

Revisiting Violence in the World of Peter Rabbit

Beatrix Potter's Belief in the Capacity of Children

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According to a recent report from the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, the number of book titles targeted for censorship has reached the highest documented level in the last twenty years—more than 4,000 unique titles.¹ While many of these books faced scrutiny “for representing the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals,” more than half of the books targeted were found objectionable for other reasons.²

New books and classics alike are challenged in an attempt to protect children from images and ideas adults believe to be harmful. One area of particular concern is exposure to violence. The concern is that exposure to violence in books will affect children like other forms of media.

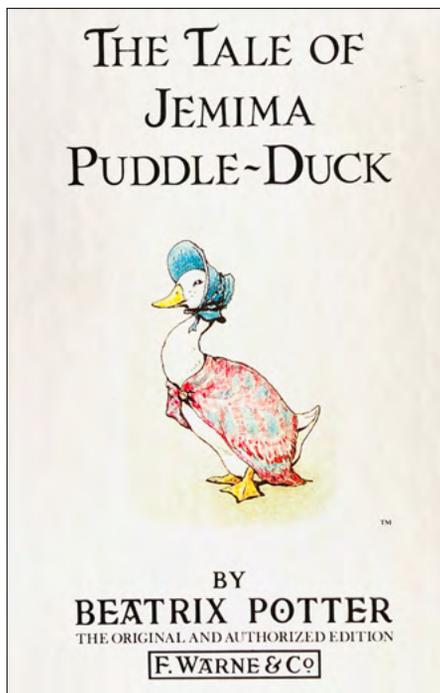
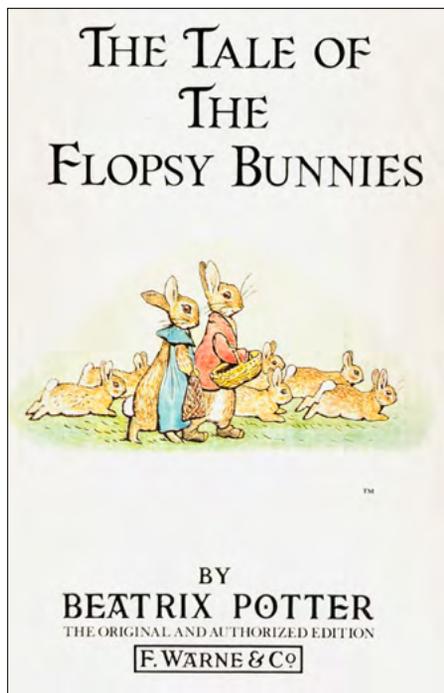
The roots of this line of thinking can be traced back to the mid-1960s, when Albert Bandura first suggested that children learn through modeling. His research showed that if children were exposed to media violence (videos of adults being aggressive toward a doll), those children were more likely to behave aggressively.³ In subsequent years, it became clear that the harmful effects extended beyond imitation. In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health released a report analyzing ten years of research on television and behavior. The results of this analysis showed that violence on television may cause children to become desensitized to the suffering of others, more fearful of the world, and more aggressive toward others.⁴ Now, it is widely recognized that exposure to media violence can be harmful to children. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ), a component of the US Department of Justice, issued the following statement on September 21, 2016, “Exposure to violence, whether directly or as a bystander can

have far-reaching, negative consequences for children.”⁵ The working definition of “exposure to violence” includes exposure to media violence such as television, movies, music, and video games. While books are not explicitly addressed by the NIJ statement, some researchers believe “books represent one potentially overlooked source of exposure to aggressive content.”⁶

In their research, titled, “A Mean Read: Aggression in Adolescent English Literature,” Sarah M. Coyne, Mark Callister, Talita Pruett, and David A. Nelson found that aggressive behaviors (verbal, relational, and physical) were present in a significant number of adolescent novels on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Further, some of the books with the highest per page scores for violence were books aimed at children from nine to eleven years old—e.g., *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* (2005), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), by J. K. Rowling; *Camp Rock* (2008) by Lucy Ruggles; and *Raven Rise* (2008) and *Pilgrims of Rayne* (2006) from the Pendragon series by D. J. MacHale. The researchers asserted that as many films are based off books, “the lines between print and electronic media are constantly being blurred.”⁷ However, while this study clearly demonstrates that



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violence is present in children's books, it does not establish that violence in children's books is harmful.

