



# Fierce Bad Rabbits: The Tales Behind Children's Books

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Editor's Choice:

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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Among the many things to recommend **Fierce Bad Rabbits** among the countless picture-book studies already existing is that only Clare Pollard could have written it. Pollard is a poet, a mother to small children and herself a former small child, and each of these informs what interests her and how she reads. The book coheres as a survey, but is also inevitably and delightfully partial ? not so much a history of children's picture books (though this is there, too), as a thoughtful, personal reading of them.

The starting-point is one that **BfK** readers will take for granted: that children's picture books merit attention, because they and their effects can be complex and profound ? they can be diversions but they need not be only that. I would not put money on this assumption being shared by the general public, however, even the general reading public, and Pollard's often detailed analysis helps make a convincing case.

The analysis of each book Pollard examines is fine-scalpelled, but it's the sort of surgical care that keeps its subjects' animating spirit intact, not killing it. Many of her favourite books are my favourite books, and her attention made me want to return to them to look again (detailed criticism does not always have this effect); a few are books I did not know, and have since ordered. (My new copy of **Clever Bill** ? how lovely to be reminded of that! ? and a biography of Margaret Wise Brown should be arriving next week. Be warned: **Fierce Bad Rabbits** will make you shop.)

Pollard balances the personal (her childhood memories ? her introduction to feminism through **Best Friends for Frances** ? or her experiences reading with her own children ? a beautifully evocative reminder of why **Dogger** makes us cry) with the analytical, the detailed with the big-picture. And she extrapolates convincing general thoughts from her few examples, so her book has original pleasures of observation and insight for experts but also coherence for those new to the subject. And her appreciation is contagious. We accompany her discovery of Dr Seuss, as a poet and poetry-reader and poetry-translator in rapt admiration of his brilliance under such constraints. The four pages on **Green Eggs and Ham** pander to my own familiarity with it, and love for it, but there are revelations, too.

There's an awful lot here. Pollard's reading of **Burglar Bill** includes brief references to his stock-character clothing, to class, to children's sensitivity to injustice, to perceptions of adulthood, there's a suggestion about how the first draft differed from the final version, a long quote from Allan Ahlberg, and a brief but meaningful link to crime and

punishment in today's society. For my money, it's these many detailed individual book-by-book readings like these that make **Fierce Bad Rabbits** a volume I'll keep coming back to, but because Pollard's structure is partly thematic, the connections and comparisons are every bit as interesting. **Where the Wild Things Are** and **Not Now, Bernard** are both portraits of 'the monstrous self?'; compare the clothes in Beatrix Potter and **Babar**, or the consequences of overeating in **The Very Hungry Caterpillar** and **The Tiger Who Came to Tea** (while on the subject of eating, see also *Death*); consider her shift from comedy (because we know that 'most picture books tend towards comedy?') to **The Lorax** in its terrible minor key.

One of my own favourite sequences sees Pollard linking Christmas, Ezra Jack Keats, **The Snowman**, silence, snow, and 'briefly, poignantly ' the death of her own father. It's a reading of the visual as well as the words and silences; it's a reading that has wonder, beauty, emotion, depth. As befitting its subject.

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