

SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

'The Giving Tree': Tender Story of Unconditional Love or Disturbing Tale of Selfishness?

Bookends

By ANNA HOLMES and RIVKA GALCHEN SEPT. 30, 2014

Each week in Bookends, two writers take on questions about the world of books. Shel Silverstein's "The Giving Tree" was published 50 years ago. This week, Anna Holmes and Rivka Galchen debate whether the book is a tender story of unconditional love, or a disturbing tale of monstrous selfishness.

By Anna Holmes

Readers cite it as a cautionary tale regarding both the social welfare state and the obscenity that is late-stage capitalism.

I never liked Shel Silverstein's spare, twee little book, not the first time I read it, back in the late 1970s, or the second time, in the mid-1980s, or the third time, just a few weeks ago, in preparation for this column.

I'm not alone. A 2010 post about "The Giving Tree" in this paper's MotherLode blog, "Children's Books You (Might) Hate," attracted more than 300 comments. A passionate and very vocal minority of reviewers on sites like Amazon and Goodreads seems to find the story an affront not just to literature but to humanity itself. "Most disgusting book ever," said one. "One star or five, there is no middle

ground,” declared another. “The Nazis would have loved it,” one man raged, proving that everything up to and including beloved children’s picture books will eventually fall prey to Godwin’s Law — that as an online discussion grows, so does the likelihood that someone or something will be compared to a Nazi.

For those who need a recap: Boy meets adoring, obliging apple tree and eventually, through a combination of utter impotence and blatant manipulation, makes off with her branches, her trunk and, of course, the literal fruits of her labor. (I’m not even going to get into the biblical implications of Silverstein’s decision to make the tree of the book’s title apple-bearing.) “And the tree was happy,” reads the last line of the 52-page story, a sentiment repeated by Silverstein so many times that it sends some, like me, into paroxysms of reflexive indignation.

Of course, maybe we’re just projecting, but to those who would say that Silverstein’s book is a moving, sentimental depiction of the unyielding love of a parent for a child, I’d say, Learn better parenting skills. To those who defend it as a warts-and-all parable lamenting man’s inhumanity to man — or, perhaps, man’s inhumanity to woman — I’d say that I’m not so sure Silverstein, who dedicated the book to a former girlfriend, “Nicky,” was writing an indictment of what men assume they can get away with. The boy uses the tree as a plaything, lives off her like a parasite, and then, when she’s a shell of her former self and no longer serves any real purpose, he sits on her — which makes her happy? (“That book is the epitome of male privilege,” a friend grouched.)

As for the argument that “The Giving Tree” is somehow a commentary on the ways humans ravage the environment, I mean, maybe? The tree of Silverstein’s imagination, unlike most other trees felled by humans, suffers mightily but never dies, left to live out her years as a five-fingered stump, abandoned in the grass like the orphaned foot of a gentle sauropod. After a brief consultation with the dinosaur expert Bob Strauss about that analogy, Strauss, without prompting, declared his disgust for the book. “I refuse to read it to my kids or my friends’ kids,” he wrote in an email. “I think that book has done more damage to fragile young psyches than any other kids’ book in the last 50 years. (O.K., maybe I’m exaggerating a bit, but you get the idea.)”

It's possible Silverstein was attempting to be subversive, and in that sense, this little Rorschach test of children's literature seems to have succeeded. Readers cite it as a cautionary tale regarding both the social welfare state and the obscenity that is late-stage capitalism. Betsey Stevenson, the economist and Obama administration appointee, reads the book to her children and says it creates a space "to have a conversation about what it means to take, and to give, too much." That said, she doesn't buy the "And the tree was happy" nonsense either. "If she had said no when he wanted her branches, would the boy have gone off and become a better person?" Stevenson wonders. "I don't want to hold the tree accountable," she continued, but she thinks there could have been a happier ending: "If only she'd set limits, she wouldn't be a stump today!"

