

# Harsh Lesson

*Ellen Handler Spitz*

## Struwwelpeter

by Heinrich Hoffmann

Dover Publications, 32 pp., \$6.95

**First, a heartfelt thanks** to the small number of devoted publishing houses like Dover, Universe at Rizzoli, and the New York Review Classics, who have undertaken the laudable project of reissuing classic out-of-print children's books. Their diligence matters, because, while used copies of originals may be searched online, the reprinting of classics resuscitates and revitalizes them, recalls them to mind, and, most importantly, brings them to the attention of an entirely new generation of parents and children. It also compels us to revise our assessment of them.

All this occurred to me as—with a fascinated seven-year-old boy at my elbow—I pored over the refurbished pages of *Struwwelpeter* (reissued by Dover), one of the most controversial, influential, and excoriated children's books of all time. It was written and illustrated in 1844 by Heinrich Hoffmann, a Frankfurt medical doctor. Subsequently translated into more than one hundred languages, the book has been parodied, mocked, revised, adapted to multiple mediums (including a so-called “junk opera” that debuted in London in 1998), and condemned for its alleged sadism, didacticism, and supposed advocacy of blind obedience. It is a book that adults love to hate and that children find enthralling.

Humorous, whimsical, outrageous, and bursting with wild exaggeration as well as with an undeniable and notorious streak of terror, *Struwwelpeter* is in truth a delight. It grips child readers and teaches them not only about the baleful consequences of misbehavior, but also about the subtle lesson that art is made up of powerful contradictory feelings and ideas: that art and literature can be both grim and funny, frightening and cheerful, momentous and banal—like myths and legends and fairy tales.

Shunned perennially for its sometimes brutal punishment of children, *Struwwelpeter* was never intended to be fearsome. It was meant to be merry and droll, an antidote to the pedantic books for children that were typical of its time. Published under the title “Humorous Stories and Funny Pictures with 15 Beautifully Colored Panels for Children from 3 to 6” (*Lustige Geschichten und drollige Bilder mit 15 schön kolorierten Tafeln für Kinder von 3-6 Jahren*), it reaches out (“See! Now look...”) to draw us in. Felicitously joining its comically painted pictures with rhymed couplets composed into the briefest of tales on cleverly designed pages, Hoffmann's art causes us to smile, to tremble, and to laugh (albeit with a mirth born from fear). Thus, by subjecting us to a gamut of emotions, he offers learning under stress and fixes his work the more tenaciously in our minds, thus ensuring our lasting retention.

In one famous episode, a girl named Harriet (Paulinchen in the original version) curiously and recklessly strikes a match. Children, of course, know the lure and the trepidation of fire. Mesmerized, we watch as her ribbons, her bright green dress, and her hair go up in flames. Red and yellow burst startlingly from her person, smoke billows in clouds around her, and we witness that she has fizzled at last into a pile of ash, leaving only her dainty red shoes behind. To mitigate the dread of all this, and for comic relief, Hoffmann supplies two pussycats at the bottom of the page, their tails tied with the child's no longer needed ribbons. Into ample pleated linen handkerchiefs, these cats weep copious feline tears at the demise of their ill-fated mistress. Thus, with tragic drama and ribald comedy

conjoined, the dangers of matches and fire sink in. A moment later, we realize, looking up from the trance induced by all this, that Harriet is not really *us*, even though what happened to her could happen to us, and that children, after looking, hearing, and feeling their hearts pump faster, are invited now, calmly, to reflect.

More frivolous because the offense is a danger neither to others nor to the child himself, and equally frightening to nearly all children who encounter it, is the tale told of little Conrad who disobediently sucks his thumb when his Mamma goes out. In a flash of instant retaliation, a menacing tailor prances on scene wearing ballet slippers, with a flying top hat and a tape measure unfurling from his pocket. Wielding a gigantic pair of scissors, he quickly shears off the offending thumbs, leaving the mutilated child alone to meditate sadly on his plight. The boy I was reading to pointed out that the terrible punishment meted out makes it impossible for the character ever to do again what he had done wrong (an interesting seven-year-old reflection on the theory of punishment as being the prevention of further crime); and so primitive is our human fear of losing body parts that this page cannot help but evoke that perennial anxiety in spite of its farcical exaggeration.

Another character, Augustus (initially called Kaspar), refuses the dish of soup that is put before him day after day at mealtime. He wastes away until he becomes a veritable stick figure, and at last all we see of him is his grave marker, with a soup tureen resting comically beside it. A colleague of mine who recalled this image from his own childhood reported that the grave of Augustus made an indelible impression on him as a little boy: never before had he realized that children could die. Stories teach lessons far beyond what they intend, and in this way *Struwwelpeter* gets under the skin. More than merely fitting each punishment to a crime, it touches, seduces, provokes, and actually fortifies its child readers. Such is the magic of art.

Children are bewitched by this book because it challenges them in ways that adults can no longer fathom nor recall. *Struwwelpeter* stands or falls on the credo that children *can* bear to be scared by art and thereby grow. It addresses its youthful audiences as such. Understanding that children ought not be burdened with scenes or themes that go far beyond their own experience, Hoffmann draws deft, bright lines between each childish act and an extreme consequence. This matters today, when a generation of parents is being compared with hovering helicopters and snowplows. In this book, it is not the parents who are in control. They pronounce their interdictions and then, as Becket would say, things take their course. I see this as a source of strength and as a corrective—a means of fostering autonomy and responsibility. *Struwwelpeter* puts all the moral power into the child's own hands. Horatian, in the sense of being both delightful and concise, as well as philosophical—a tragicomic picture book that, after 165 years, still speaks to children of the real world. Here they will learn things they need to know: about cruelty to animals, jealousy, greed, prejudice. As my youthful interlocutor pronounced at the end, “scary and funny, kind of all at once.”

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