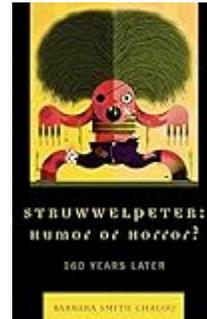




Barbara Smith Chalou. *Struwwelpeter: Humor or Horror? 160 Years Later.* Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007. 112 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-1663-0.



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Struwwelpeter and Shockheaded Peter, or Shocking Attempts at History

Scholars of German history are familiar with the gory yet delightful nineteenth-century children's tales by Heinrich Hoffmann. I am fairly certain that most of us would be pleased at any excuse to read a new interpretation of these children's cautionary tales—if for no other reason than to revisit those creepily satisfying stories of misbehaving children who suffer horrible fates whenever they disobey their elders. Yes, dear readers, young *Suppen-Kaspar* will, with every reading, refuse to eat his soup, and will, at the end of every reading, wind up in his grave—*Schadenfreude* in its most delicious, once-removed form: there but for grace would those of us who refused our vegetables at dinner also have gone.

But Barbara Smith Chalou's attempt to use the *Struwwelpeter* tales to write a history of child-rearing practices and children's literature in its socio-historical context (p. x) disappoints. Her claims throughout the book to use Hoffmann's stories, originally written for his three-year old son, as an historical document are not based in any history or historiographical scholarship. Chalou is more concerned with accusing Hoffmann, a doctor and early practitioner of psychiatry for young

people, of not recognizing that his stories were not “developmentally appropriate” for young children (p. 28). Her twenty-first century, very United States-oriented framework for analyzing nineteenth-century German familial relationships is problematic at best.

As someone with a dual Ph.D. in history and in education, I am supportive of scholars who work on historical topics outside traditional history departments. Chalou is an associate professor of education at the University of Maine-Presque Isle. Potentially, an expert on children's books could add much to our historical understanding of *Struwwelpeter*. But interdisciplinary work requires a certain degree of understanding of all the disciplines involved, and this project does not conform to any accepted standards of historical scholarship. Indeed, the absence of a sense of the social and cultural context in which Hoffmann published the book, the number of historical inaccuracies, the anachronistic frameworks employed, and the moral questioning of Hoffmann's character will leave even educational historians confused as to why Chalou undertook this task.

The first suggestion that Chalou might not be able

to look at a nineteenth-century document in a historically appropriate manner begins with the end: her bibliography. Chalou does not appear to read German, since all of her sources are in English. My sense that Chalou lacks foreign-language training is reinforced by a rather embarrassing mistake she makes in her analysis of how Hoffmann describes children. She suggests that Hoffmann's "good understanding of the nature of the child" is diminished by "his tendency to refer to children as *it*, *antagonist*, or by the universal *he*" (p. 10, emphasis in original). Here is a perfect example of why a cursory knowledge of any foreign language can help us understand other aspects of life: the German word for "the child" is *das Kind*, a neuter noun—as opposed to a masculine noun (the father, *der Vater*) or feminine noun (the mother, *die Mutter*), and the English translator made a logical decision to mark references to a child as "it" or, as was accepted in the age of Hoffmann and the translator, a "he" to indicate a child whose gender is not specified. The misunderstanding of the translation is a minor, if easily avoidable, mistake; the anachronistic, implicit assumption that late-nineteenth-century writers should have been aware of twentieth-century discussions of gender and language diminishes Chalou's credibility as an historian, pointing to an apparent lack of awareness about the development of feminist language debates.

Still, these language concerns might not indicate a larger problem with the book had Chalou listed any other sources, primary or secondary, that point to an attempt to learn some basic facts about German history. Although she references the existence of the Grimms' fairy tales, and lists in alphabetical order other "fashionable [children's] books of that time" in Germany, not even an English translation of those stories appears in the bibliography (p. 5). Nor does she support her claim that *Struwelpeter* was the most "enduring" of all other German children's tales (p. 5). Her note that Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm "transcribed the [tales] from the oral tradition" suggests that she has not even read carefully those secondary source authors she relies on, such as the work of Jack Zipes, or she would have been aware that the brothers Grimm played a slightly more active role than that of mere stenographers in their fairy tale collection (p. 5). Her observation that "Hoffmann, though, seems to take the cautionary tale to new heights of terror that exceeds anything written by the brothers Grimm" is curious (p. 5). Even assuming such a comparison were relevant, her use of "Red Riding Hood" as the only example glosses over the level of violence in the nineteenth-century version of that story. It also leaves one wondering if she

would make the same claim had she read the Grimms' "The Juniper Tree," in which a stepmother decapitates her stepson by slamming a trunk lid on his head, stages a scene that causes her own daughter to believe herself responsible for killing the boy, talks her daughter into grinding the boy's body in to a black pudding, and then serves the dish to her husband, who, while exclaiming over the tastiness of the meal, salted by his stepdaughter's tears, accepts the explanation that his son has left on a trip. The complete set of Grimms' fairy tales are available on-line in German and English, so that German reading skills would not have been necessary to hunt for a complete collection of these stories. In chapter 5, she describes other nineteenth-century works that parody or imitate the story of *Struwelpeter*, but she provides no analysis or interpretation. I am uncertain as to why she finishes the chapter by reprinting the entire text of the still-beloved *Max and Moritz* vignettes (from 1865)—a citation at least would have allowed interested readers to locate Wilhelm Busch's words with their accompanying pictures. As for the secondary sources she uses about children in history, she references only a controversial 1974 edited volume on the history of childhood by the psychohistorian Lloyd deMause and the important 1960 book *Centuries of Childhood* by Philippe Ari s, apparently ignoring a vast literature on nineteenth-century German children and family life, in English, that one would expect in an historical treatment of that subject matter. Even a reference to Bruno Bettelheim's claim that children needed the horror in fairy tales (*The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* [1976]) would have given Chalou a foil to work with.

