



Two Children Tell: Meeting Monsters

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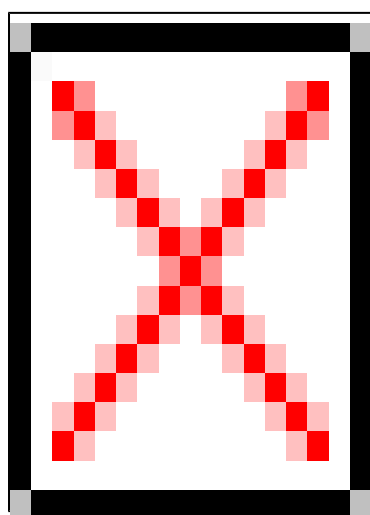
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Nick meets monsters



In the latest of her series describing children's early responses to stories and language, **Virginia Lowe** remembers her son Nick's first encounters with monsters.

When Rebecca and Nick were born, in the seventies, there was little understanding of the pleasure children obtain from monsters. **Sesame Street**, with Oscar the Grouch and the others, was still quite new on television. My mother was puzzled: Why do you read your beautiful children about such ugly creatures? she asked of Sendak's [Where the Wild Things Are](#) [3].

In fact, neither child showed any fear of Sendak's benign, not to say goofy-looking, Wild Things, with Max always (except on one turning) completely in control. In fact, Rebecca used to tell herself different stories to the pictures, starting from the back. One I overheard her telling the infant Nick at 3y7m was about the Wild Things bouncing on their beds, and 'Mothers watch and criticize them as they fight and hit.'

Nick, though a child with many more fears, never displayed any discomfort either. But at 2y6m we revived **Harry the Dirty Dog** (Graham/Zion) which he hadn't heard for several months. After the first reading, he asked for it 'again' (as was usual) but 'don't read the bad part'. I couldn't see what would be frightening in this tale of a white dog with black spots becoming a black dog with white spots. 'What bad part?' I asked him, and his reply was 'where they say there's a strange dog in the yard'. Then I realised that the thought that you could run away from home, get dirty, and not be recognised by your family, was much more frightening than any monster, and not only that, he felt within the bounds of possibility as well.

The moral is that some child will find some picture frightening, but only the parent will be able to predict which ones. For instance, **Samuel Whiskers** was Rebecca's favourite Potter for years, but Anna Crago (in **Prelude to Literacy**, Crago) was afraid of it because of the spider when Tom Kitten is shut in the attic.

When Nick was 2y3m, I took him, with Rebecca 5y6m and a friend Lucy (about 3y6m) to the film of **The Wizard of Oz**. Lucy's mother assured me that she had seen it on TV with no anxiety, but as soon as Toto was not in the picture, she collapsed against me, asking 'where's the dog?' Nick was on my lap throughout. When the Wicked Witch of the West turned up, I put a reassuring hand on Rebecca's, cuddled Lucy against me, and Nick took one look at the screen and dived for my sweater. From there on, throughout the scene, he alternated a mouthful of breast milk with a quick glance at the screen. 'He's having a boob' rang Lucy's piercing voice throughout the cinema. Discussing it in the car afterwards, Rebecca's main interest was whether they could have used playdough to make the witch's nose so long.

But from there on, Nick was afraid of many things, mainly in books. We had **Some Things are Scary** (Heide) and he started saying 'he yoves me' to the lion and the pirate and 'dat nice one' to the dragon, cuddling the page, behaviour he had not evidenced before.

He was able to articulate 'me scared of witch' witches in books' to Hoffman's **Rapunzel** (with no visual connection between Rapunzel's witch and Oz's one).

He used to enjoy John's dramatic readings of 'the great rough voice' of the Father Bear in Stobbs' version of **The Three Bears**, and his crying voice in **The Elephant and the Bad Baby** (Vipont/Briggs). Now he would turn and cuddle the reader consolingly, or refuse to hear **The Three Bears**. N: Cos when he gruffs I'm scared, you see.

Two months later this had changed again with 'I yove him' to pictures of lions and witches and spiders and dinosaurs. But at this age he began rejecting titles for a different reason. N: Me no like sad ones' to **Emma Quite Contrary** (Wolde) where there is no threat of punishment from the parent, or refusing to let me even open the page where Tabitha Twitchet comes down on her children who have spoilt their best clothes in Tom Kitten.

By 2y8m he had found a new strategy 'denying the reality of the scary character. To Rebecca's teasing. R: It's a skeleton! It will get you. N: It's not real. It's stuck down. At 4y2m, at his first encounter with the threatening Groke (in **Moominland Midwinter**, Jansson) he asked if she was always awake, and went to find another book chanting N: We don't know and we don't know, cos we've never seen one and there's nothing real about them.

By 4y3m he was asking for 'scary ones' in books of myths and legends, and managed to listen to all of **Comet in Moominland** 'by far the most frightening book he had encountered. As an adult he has displayed courage both as a paramedic and saving whales on the *Sea Shepherd*.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Australia. She is the proprietor of [Create a Kids' Book](#) [4], a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-4153-9724-7, £29.99 pbk).

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