In fact, no definitive research exists that demonstrates that violence in picture books is inherently harmful to children. However, we do know that picture books provide a space for children to "prepare themselves" to be able to face "painful or confusing matters" and even to discuss those ideas with adults.⁸ Rather than focusing on shielding children from all instances of violence, the focus should be on how that violence is treated by the authors and illustrators.

An examination of one of the most well-known picture book authors, Beatrix Potter, may help explore this idea further. Her creation, the World of Peter Rabbit, starting with *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902), has been entertaining and delighting children for more than 120 years. The books in this literary universe sell millions of copies each year, have been translated into more than a dozen languages, and have never gone out of print.⁹

Yet, throughout those works, Potter presents both human and animal as capable of deathly violence. Unlike other picture book authors, who write for children as though they exist in "a wonderfully ideal state of innocence,"¹⁰ Potter's works are evidence that she perceived children capable of understanding the complexities of life. In fact, according to Rebecca Luce-Kapler in "The Seeing Eye of Beatrix Potter," Potter's treatment of predator and prey, life and death, is part of what makes her books so memorable.¹¹

However, Luce-Kapler notes that while Potter doesn't shy away from harsh realities, she does try to soften them.¹² Potter's use of clever interplay between text and image as well as pacing (in addition to humor) make her portrayals of harsh and violent realities more palatable to all readers, young and old alike. While these techniques are employed throughout the texts that compose the

World of Peter Rabbit, an exploration of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*, and *The Tale of Mr. Tod*, published between 1903 and 1912, provides ample evidence to support this observation.

From the very first, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* addresses mortal peril rather directly. Just several sentences into the book, Potter introduces the idea that Peter's father had been killed in Mr. McGregor's garden and "put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor."¹³ In Potter's first edition (1902), the illustration accompanying the text shows a smiling woman bringing a pie to the table while a baby, a dog, and Mr. McGregor—depicted with a fork and knife in hand—eagerly awaiting her arrival. This scene introduces the complex idea that despite their clothing, and other anthropomorphisms, these characters are animals and exist in a complex relationship with humans. While the happy dinner scene might look familiar to many children, most have not grappled with what, or who, in this case, they are eating. While this illustration was removed by the publisher from the 1903 version, Potter's original inclusion of this scene is an example of her treatment of children as capable of handling the real world in which we both love animals and eat them.

Despite broaching difficult realities, Potter's treatment of this subject is gentle. While the death of Peter's father was probably best described as murder, Potter euphemistically calls this an "accident."¹⁴ In fact, scholar Seth Sicroff made note of Potter's "deliberately bland and aphoristic sentence structure" in his analysis of the scene, citing it as an example of "less is more."¹⁵ Further, Sicroff notes, the pleasant illustration of the rabbit pie is presented prior to the words,¹⁶ moving the story forward and helping the reader gloss over the violence that must have ensued for Peter's father to *become* the pie. A final technique that makes this death more palatable for the reader is that Peter promptly dashes

off to Mr. McGregor's garden despite the fact that this is the very place where his father met his demise. This turn of events suggests the commonplace nature of rabbits in gardens and moves the reader swiftly past any cognitive conflict.

Beyond the beginning allusions to peril, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, as a whole, is the tale of a bunny that narrowly escapes death. He is literally an animal running for his life after he steals food from Mr. McGregor's garden and is caught. Mr. McGregor chases Peter with a rake, the purpose of which is surely to stab and maim the bunny, if not explicitly to kill him,¹⁷ and attempts to "put his foot upon Peter" (i.e., stomp him to death).¹⁸ Potter provides illustrations of both narrow escapes, featuring both the rake poised in the air as if to strike¹⁹ and the boot, narrowly missing Peter.²⁰ The inclusion of these violent realities—man's hunt for animals—illustrates Potter's belief that children are capable of understanding the inherent tension in human-animal relationships.

That said, in these instances as well, Potter lessens the intensity of the violence through a variety of techniques. In the images that depict the rake, the visual distance between Peter (the prey) and Mr. McGregor (the hunter) serves to reduce the intensity of the scene, as though Potter is keeping the reader at a safe distance. The removal of Peter's clothes is yet another technique used; it is a method of reverse anthropomorphism in which Peter becomes less human, as noted by Ruth MacDonald in her work "Why This Is Still 1893: *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and Beatrix Potter's Manipulations of Time into Timelessness."²¹

