

Now You Take “Bambi” or “Snow White”—That’s Scary! Stephen King

Read the story synopsis below and ask yourself if it would make the sort of film you’d want your kids watching on the Friday- or Saturday-night movie:

A good but rather weak man discovers that, because of inflation, recession, and his second wife’s fondness for overusing his credit cards, the family is tottering on the brink of financial ruin. In fact, they can expect to see the repossession men coming for the car, the almost new recreational vehicle, and the two color TVs any day; and a pink warning-of-foreclosure 1 notice has already arrived from the bank that holds the mortgage on their house.

The wife’s solution is simple but chilling: Kill the two children, make it look like an accident, and collect the insurance. She browbeats her husband into going along with this homicidal scheme. A wilderness trip is arranged, and while wifey stays in camp, the father leads his two children deep into the Great Smoky wilderness. In the end, he finds he cannot kill them in cold blood; he simply leaves them to wander around until, presumably, they die of hunger and exposure.

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The two children spend a horrifying three days and two nights in the wilderness. Near the end of their endurance, they stumble upon a back-country cabin and go to it, hoping for rescue. The woman who lives alone there turns out to be a cannibal. She cages the two children and prepares to roast them in her oven as she has roasted and eaten other wanderers before them. The boy manages to get free. He creeps up behind the woman as she stokes her oven and pushes her in, where she burns to death in her own fire.

You’re probably shaking your head no, even if you have already recognized the origin of this bloody little tale (and if you didn’t, ask your kids: they probably will) as “Hansel and Gretel,” a so-called fairy tale that most kids are exposed to even before they start kindergarten. In addition to this story, with its grim and terrifying images of child abandonment, children lost in the woods and imprisoned by an evil woman, cannibalism, and justifiable homicide, small children are routinely exposed to tales of mass murder and mutilation (“Bluebeard”), the eating of a loved one by a monster (“Little Red Riding-Hood”), treachery and deceit (“Snow White”), and even the specter of a little boy who must face a black-hooded, ax-wielding headsman (“The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins,” by Dr. Seuss).

I'm sometimes asked what I allow my kids to watch on the tube, for two reasons: First, my three children, at ten, eight, and four, are still young enough to be in the age group that opponents of TV violence and horror consider to be particularly impressionable and at risk; and second, my seven novels have been popularly classified as "horror stories." People tend to think those two facts contradictory. But . . . I'm not sure that they are.

Three of my books have been made into films, and at this writing, two of them have been shown on TV. In the case of Salem's Lot, a made-for-TV movie, there was never a question of allowing my kids to watch it on its first run on CBS; it began at nine o'clock in our time zone, and all three children go to bed earlier than that. Even on a weekend, and even for the oldest, an eleven o'clock bedtime is just not negotiable. A previous TV Guide article about children and frightening programs mentioned a three-year-old who watched Lot and consequently suffered night terrors. I have no wish to question any responsible parent's judgment—all parents raise their children in different ways—but it did strike me as passingly odd that a three-year-old should have been allowed to stay up that late to get scared.

But in my case, the hours of the telecast were not really a factor, because we have one of those neat little time machines, a videocassette recorder. I taped the program and, after viewing it myself, decided my children could watch it if they wanted to. My daughter had no interest; she's more involved with stories of brave dogs and loyal horses these days. My two sons, Joe, eight, and Owen, then three, did watch. Neither of them seemed to have any problems, either while watching it or in the middle of the night—when those problems most likely turn up.

I also have a tape of Carrie, a theatrical film first shown on TV about two and a half years ago. I elected to keep this one on what my kids call "the high shelf" (where I put the tapes that are forbidden to them), because I felt that its depiction of children turning against other children, the lead character's horrifying embarrassment at a school dance, and her later act of homicide would upset them. Lot, on the contrary, is a story that the children accepted as a fairy tale in modern dress.

Other tapes on my "high shelf" include Night of the Living Dead (cannibalism), The Brood (David Cronenberg's film of intergenerational breakdown and homicidal "children of rage" who are set free to murder and rampage), and The Exorcist. They are all up there for the same reason: They contain elements that I think might freak the kids out.

Not that it's possible to keep kids away from everything on TV (or in the movies, for that matter) that will freak them out; the movies that terrorized my own nights most thoroughly as a kid were not those through which Frankenstein's monster or the Wolfman lurched and growled, but the Disney cartoons. I watched Bambi's mother shot and Bambi running frantically to escape being burned up in a forest fire. I watched, appalled, dismayed, and sweaty with fear, as Snow White bit into the poisoned apple while the old crone giggled in evil ecstasy. I was similarly terrified by the walking brooms in Fantasia and the big, bad wolf who chased the fleeing pigs from house to house with such grim and homicidal intensity. More recently, Owen, who just turned four, crawled into bed with my wife and me. "Cruella DeVille is in my room," he said. Cruella DeVille is, of course, the villainess of 101 Dalmatians, and I suppose Owen had decided that a woman who would want to turn puppies into dogskin coats might also be interested in little boys. All these films would certainly get G ratings if they were produced today, and frightening excerpts of them have been shown on TV during "the children's hour."

Do I believe that all violent or horrifying programming should be banned from network TV? No, I do not. Do I believe it should be telecast only in the later evening hours, TV's version of the "high shelf"? Yes, I do. Do I believe that children should be forbidden all violent or horrifying programs? No, I do not. Like their elders, children have a right to experience the entire spectrum of drama, from such warm and mostly unthreatening programs as *Little House on the Prairie* and *The Waltons* to scarier fare. It's been suggested again and again that such entertainment offers us a catharsis⁴—a chance to enter for a little while a scary and yet controllable world, where we can express our fears, aggressions, and possibly even hostilities. Surely no one would suggest that children do not have their own fears and hostilities to face and overcome; those dark feelings are the basis of many of the fairy tales children love best.

Do I think a child's intake of violent or horrifying programs should be limited? Yes, I do, and that's why I have a high shelf. But the pressure groups who want to see all horror (and anything smacking of sex, for that matter) arbitrarily removed from television make me both uneasy and angry. The element of Big Brotherism inherent in such an idea causes the unease; the idea of a bunch of people I don't even know presuming to dictate what is best for my children causes the anger. I feel that deciding such things myself is my right—and my responsibility.

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