

Promoting “nanny dogs” is a threat to public health

[Other](#) - Tuesday August 15th, 2017

Very young children do not see animals as “other.” It seems natural to them that stories should feature animals who speak and wear clothing. There is no harm in that. Babar, Curious George, Paddington Bear: toddlers don’t actually get up close and personal with elephants, bears and monkeys before they have sorted out the difference between what is imaginary and what is real.

But they do get up close and personal with dogs, because – to state the obvious – bears, monkeys and elephants don’t live in children’s homes, but dogs do. And so unless adults are vigilant and realistic about the interaction they permit or encourage between babies or toddlers and the family dog, they are enabling a certain risk of harm, no matter how amiable and gentle their particular beloved pet has shown itself to be.

Part of that vigilance should extend to the books they read to their children.

Peter Pan & Nana.  
(Beth Clifton collage)

Nana the St. Bernard

One of the most popular children’s stories ever written, Peter Pan, by J. Barrie, produced as a play in 1904, two years before becoming a book, featured Nana, a St Bernard dog modeled on Barrie’s Newfoundland, Porthos, who played the long-suffering nursemaid to the children of the Darling household.

Of course, most children who are exposed to Peter Pan are old enough to know the difference between the real and the imaginary. They know that the play is a fantasy. They understand children cannot learn to fly, however mightily they put their minds to it.

But Nana – well, the line here was a little blurred, for many dogs do shepherd and protect their human “flocks” in a rudimentary way, and so the beguiling concept of the “nanny dog” took hold in the imagination of a certain class of dog lovers, and in a big way.

Foreground: National Post public affairs columnist Barbara Kay. Background: illustration from “Good Dog Carl” series.

Shibboleth

But not in a good way. In fact, the very words “nanny dog” serve as a shibboleth pointing to the belief system of the rather bizarre pit bull advocacy movement that formed some five decades ago and has since rapidly expanded. Its basic mission is to rebrand the fighting dog, whose genetically embedded penchant for impulsive aggression and relish for combat is well documented. The pit bull advocacy movement is dedicated to recasting the pit bull type dog’s image into that of a model canine citizen, and a suitable companion for humans of all ages.

Investigators believe this photo was taken and posted to Facebook only minutes before the pit bull killed the baby.

According to the pit bull advocacy narrative – narrative being so much less rebarbative than hard facts – the pit bull’s menacing looks are misleading. Yes, they fight well and often to the death, but they are forced into it by bad people who exploit their willingness to please, we are told. Why according to the narrative, the fighting dog is by nature a very good dog, a gentle dog, so gentle that he...he...he is, and always has been, the “nanny dog” of the canine world. Which is why, pit bull advocacy websites, one so often sees photos of pit bulls with infants or young children draped over them in trusting sleep.

“Fiction cut from ideological cloth”

In reality, no amount of historical sleuthing has ever produced any evidence that the pit bull was known as the “nanny dog.” It is a fiction cut from whole ideological cloth, specifically by Lilian Rant, then president of the Staffordshire Club of America, in a 1971 newspaper interview.

Fortunately, narrative alone cannot sustain a truly absurd fiction forever. Besides, responsible dog owners of all stripes were disturbed by the idea of babies being left unattended with any dog, and said so. A few years ago the pit bull lobby caved to the blowback, removing the assertion from its catechism, and quietly consigned it to the graveyard of counter-productive arguments.

But the harmful myth lives on in children’s books.

Lower left: illustrations from “Good Dog Carl” books. Lower right: real-life children engaged in a variety of dangerous activities with Rottweilers.

(Beth Clifton collage)

“Nana on steroids”

Alexandra Day (a pseudonym) is a highly successful author of a series of children’s books called Good Dog Carl. Day’s real name is Sandra Louise Woodward Darling, an ironic tip of the hat to Peter Pan, since Carl, a Rottweiler, is not only a Nanny Dog, he is what we might call Nana on steroids.

Carl is no Seuss-like fabulous “creature,” meant to appeal to a child’s imagination. He is a Rottweiler who conforms perfectly to his breed. Carl is big and muscular. When he opens his mouth, you see his fearsome teeth and are free to imagine what those teeth can do to an animal or human such a dog considers prey. Also realistically, Carl has no capacity for speech (although he can read).

In fact, everything about Carl’s presentation is realistic except for his human ability to care for children in complex ways: dressing, feeding, housecleaning, etc. Thus, he does not fall into any of the traditional genres of animal stories for children, such as: the Fable – Aesop’s, Uncle Remus, Just So stories; Pet Tales – Lassie, Old Yeller, Sounder; Fantasy – Peter Rabbit, Wind in the Willows; or Reality fiction – Call of the Wild, Black Beauty.

Criminal offense

In the Carl series of 20-plus books, the plot format holds steady, in formulaic repetition of the 1957 Dr. Seuss classic *The Cat In The Hat*: Mother is called away from mothering for one reason or another – shopping, a grandmother in need of attention – and leaves her baby, Madeline, in Carl’s care. Leaving a child in a dog’s care is in real life often charged as a criminal offense, even when there are no tragic and horrific consequences, but this point is never raised.