Perhaps one of the most intense images in the text, in which Peter appears mere inches from Mr. McGregor's spiked boot, Peter is completely naked. Rather than focus on how "dreadfully frightened" Peter is during this life or death chase, Potter uses "tangential discourse," a technique noted by Carole Scott in her work, "An Unusual Hero; Perspective and Point of View in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*."²² In this discourse, the reader is diverted from the intensity of the chase through the inclusion of calming imagery—a robin picking at Peter's missing shoes.²³

Further, Scott noted the "gentle" language used to describe Mr. McGregor's attempts to murder Peter. For example, when Peter is almost trapped under a sieve, "the narrative voice passes politely and distantly over the scene."²⁴ Potter uses the alliterative text "Mr. McGregor came up with a sieve, which he intended to pop upon the top of Peter,"²⁵ rather than language articulating the gardener's murderous intent. Luce-Kapler also noted the clever use of language to soften the moment predator meets prey. When Peter runs into Mr. McGregor, Potter's text is playful and humorous in tone: "Whom should he meet but Mr. McGregor!"²⁶ While

the techniques employed by Potter do not obfuscate the peril in the story, they do temper the experience for readers.

In *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, Potter also addresses death and peril in a direct way. The premise of the story is that the squirrels must ask permission from an owl (Old Brown) to gather nuts on his island. In return, the squirrels offer the owl gifts. These gifts, however, are almost all other animals for Old Brown to eat, including mice,²⁷ a mole,²⁸ minnows,²⁹ beetles,³⁰ and a "new-laid egg."³¹ The squirrels are thus presented as killers, which, as they

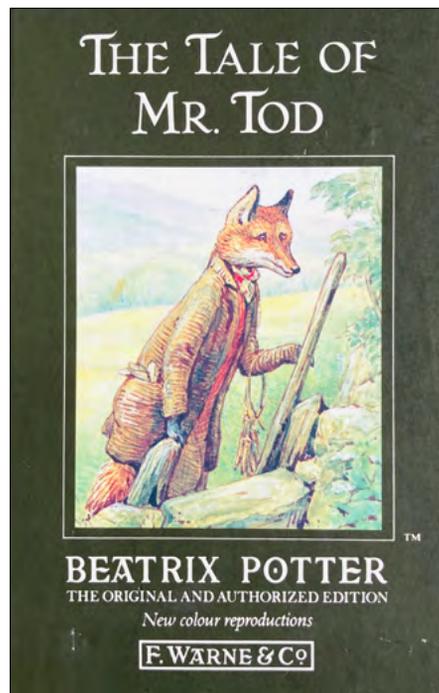
are omnivores, is scientifically accurate. Old Brown accepts and eats these gifts while trying to ignore Nutkin's deplorable behavior. Nutkin goes too far, and takes "a running jump right onto the head of Old Brown!"³² Then the owl snatches him up and sets about to eat him. The accompanying image shows Old Brown with a claw pinning Nutkin down by the neck and Nutkin's severed tail in his beak.³³ While Nutkin ultimately escapes, he is traumatized; "he will throw sticks at you, and stamp his feet and scold and shout" should the event be brought up.³⁴

Despite the violence and death depicted by Potter, she uses several techniques to make the realistic woodland violence, animal against animal, less frightening. The overall tone of the text is made light through the use of riddles and images like that of Nutkin tickling owl's beak³⁵ and dancing.³⁶ Further, as noted by Ruth MacDonald in her work, Potter's use of anthropomorphism is very

muted in this text; all of the animals appear unclothed, dehumanizing them.³⁷ In fact, the only time clothing is referenced, is when Old Brown attacked Nutkin and put him in "his waistcoat pocket!"³⁸

In this case, the reference to clothing is humorous and distracts from the fact that Nutkin is about to be eaten. The tension and violence of this moment is reduced by Potter through the text, assuring the reader, "This looks like the end of the story; but it isn't."³⁹ The violence of animals eating animals is downplayed throughout the text as well. We never see the squirrels kill their "gifts," and Owl is never shown eating any of the animal meals he is offered. While the complexity of predator and prey relationships among woodland animals is explored, the reader is not inundated with graphically violent imagery.

In *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, the threat of death is also present. Accompanied by his cousin, Benjamin Bunny, Peter Rabbit returns to Mr. McGregor's garden. The two proceed to steal onions, but before they can leave the garden, they come across a cat and are forced to hide in a basket to avoid being killed and eaten. Potter's illustration of this scene depicts the cat staring at the basket opening, where we are told she stayed "for five hours"⁴⁰ (original emphasis), patiently hunting the rabbits. The two are



saved when Benjamin Bunny's father comes into the garden and viciously attacks the cat, "scratching off a handful of fur" and forcing it into the greenhouse.⁴¹ Although being caught by Mr. McGregor, a human, is a threat, the thrust of the peril and violence Potter shares with children in this story is enacted by animals.

