

# Reading Differently After 9/11

## *How life at the university was different after September 11, 2001*

*I*

If I can speak on behalf of others, the events of September 11, 2001, have increased Americans' sense of vulnerability. In the words of a song by Sting now associated with these events, we have come to learn "How fragile we are."

Since 9/11, our lives have been different at the university: we read and teach differently. Now, for example, students seem genuinely moved when they read Homer's description of Hector's farewell to his family before he leaves to fight the Greeks at the gates of Troy, more sympathetic when they hear about the victims of wartime atrocities.

I teach Children's Literature to university students in San Diego; and just as much as September 11, tragedies in this city a few months later have made even more poignant our investigations of children's lives. In March, seven-year-old Michelle van Dam was abducted; and in April, two-year-old Jahi Turner disappeared from a city park. The body of Michelle was found weeks later; as of this writing, Jahi has not been found.

Along with September 11, these abductions have been very real-world reminders to my students that issues of vulnerability and fragility are particularly acute in children's lives. It may be bullies in the schoolyard. It may be the terror of going to bed alone in the dark. Or it may be the situations our newspapers routinely tell of children who have been abused

by civil or religious guardians. Children's lives, in other words, also have their anxieties and fears—some big, some small, only children do not know which are “big” and which are “small.” As Randall Jarrell says in his poem “Children Selecting Books in a Library”:

*“Their tales are full of sorcerers and ogres / Because their lives are.”*

Childhood, then, is not all sweetness and light. So, too, children's literature is not all pleasant picnics attended by happy youngsters trailing clouds of glory. That is what I and my students have been discovering. Since September 11, we have been reading differently: paying attention to moments in children's books when we are reminded of our vulnerability and fragility. We have also noticed how, as readers, we customarily rush over and ignore those unpleasant moments—speeding forward to the expected happy ending and seizing on upbeat moments, resisting the other kind.

Take Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Ask people what they remember from that story, and they will mention the madcap antics of Toad or perhaps the friendship between Mole and Rat. Perhaps they will recall the happy moment when Mole, lost in the snowbound woods, finds his way to the snug comfort of Badger's underground home or the equally happy moment when Mole returns to his own old home at Christmas time and hosts a group of caroling mice. But no one seems to remember the scene right before these, the one that makes these homecoming scenes so touching, when Mole is full of fear and trembling and lost in the Wild Wood.

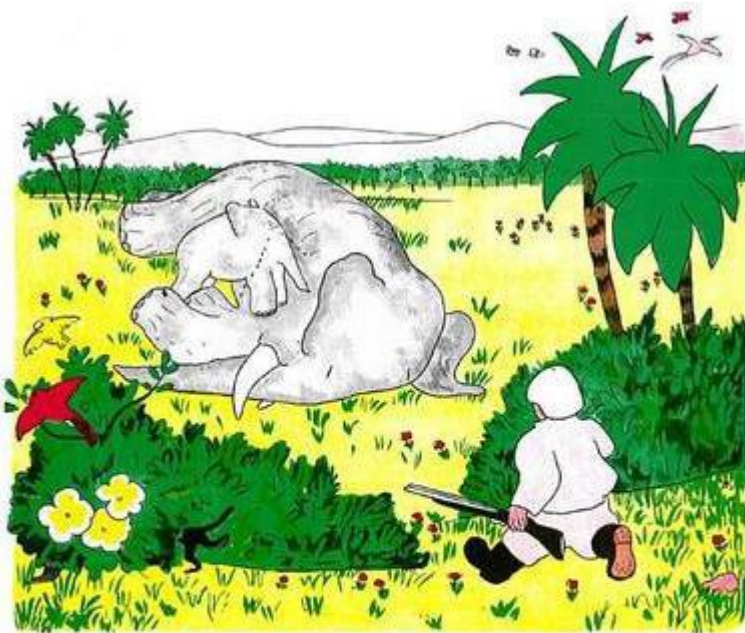


“Mole in the wild wood” from “Wind in the Willows” by Kenneth Grahame. Illustrated by E.H. Shepard

This is what happens in that ignored scene. Against advice, Mole has set out on his own to visit Badger, traversing the Wild Wood in winter and with night coming on. First he sees faces, then he hears whistling and pattering as others begin to taunt him from dark places, then a rabbit runs by him advising, “Get out of this, you fool, get out!” Mole breaks into a run himself, panicked and bumping into things until he collapses, “panting and trembling.” Later, Mole sobbingly confides to Rat, “I’ve been so frightened.” There is an ache in that line by Grahame.