Carl takes literal care of Madeline: dressing her, making her meals, taking her out to the park or trick-or-treating on Hallowe’en. To get from place to place, Madeline rides around on Carl’s back. Messes are made, but cleaned up before Mother comes home to a quiet, clean house.

## Carl Goes to Daycare

In Carl Goes to Daycare, for example, Mother assigns Carl to help out at a daycare center. Madeline is now no longer a baby, but about three. Mother and the teacher accidentally get locked out of the center. Carl is inside, surrounded by a roomful of very young children.

The noisy kids are all over Carl, ramming toys into him, embracing him from behind, highly irresponsible behavior that in real life would try the patience of any dog and invite a negative response, but does not faze Carl in the least.

Interestingly in this story but not in others, the mother makes a great show of anxiety about being forcibly separated from her child, as well she would be in real life, but clearly for comic effect here, since the premise of the series is that it is perfectly normal for a dog to take full responsibility for a child or children.

Rottweiler. (Beth Clifton photo)

Marcos Raya

Recalling J. M. Barrie's inspiration, Day's fictional hero is modelled on her own beloved dog, a Rottweiler called Toby, whose gentleness guided Day in her assessment of the breed. She was not unaware of their reputation for aggression. But in an echo of the pit bull advocacy narrative, Day believed that their reputation "comes from Rottweilers having a great desire to please their owners. If an owner wants violence, he'll get it."

This is of course a false belief, rooted in sentimentality and merely personal experience. Many a child victim of Rottweilers raised in dog-loving families – those that survive at least – can sadly attest that in their homes violence was not wanted, but gotten anyway.

A recent case in point is that of one-year old Marcos Raya Jr. of Phoenix, Arizona. Momentarily set down on the floor by his grandmother, Raya was savaged to death by a family member's Rottweiler, who continued to maul the child until shot to death by police. Typically, the dog had allegedly never been violent before, and no discernible trigger could be identified.

(Beth Clifton photo)

(See the Raya case details at [Why Rottweilers are as deadly as pit bulls.](#))

Rottweiler reality

In its propensity for impulsive aggression a genetic cousin to the pit bull, the Rottweiler is the only breed that comes close to matching pit bull depredations on a per capita basis. To put this statement into perspective, dog bite epidemiology shows that both pit bulls and Rottweilers are about 10 times more likely to kill or disfigure someone than the average dog. The 35 years of dog attack data logged and posted by ANIMALS 24-7 demonstrate that between them, pit bulls and Rottweilers, they account for more than 70% of all human dog attack fatalities.

(See [Dog attack deaths & maimings, U.S. & Canada, 1982-2016.](#))

We hear far more about pit bull attacks than we do of Rottweiler attacks chiefly because the population of pit bulls is so much higher, currently about 5% of the North American dog population, while Rottweilers are about 1.8% of the dog

population.

(See “Rescued” pit bulls now outnumber pit puppies.)

Millions sold

The Good Dog Carl series has enjoyed enormous success. In 1990, Carl’s Christmas knocked celebrity author Judith Krantz out of her #4 position on the New York Times Best-Seller list, and in 1991, Carl’s Afternoon in the Park sold out a printing of 400,000 by publisher Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. With reissues, there are millions of Carl books in print.

One must always be cautious about assigning causal status to possibly coincidental data. Still, knowing the causal effect of other beloved dog stories in boosting breed sales – Dalmations surged enormously in popularity as a direct consequence of the 1961 adventure film, 101 Dalmations, for example – it is difficult to imagine that the rise in numbers of Rottweilers running parallel to the Good Dog Carl series is a coincidence. The reporter of a 1991 profile of Day in Entertainment Weekly remarked, “It’s not farfetched to speculate that Carl is partly responsible for boosting Rottweillers, last year for the first time ever, into the top five of the American Kennel Club’s most-popular breeds list.”

More ominously, as ANIMALS 24-7 observed in Why Rottweilers are as deadly as pit bulls, “Of the 110 people killed by Rottweilers in the U.S. and Canada since 1978, 109 of them killed after the publication of Good Dog, Carl, 83 were children of 11 years or younger; 78 were children of eight years or younger; 70 were children younger than age six.”

Alexandra Day, a.k.a. Sandra Louise Woodward Darling.

(Promotional photo)

Benefit of the doubt long since eroded

To give Day at least the initial benefit of the doubt, in 1985, when she published her first Carl-themed book, she could not have known that her own dog represented a breed with a disturbing propensity for violence against other animals and humans, because Rottweilers were still so uncommon in the population that the attack statistics were not yet alarming. Credulity regarding a breed’s character without proof to the contrary is not a sin.

But as time went by, and certainly by 2015, when her most recent Carl book was published, she had to have been aware of the unfolding evidence that Rottweilers are a demonstrably high-risk breed for all humans, but especially for children. Promoting the false and harmful myth of the “nanny dog” that can be left alone with responsibility for a child or children is cause for deep concern. And, yes, it is also reasonable ground for judgment of an author who has chosen lucre over ethical responsibility.

Merritt & Beth Clifton

Good Dog Carl is very likely the root cause of many human tragedies. If these books are to remain in circulation, and there is no legal reason why they should not, public safety principles dictate that they should be sold like cigarettes, with ostentatious warnings containing data regarding the increased risk the product represents to human health.

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