

Reconsideration Scenario #1 Contra Costa County Library's Response

I am writing in response to your request for reconsideration of The Witch's Hand by Peter Utton. As I explained to you in my letter, the title was referred to a reevaluation committee consisting of the library's Youth Services Specialist and two other librarians involved in the selection of books for children.

At the time the book was published in 1989, it was reviewed in such major review sources for children's books as Booklist, Publisher's Weekly, Kirkus, and School Library Journal. For the most part, it received positive reviews, although the School Library Journal reviewer did feel that some aspects of the story might frighten young children. (*All reviews enclosed*) Since the library purchased the book in 1991, circulation records show a continuous demand for and use of this title. One of the library's copies of the book has circulated 110 times.

In this story, a young boy (George) sees a "horrible, brown, crinkly thing" pinned to the wall above his father's desk and asks what it is. His father starts to answer, but then pauses and says he can't continue because "it's too scary." George begs to hear the story anyway, so his father lifts him up onto his lap and launches into an elaborate tale about a witch sneaking into the house the night before to snatch George and his brother. The brown crinkly thing, says George's father, is one of the witch's hands, which George's mother cut off when she came to his rescue as he grappled with the witch. George is momentarily stunned by the tale, but in the end his father admits he made the whole thing up and shows George that the horrible object is really only a brown leaf. The book ends with George laughing and calling his father a "rotten fibber!"

There are many clues in the book that indicate that the story about the "witch's hand" is an elaborate, tongue-in-cheek tall tale. The ruse is set up on the first page when George's father first starts to give him a matter-of-fact answer about the object on the wall, and then pauses and concocts the scary story instead. The silly, creative language George's father uses is another clue. When the witch makes her way down the hall, the sound she makes is a "slither-slither-pat-pat-cackle-cackle." When George's father squeezes her by the neck, the witch squawks, "uggle, oggle, aggle." This isn't the kind of language a father would likely employ if such a creature had really entered his house the night before.

More clues that the story is tongue-in-cheek can be found in the dialogue between the parents when they are struggling with the witch. When "Mummy" gets up to investigate the commotion and discovers her husband in the grasp of a monstrous witch, all she says is, "Good Gracious! "Don't wake the boys!" quite a mild response, considering the circumstances! When George's father tells his wife to get "the sword" to rescue him, the parents have this exchange:

“Sword, what sword?”

“The witch sword – it’s in the broom closet!”

“Oh, that sword!”

The illustrations also do quite a bit to temper the potential scariness of the text. Although the witch’s appearance is frightening, George’s father is somewhat goofy-looking and has trouble keeping his pants up – they are slipping down below his bottom in one illustration. His mother is wearing bunny slippers, and does not look at all horrified when she discovers her husband battling a witch in the middle of the night. Neither parent looks the least bit disheveled or distraught as they watch the vanquished witch shrink away and then disappear – they are both smiling quite benignly.

While The Witch’s Hand might be frightening to some preschoolers, many older children would pick up on the clues that the story was a “tall tale,” and find the fact that George’s father was telling him such an elaborate “fib” very funny. Most of the reviewers recommend this title for children from about kindergarten through third grade. Many children that age enjoy and even request scary stories, especially when all is resolved in the end, as is the case here. Both the title of the book and the cover illustration – a bony witch’s hand opening a bedroom door – indicate that this book would be best appreciated by a child who does enjoy scary stories.

The books in the picture book sections of our libraries are used by a very wide age range of children, from babies all the way up to second and third graders. Some of the titles found there, while still in picture book format, are more appropriate for elementary school-age children rather than for preschoolers. Library staff is always happy to help select age-appropriate titles in the picture book section and in other areas in the children’s collection. There are many picture books that are only mildly scary that would be more suitable for a preschooler.

I commend you for your concern on this matter. It shows you take an active and serious interest in the influences on our growing generations. As a publicly-funded institution, the library is obligated to select materials to meet the wide variety of recreational, informational, and educational needs of the community it serves. Since the library’s collection is so diverse, we encourage our patrons to take the time to look over the books that they choose to make sure the content is acceptable to their family. Library staff is available to assist patrons and parents in selecting reading materials that are suitable to their age, interests, and family values. From all the available options, patrons must choose those most appropriate to their own family’s needs, preferences, and sensitivities.

In view of the above information, I have decided to retain The Witch’s Hand in the library collection. If you would like to discuss this further, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,