As in her other stories, Potter softens the mortal peril through the interplay of text and image. Rather than show the fear on the bunnies' faces as they hide in the basket, Potter simply presents the image of a cat sitting calmly on a basket. Further, she makes light of the choice to do so stating, "I cannot draw you a picture of Peter and Benjamin underneath the basket, because it was quite dark, and because the smell of onions was fearful; it made Peter Rabbit and little Benjamin cry."⁴² She doesn't linger on how the five hours were spent, but rather moves time along quickly, highlighting the change in the sun's position in the sky on the same page,⁴³ then beginning the next two-page spread with an allusion to the passage of time in the phrase "At length."⁴⁴ During Mr. Benjamin Bunny's fight with the cat, Potter also moves the action along swiftly with text, sparing only two sentences to describe the altercation. Further she de-emphasizes the violence by presenting an image right before Mr. Bunny lands "on top of the cat,"⁴⁵ rather than the fight itself.

The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck chronicles one of Potter's most unsettling animal stories: the perilous story of a would-be mother duck who is almost eaten by a fox. In an attempt to raise her own ducklings, rather than have them taken from her by the farmer's wife, Jemima leaves the farm and encounters a fox that offers to let her stay in his shed to hatch her ducklings. She makes her nest on a "vast quantity of feathers,"⁴⁶ oblivious to their origin (ducks previously killed by the fox), and then lays her eggs. Prior to Jemima hatching her eggs, the fox invites Jemima to a "dinner party" and suggests that Jemima gather seasonings for omelets, clearly foreshadowing his plans to eat both her and the eggs (her babies).⁴⁷ By chance, Jemima runs into Kep the dog, who, with the help of some puppies, foils the fox's plans. In the process, Jemima's eggs are "gobbled up" by puppies—put more bluntly, her babies are killed. This text addresses the complex reality that eggs are simultaneously desired babies and food for humans as well as wild and domestic animals. While the fox is clearly the predator in this story, so too are the humans and dogs that while "protecting" Jemima, are also eating her eggs.

The eating of poultry babies (eggs) is both conceptually upsetting and commonplace. Perhaps that is why Potter added so much humor to the tale. A child cannot help but see the not-so-subtle signals that the fox plans to eat Jemima and the eggs, including, but not limited to, the "sackful of feathers" in his shed,⁴⁸ the sly hungry looks,⁴⁹ and his comment that "he loved eggs and ducklings."⁵⁰ Potter goes so far as to describe Jemima in the text as "conscientious" while the facing illustration shows her eggs left unattended with a fox.⁵¹

In this way, Potter reframes this tale as though the reader is in on a joke: Everyone knows but Jemima! Potter also uses clothing to signal when animals are behaving more like animals and less like

people, a distinction that makes a difference morally. In her work, Scott noted that Jemima's perception of the fox as a "gentleman" is directly related to his "suit"⁵² and that clothing can signal when one is conforming to moral customs.⁵³ Potter depicts the fox, unclothed, pawing at the eggs,⁵⁴ and Jemima without clothing in the scenes following the fox's dinner invitation.

The puppies are never presented in clothing, reducing our conflict about them eating the eggs. A final technique used to make this tale less heavy is the visual distance Potter creates from Jemima at the end of the tale. While she cries "tears on account of those eggs,"⁵⁵ Jemima is facing away from the reader, so her pain isn't visible. These techniques render the hard truths presented in the tale much more palatable.

In *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*, the threat of death is heightened as not one, but six of the Flopsy bunnies are imperiled. In this story, the Flopsy bunnies, offspring of Benjamin and Flopsy Bunny, are hungry and in search of food. With their father, they travel to Mr. McGregor's "rubbish heap" in the hopes of finding nourishment.⁵⁶ After gorging themselves on discarded lettuce, the bunnies all fall asleep. Mr. McGregor finds the baby bunnies in his trash pile and gleefully gathers them up in a sack to bring to Mrs. McGregor with intentions to "skin them and cut off their heads," eat them, turn them into clothing lining, or sell them.⁵⁷ Ultimately, the bunnies are saved by another woodland creature: a mouse. As in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, humans are the predominant predatory species in this text. The graphic descriptions of how the bunnies will be killed depict man as a violent species, which is both accurate and disturbing.

