was ever learned from the example here of poor, incinerated Harriet, so much the better. Mocking a black child for his colour is repellent, and Hoffmann was right to make this an issue in *The Story of the Inky Boys*. The young thugs who are shown mocking the 'woolly-headed black-a-moor' richly deserve their punishment. This lesson in tolerance continued to offer a valuable alternative to the Nazi-inspired racism found in other German children´s picture books years later. The actual picture of the little black boy, carrying his blue umbrella as he struts out so confidently, went on to provide the inspiration for the cover illustration on Helen Bannerman´s *The Story of Little Black Sambo* – another nineteenth century picture book that has since proved problematic for some critics.

The nearest equivalent to *Struwwelpeter* today is Roald Dahl´s famous collection *Revolting Rhymes*. Here was another author sometimes considered too violent for the young readers who flocked to his writing in such numbers. But certain children´s books have always proved more frightening to parents than they seem to be to most children. Those grown-ups who now remember Struwwelpeter with loathing may indeed wish that they had not come across this book at an early age. For other adults however, this was sometimes their very favourite book when young. Exactly the same could also have been true of the current show in London – horrific for some children and adults, but wonderfully entertaining for others. You paid your money, but after that it would have been your own personal psychology and temperament that finally made the difference between enjoyment or disgust.

Those admittedly older children around me on the day I saw the show certainly seemed to be enjoying themselves. Whether some of the quieter and younger ones were having an equally good time was however less certain.