One might forgive a scholar new to historical research for not doing all her reading. Not doing all her homework is another matter. In order for her claim that Hoffmann would have been aware of the ideas of Charles Darwin to stand, the *Origin of the Species* would have had to be published before *Struwelpeter*; in fact, it was published in 1859, fifteen years after Hoffmann's son received his father's handmade book for Christmas. This historical inaccuracy is compounded by her gross mischaracterization of Darwin's work: re-reading *Origin of the Species* and consulting with specialists in biology makes clear that Darwin did not believe "that the child was the link between the human and the animal," which is also not an accurate description of recapitulation theory (p. 26). Darwin's contemporary Ernst Haeckel, credited with articulating the recapitulation theory, whom she mentions, attempted to explain similarities in animals and humans with the famous but discredited ob-

servation that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” as all biology students learn—just as they learn that his first scientific publication was in 1862. Likewise, it is impossible that “Freud’s model [of child development] was widely known and should certainly have been known to Dr. Hoffmann,” since Sigmund Freud was twelve years old when *Struwwelpeter* appeared. Then, explaining Freud’s five stages of human sexual development, she hypothesizes an “interesting correlation”: Hoffmann’s three-year old son might have been going through toilet-training and thus Freud’s “anal phase,” leading Hoffmann to entitle his book “*Slovenly [messy] Peter*” (p. 27, brackets in original). Here, a discussion with a German speaker or consultation with a historical lexicon about the image associated with *struwwel*, another form of *strubbel*, would have taught her that the adjective is not one that would be associated with fecal matter. With the exception of the book *The Civilizing Process* (1939; republished 1969) by Norbert Elias, whose use of Darwin’s and Freud’s ideas does not challenge the boundaries of reason, Chalou provides no citation for the bases of this confused amalgam of ideas, not even books about or by Darwin or Freud.

I will spare readers a full discussion of her connection of “generations of German children reading *Struwwelpeter*, who are instructed from early childhood to defer to parental authority, and the Nazis’ seemingly effortless rise to power” (p. 47). It is sufficient to note that she explains the “irrational passion” for Nazism by comparing it to the popularity of the Beatles in the 1960s: young people “dreamed of marrying their favorite Beatle” for the same reasons that young people had once joined the Hitler Youth; that is, “to fit in and conform” (p. 47). I am not even certain how to categorize this sort of history: it is not presentist or anachronistic, since those words imply accurate knowledge of historical events, with incorrect application of analysis. Chalou’s version of historical research and writing is unique—I hope.

The rest of Chalou’s book continues in a similar vein with the objective of finding fault with Hoffmann as an author and as a father. Chapter 3 offers a blow-by-blow comparison of *Struwwelpeter* with the Warner Brothers “Looney Toons” cartoons in order to “clarify whether the content of *Struwwelpeter* stories is frightening or humorous, despite the author’s inferred intention, that they are meant to be humorous” (p. 30). After looking at examples from Wile E. Coyote’s antics, which children, supposedly, know to be fantasy and thus funny, and examples

from *Struwwelpeter*, where the violence is “real,” she ascertains that the *Struwwelpeter* stories would have been frightening and not humorous to children and that there is no evidence that Hoffmann even meant to insert humor in his writings (pp. 30-35). Her answers here are not informed by theories of humor and horror, such as Freud’s work on “das Unheimliche” or “the uncanny,” nor does she provide her own definition of what those terms mean for her study. Then, after a quick sprint through modern authors who write “developmentally appropriate” literature for children, such as Roald Dahl, J.K. Rowling, and Lemony Snicket (the *nom de plume* of Daniel Handler), she finishes this slim volume with her own moral of the story: it is permissible to use violence in children’s literature, but authors must use real-life and possible events that children can relate to and thus learn from (pp. 76-77). Hoffmann thus failed in his attempt to educate children through his unrealistically violent depictions of the consequences of misbehavior.

Despite this confusing didactic flourish of an ending, Chalou herself has failed to accomplish any of the tasks she set for herself. It is not a book appropriate for classrooms on history, cultural studies, children’s studies, or pedagogical theory, and nothing in the book will be of use to scholars in these areas. The book does not examine the history of child-rearing practices and children’s literature, or consider its socio-historic context (p. x). Nor does she adequately propose a model to address what she believes to “beg the more intriguing question” of whether *Struwwelpeter* was “developmentally appropriate” for its intended audience (p. 4). Her analysis suggests a lack of even a basic awareness that different languages have different structures than English or that translations complicate this matter across time. The very question in the subtitle of her book, *Humor or Horror?* is not, it would seem, actually intended to be anything but rhetorical. Yet here, too, Chalou will disappoint the only audience that might be interested in this sort of moralistic treatise masquerading as scholarship: its argument, conceptualization, and execution are not even effective as a soapbox against exposing children to inappropriate violence in society. German fairy tales end with the sober, realistic but satisfactory conclusion that “wenn sie nicht gestorben sind, dann leben sie noch heute” (“and if they have not died, they still live today”). Perhaps appropriately for a review that references Hoffmann’s work, there is no happy end here.

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