

What We Can Learn From 3 of the World's Scariest Bedtime Stories

By Paige Towers • May 9, 2016 at 1:37pm

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Maybe you were lucky as a child. Maybe whomever was tucking you in at night chose to lull you to sleep with a sweet story — something from , or one that involved ponies or flowers or both ponies and flowers. And no matter what happened, everything and everyone was fine by the end. Some mischief likely took place and lessons were certainly learned. But no one hemorrhaged any blood. No one died.

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Seuss Silverstein

Maybe not. Maybe the stories you heard weren't intended to comfort, but rather make you tremble with fear before you pulled the sheets over your head. And if that was the case, it might not be so strange.

Much like lullabies,

a lot of traditional bedtime fables are dark, twisted, morbid. Why? Well, when they were first created, stories were one of the only ways for parents to inform children about the hard lessons waiting for them in the world.

Life was dangerous and hard and the only way to survive would be by listening to your elders. If they didn't, these stories made it clear, there was a real chance they'd be mauled by a bear or meet some other unfortunate fate. Fear is a powerful motivator. And it also serves a deeper psychological purpose.

on being scared through fictional situations allowed children "to rehearse threatening scenarios from a position of relative safety." Dark stories were security systems; scaring the shit of them kept them safe and sound.

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As stated in the article "The Lure of Horror" The Psychologist Online,

And wow, were they messed up. Want proof? Just take a look at these examples from Japan, Germany and Brazil. Murder, conflagration, starvation and smothering follow. But remember: hidden within all the horror may be the facts of life.

Japan

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Many Japanese folktales are often dark and — unlike most children's stories in the U.S. — lack a clear distinction between good and evil. Yet, the story, “

” (otherwise known as “Monkey Crab Battle,” which is obviously way more fun to say), takes “dark” to a new dimension. Although it was first published in a Japanese fairy tale series in 1885, it's likely been told in some form or another for centuries.

The Monkey and the Crab

A very nice crab is out for a walk (for a crawl?) when she finds a rice ball in the grass. We're off to a positive start here, until some greedy monkey notices her carrying said rice ball and is

like, “I want that.” Being a monkey, he’s clever enough to persuade the crab to trade her rice ball for a persimmon seed, which she goes home and plants. That seed grows into a tree at megaspeed and produces a lot of red fruit.

This is all well and good except for the fact that Ms. Crab can’t climb the tree to pick the fruit. Lo and behold, the monkey shows up again and volunteers to gather the spoils. This is when things get scary: that monkey goes on a serious

and starts eating everything in sight. When the crab complains, the monkey picks a hard, unripe persimmon and hurls it at our dear crab — very graphically smashing her body and killing her — after which dozens of little baby crabs emerge from her crackedopen belly.

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fruit rampage

Despite being seconds old, these little crabs have one thing on their minds: vengeance. And they on their mother’s killer: The fur on his rearend gets burned off; he slips and falls on some manure. To cap it off, while his eyes are “peeled open,” his body is flattened by a stone to the thickness of a rice cracker. Sweet dreams, kids!

go nuts

Germany

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Germany also has a long, rich history of folklore. This is the country, after all, that invented Santa Claus and Easter Hare (The Easter Bunny 1.0), as well as passed stories on for generations that eventually served as the inspiration for tales written by the Brothers Grimm and Washington Irving. (That's right, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" were both based on German folklore.)

But in the spirit of German minimalism and stereotypical right to the point bluntness, their bedtime stories did not mess around.

Take, for instance, “Die Geschichte vom Suppenkaspar” (“The Story of Soup Kaspar”) and “Die gar traurige Geschichte mit dem Feuerzeug” (“The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches”), which appeared in the German children’s book, *Struwwelpeter*,

written by Heinrich Hoffman in 1845. In each, a child does something he or she is not supposed to. As a result of their minor infractions, they die horrible deaths.

In “The Story of Soup Kaspar:”

A healthy, happy little boy named Kaspar refuses to eat his soup one night at dinner. The next day he refuses again. “No!” he screams again at the dinner table the following night. By the fourth day, little Kaspar is so thin that he looks like a stick figure and is probably staggering around, weak with hunger.

By the fifth day? Dead. Eat your dinner, kiddos.

In “The Dreadful Story of Pauline and the Matches”

, sweet little Pauline was always told not to play with matches. (You know where this is going.) But when her mother and nurse go out for the day, Pauline decides that there isn’t any harm in just lighting a match or two. Two rather concerned cats try to stop her, but Pauline understandably has no interest in listening to cats and so when she lights her first match, she jumps for joy at the sound of the crackling. Her joy does not last long: the fire catches her apron string and rapidly spreads over her entire body. Poof!

Do the stories have a notsosubtle underlying moral? Sure. But neither Kaspar or Pauline have a chance to understand the

error of their ways. Such were the times, however. Doovers don't exist.

Brazil

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For the last story, we head to Brazil.

Influences from Portuguese, African and Brazilian folklore blend together to create some fascinating bedtime story material there. And there's a story that many, many a young child has listened to in the dark: La Pisadeira.

To be fair, La Pisadeira is less a bedtime story than a dead woman creature that is randomly referenced in an unending number of stories and legends dating back to at least the last three centuries. Either way she's often described as a dirty, skeletal elderly woman with long, knotted hair, sharp

fingernails, a shrill laugh and a mouth of mossy, rotting teeth. She only appears at night after you fall asleep, which is super great for convincing children to go to bed. She also prances around on rooftops, waiting for that perfect moment to sneak through a window or door and attack her innocent, sleeping victims.

There's really no escaping her: After the unsuspecting victim falls asleep, La Pisadeira

creeps up onto their chests and sits there. The weight of her body causes a slow suffocation in which the victim experiences something that almost certainly arises from sleep paralysis

— meaning they can't move a muscle or cry out for help. The more you become gripped by fear, the heavier the old hag's skeletal body feels. (Yay!)

Deep cultural beliefs kept the story alive all over the world. Knowledge of her presence was a way of making future generations that might have strayed from piety aware of pure evil. ("Stay your prayers tonight because the old hag could creep in the window.") One must of course wonder if (and her resulting sleep paralysis) is such a persistent threat because so many would go to sleep fearing that state. Maybe.

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La Pisadeira

And one can reach conclusions about every scary story. They served as a way to both educate and pass down hardwired cultural beliefs. The tales might be a bit morbid, but one thing is for sure: if you tell a child not to play with matches, they may ignore you. If you tell them that little Pauline played with matches and went out in a blaze? That's one lesson they might wake up believing.

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