As in other texts, Potter's treatment of this perilous situation eases the reader's tension. The order of events and pacing of this story is an important factor. The bunnies have already been saved and are at a "safe distance" from Mr. McGregor when we learn about his plans to kill them and profit from it.⁵⁸ This pacing reduces any anticipatory fear because the reader knows the bunnies are unharmed.

Potter's use of clothing in her illustrations are also relevant in this story. The bunnies are naked when abducted by Mr. McGregor signaling that in this moment, they are more animal than human. While Scott suggests in her analysis of their clothing that this is because as children, they "are too little to need them,"⁵⁹ this lack of clothing functions to create psychological distance for the reader. Only after the bunnies are safe do we see a snitch of clothing on them—a small blue bow is present on one bunny's neck.⁶⁰

Consistent throughout the tale is the absence of fearful expressions on the faces of the Flopsy bunnies; the reader is presented with obscured views (a result of the sack or the plant in the scene in which the beheading and skinning is discussed⁶¹). Potter's text also turns attention away from the peril. For example, Mr. McGregor whimsically participates in counting out the bunnies, "One, two, three, four, five, six leetle rabbits!" when they are abducted and again when discussing his happy plan for their demise.⁶² Taken together, the graphic murder plot for the bunnies becomes less frightening and more commonplace.

The Tale of Mr. Tod features two predators—a badger and fox, Mr. Tommy Brock and Mr. Tod, respectively. The thrust of the text is the tension between these two predators over resources. Once again, Benjamin Bunny’s offspring find themselves in mortal danger when they are kidnapped by the badger, who “did occasionally eat rabbit-pie; but it was only very little young ones occasionally, when other food was really scarce.”⁶³ The badger takes up residence in one of the fox’s dens where “rabbit bones and skulls, and chicken’s legs and other horrors” are evident and puts the baby bunnies in the oven.⁶⁴ Mr. Tod discovers the badger in his home, is enraged, and contemplates killing him, but he “thought better of it”⁶⁵ and decides to play a prank on the badger. The two become so engaged in fighting each other that the baby bunnies are able to escape with the help of Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny. This text highlights not only the tentative relationships between herbivores and omnivores, but also the inherently violent and competitive nature of predators (at the expense of baby bunnies).

From the onset, Potter acknowledges that this text is about “two disagreeable people,” and in doing, makes clear to the reader these characters will not be the protagonists of the story, but rather the villains.⁶⁶ The pacing of the conflict between these two characters also serves to reduce the intensity of the text; how many trips into the room will it take Mr. Tod to finally set up his trap? The result of this protracted prank is that the reader is not afraid of the coming conflict, but rather humorously exasperated by the delay. Further, Potter’s inclusions of Mr. Brock’s “apoplectic” snores distract from any perception of seriousness. Her use of illustrations is also strategic in that there are almost no images of the bunnies themselves. Throughout their mortal peril the reader has to imagine them in a sack⁶⁷ or in the oven.⁶⁸ As a result, the

readers do not experience fear nor much empathy. The only time all the baby bunnies are actually included in an illustration they are unclothed⁶⁹ and thus, appear less human, further reducing the reader’s anxiety. Clothing is used as a signal for the fox as well as the badger. Both are depicted mostly clothed throughout the book, suggesting that their human characteristics will outweigh their animal natures.

As is apparent from this analysis, Potter does not shy away from mortal peril. Potter presents both man and animal as capable of violence and includes death as ever-present. In doing so, she is “treating children as if they were really just human beings like the rest of us,”⁷⁰ capable of understanding the complexities of life and natural order. Instead of creating a violence-free world for her readers, Potter tempers these harsh realities through the use of pacing and humor, in addition to the clever use of image and text. In doing so, Potter provides a literary place in which children can confront uncomfortable and complex truths. She does not “protect” children, but rather “prepares” them to face difficult truths that are ever-present.

While it is natural to wonder, if, like other forms of media, the violence depicted in children’s books may negatively affect children, Potter’s works demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case. Rather than focus on the inclusion of violence, if discussions related to challenging and banning books must occur, they should instead explore how violence is treated by the author and illustrator. Further, these dialogues should also address how these stories may help children face some of life’s harsh realities. If Potter’s enduring popularity is evidence of anything, it is that these stories are worth sharing, even in light of their violent plot lines. &

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