Anna Holmes has written for numerous publications, including The Washington Post, Salon, Harper's, Newsweek, Sports Illustrated and The New Yorker online. A 2012 recipient of the Mirror Award for Commentary, presented by Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Journalism, she is the editor of two books: "Hell Hath No Fury: Women's Letters From the End of the Affair"; and "The Book of Jezebel," based on the popular women's Web site she created in 2007.



By Rivka Galchen

"The Giving Tree" is in part a disturbing tale of unconditional love, in part a tender tale of the monsters that we are.

Here we have a story, fewer than 650 words long. What are its adjectives, after the one in the title, "giving," which never appears in the story itself? Little, tired, happy, older, alone, happy, too big, happy, happy, long, sad, happy, too busy, warm, happy, happy, so happy, too old, sad, happy, happy, long, sorry, gone, too weak, gone, too old, gone, too tired, sorry, old, sorry, quiet, very tired, old, good, happy. "Happy" is the last word of the story, and in interviews Shel Silverstein explained that it took him years to find a publisher for "The Giving Tree" — that it had been important to him that he keep what he called the sad ending.

What are we to make of all those happys like poppies dense in a simple, flat field? Each happy alters the happy that follows it. The plain language complexes through each repetition, until it's as insided-out and upsided-down as the language of "Runny Babbit: A Billy Sook," the one book, worked on for more than 20 years, that Silverstein, the prolific writer who gave us the peppermint gale of most every elementary-school literature syllabus, kept not quite finishing. Maybe Silverstein had trouble finishing it because some things are clearly so very difficult to say. Like: "Runny fad a hamily — / Matter of fact, he had / A sother and two bristers, / A dummy and a mad."

I love Silverstein's profoundly playful stuff so much more than "The Giving Tree," but I like playfulness in general best, because I can take it more seriously. In part, the preceding is just an irrelevant fact about this one particular reader, but also humor does guard better against the barbarians of piety than seriousness does. It is rare the reading that mangles "Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout / Would not take the garbage out" into a simple morality play against civil disobedience. Mess with the meter of humor, and it's immediately obvious something is misrepresented. A rabbi and a priest don't just walk into a bar and start tendentious theological debates.

Manhandling more straightforward prose into platitudes is much easier. "The Giving Tree," I was surprised to discover, is a great book. I didn't remember it that way, because too many people had told me about it since I'd last read it. The actual story doesn't extol the tree, or endorse the boy. The tree and the boy both do the very particular things they do, and say the particular things they say, and, talking tree notwithstanding, their relationship seems emotionally realistic. The story describes honestly something that is, which is very different from proposing what ought to be. To condemn "The Giving Tree" for having a female who gives in a way that destroys her is as invalid as condemning "Mrs. Dalloway" for having a soldier who commits suicide. Conversely, teaching "The Giving Tree" as a model for how a woman (or anyone) should be is like saying that same soldier sets an example. "The Giving Tree" is not a children's book like the useful, humble classic "Hands Are Not for Hitting." The tale is not exemplary.

When the tree suggests to the grown man, who wants a home and family, that he should climb her branches and play, she seems like a nice enough tree but not one who, as the current lingo goes, understands the man she loves. When the man repeatedly fails to be kind, he seems even more limited in his understanding than the tree. The boy and the tree are both “flawed,” and in the most old-fashioned way, their flaws, which are also their characters, determine their fates. The sadness one feels in reading this book so full of the word “happy” is not unlike the sadness of knowing just how it’s going to end up for poor Oedipus. “The Giving Tree” is in part a disturbing tale of unconditional love, in part a tender tale of the monsters that we are. When I read the book again these 30-some years later, my only brief reservation — that it should somehow have been funny, that funny might have saved it from its destiny of weird co-optings — faded. The book, too, has its fundamental character and fate. Silverstein would have made it funny, if that was what it was meant to be.

Rivka Galchen is a recipient of a William J. Saroyan International Prize for Fiction, a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers’ Award and a Berlin Prize, among other distinctions. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in numerous publications, including Harper’s and The New Yorker, which selected her for their list of “20 Under 40” American fiction writers in 2010. Her debut novel, the critically acclaimed “Atmospheric Disturbances,” was published in 2008. Her second book, a story collection titled “American Innovations,” was published in May.

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