Or consider Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie*. Most memories of the book fasten on the image in the title, as if the happy hut of Heidi’s grandfather had been transported from the Alps to Kansas’ flatlands. But in truth, Wilder’s novel is a vision of constant precariousness, and a more representative image might be the one of Pa at the window with his gun and the terrified family huddling together while a pack of wolves howl outside and scratch at the door. Even the prairie is no special delight: “The land and sky seemed too large, and Laura felt small.”

This same sense of vulnerability in the vastness of the space is present in America's most beloved bedtime book, Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon*. On one side of the Great Green Room is the bunny child who is restless and unwilling to go to sleep, and on the distant other side is the Old Lady who is always whispering "hush." They never touch. So, in the absence of human contact, this solitary and pitiable child creates company, personifying objects, bidding, "Goodnight clocks and goodnight socks. Goodnight comb and goodnight brush. Goodnight nobody." There is a pathos in that story which I never noticed before, until recently.



The hunter has killed Babar's mother! The monkey hides, the birds fly away, Babar cries. The hunter runs up to catch poor Babar.

### Jean DeBrunhoff, "The Story of Babar"

That same loneliness in *Goodnight Moon* is at the dark center of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. When Harry looks into the Mirror of Eresid, what he is told he will see is his "deepest, most desperate desire"; and what Harry sees is his dead parents, in a desperation that is both sad and touching. Harry is an orphan, like many other heroes and heroines in children's literature; and the orphan is, once again, an image of the child's vulnerability and fragility in

a capricious world.

*Six sentences into The Story of Babar, Jean De Brunhoff writes: "Babar is riding on his mother's back when a wicked hunter, hidden by some bushes, shoots at them. The hunter has killed Babar's mother."*

In truth, the world of children's literature is full of such stories. If you want an image of the precariousness of children's lives, pick up the fairy tales. There you will read of two children, Hansel and Gretel, abandoned by their parents in the woods and soon to encounter an ogre. Or Snow White, left alone in the woods by the huntsman who spares her life because he believes the wild creatures will soon devour her; later she will be harassed by a sorceress. Or Little Red Riding Hood, who might as well be a child walking home from school. But that is not the end of it. Examples of children's vulnerability abound in the fairy tales.



Beatrix Potter, "The Tale of Peter Rabbit"

Though we may not like to believe it, great children's authors do not shrink from this. When Peter Rabbit's mother explains why he is not to go into Mr. McGregor's garden, she makes a simple and direct comment: "Your father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor." And terror is not

absent from Beatrix Potter's book: "But round the end of the cucumber frame, whom should he meet but Mr. McGregor!" Nor is jeopardy absent: "Presently, [Peter] came to a pond where Mr. McGregor filled his water-cans. A white cat was staring at some goldfish; she sat very, very still but now and then the tip of her tail twitched as if it were alive. Peter thought it best to go away without speaking to her."

If anything, it is readers, not authors, who shrink from these anxious moments. When we read Beatrix Potter's books, we seize on the escapes; but stop the camera a few frames before and one gets a different Beatrix Potter, a world of vulnerability and terror: where Tom Kitten is trussed up in a roly-poly pudding and about to become someone's dinner, where Jeremy Fisher is swallowed by a trout, where a fox has designs on Jemima Puddle-duck, where an owl holds Squirrel Nutkin in his claws, and where a cat has captured Benjamin Bunny.

*Stop the camera a few frames before, in other words, and we get the essential scariness of Beatrix Potter. Then reading her books seems less like a holiday in the Lake District and more like a glimpse of arbitrary violence and jeopardy.*

Adults, I've learned, do not like to hear this. We resist and prefer a vision of childhood free of anxiety. We race over unhappiness to reach the happy ending. But that sense of fragility and vulnerability is still there, as recent events suggest, in children's lives and in their reading.

In his short story "Pierre Menard," Jorge Luis Borges tells of a modern author who wrote his own version of *Don Quixote*. Menard's version is exactly the same, word for word, as Cervantes' original, but Borges explains that Menard's book is an entirely different work because of the four hundred years that have intervened. It doesn't take four hundred years. After September 11, or after other tragedies that touch us deeply and closely, we read the very same stories in different

ways and with more sympathy.

*A version of this essay originally appeared in Inis (Autumn 2002), an Irish magazine.*

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