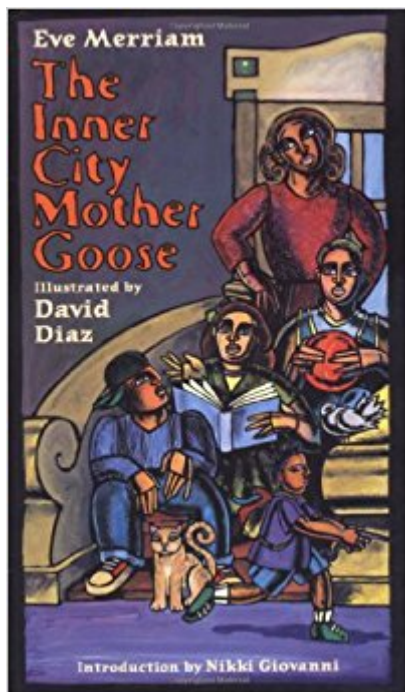


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The Inner City Mother Goose



Synopsis

Commenting on political and social issues related to the conditions of the inner city and inner city life, provocative new versions of the classic Mother Goose rhymes, originally published in 1969, are accompanied by new full-color illustrations by the Caldecott Medalist for Smoky Night.

Book Information

Age Range: 12 and up

Hardcover: 80 pages

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Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

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Customer Reviews

Grade 7 Up?Once upon a time?in 1969?the prolific, insightful Merriam penned these prophetically painful words. Fortunately for readers, they are still available. Unhappily ever after, however, they still ring disarmingly true. Originally written as a form of social and political commentary, the book was reprinted in 1982 and greeted with much controversy. The words are hard, honest, and, at times, harsh. The poetry is given fresh and updated verve with bold, multicultural illustrations by Diaz and an introduction by Nikki Giovanni. The Inner City Mother Goose travels to the place many fear to tread?and records the anger, agony, and angst present in everyday life. Unemployment, housing woes, drugs, violence, corruption, and neglect are presented in solid, rhythmic lines like "Now I lay me down to sleep/ I pray the double lock will keep," and "There was a crooked man,/ And he did very well." If Merriam thought her lines were appropriate in 1969, she would be saddened to know of their expanded meaning today. Giovanni's introduction leaves readers with perhaps the best reason to read and reread these lines? "Sticks and stones are easily forgotten; it is the words that stay with us."?Sharon Korbeck, Waupaca Area Public Library, WI Copyright 1996 Reed

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Gr. 9[^]-12. Anyone who thinks that "inner city" and "Mother Goose" are incompatible hasn't read a good collection of the rhymes to a child at bedtime and wondered, "Maybe I should skip this one . . ." These traditional rhymes have been violent from the beginning, and their origins often lay in social commentary. The Inner City Mother Goose makes no pretense of appealing to children. Someday, perhaps, the rhymes' biting, ironic commentary will be so far removed from reality that they become nonsense, but that day seems no closer than it was 27 years ago when the first edition of The Inner City Mother Goose was published as an adult book. The 1970 Booklist review called its verse "lacerating little rhymes, worlds removed in mood and content from the traditional Mother Goose poems." Most of the verses were illustrated with striking, gritty black-and-white photographs. Now published as a young adult book, the new edition includes a number of poems written after the first. It also omits several from the original book. Acrylic paintings by Caldecott-winner David Diaz illustrate 10 of the verses. Although the more sophisticated art in the first edition may actually have greater appeal to young adults, Diaz's small, intense paintings create portraits rich in composition, color, and gesture. The images, almost mythic in their sense of representing more than individual people, seem to move with the rhythm of the verse. No matter which illustrations the reader prefers, the power is in the poetry. As in any collection, some of the poems are better than others. As in any parody, knowledge of the original adds greatly to a reading of the verses. Still, the poems come together, uneven but undeniably powerful. They make their statements in different ways, with different tones, all contributing to a chorus that comes through loud and clear. When they first appeared, these poems sounded modern in spite of their nursery rhyme inspiration. They still do. Merriam's introduction to the second edition (1982) is reprinted here. In it, Merriam comments that the book became "just about the most banned book in the country," with most of the criticism centering on one vulgar word, though broadening into more general charges that seemed to confuse cause and effect. Some of the poems concern aspects of our society, such as violence, racism, and corruption, that most of us prefer to leave in darkness. Instead, the poetry occasionally flashes like summer lightning, suddenly illuminating what we would rather not see and exposing our fears in its swift, cold light. Whatever its history, and wherever librarians choose to shelve it, this book belongs in libraries: not because it mimics Mother Goose, not because it stirs controversy, but because it speaks with such clarity and in such an unexpected form. Carolyn Phelan

My mom always read nursery rhymes and other stories to me, but none like this! I still have the

books she read me when I was a toddler, and was glad to acquire this one as an adult! Some of the ones in this book relate to society today, with mature themes, much like the nursery rhymes of old--I didn't know their meaning until I was a teenager in high school! Anyway, this is a great collection with great art/pictures of brown or black people...

Great book in great shape.

Glad to be able to get this book. It was very controversial in the 60's and has been very hard to get.

I first heard Eve Merriam's "The Inner City Mother Goose" in 1971, when it was part of the Oral Interpretation performed by Richard Quezada that won the New Mexico State Speech contest. Rick had a wonderful deep voice, the sort that radio DJs would die for, and he made these poems really come alive. Today people get all excited by politically correct fairy tales, but for our generation it was Merriam turning nursery rhymes on their head to reflect the realities of the urban ghetto that were a sign of the times. These are not parodies, but telling satires that take beloved nursery rhymes as their point of departure. Most of the time her starting points are perfectly clear, as with "Simple Simon, "Jack Be Nimble, Jack Be Quick," and "If." Besides, not all of her reference points are nursery rhymes, because you will also see the echoes of Christmas carols (e.g., "Twelve Rooftops Leaping"). Other poems simply are in the general style of children's rhymes, albeit with more serious intent (but then remember, "Ring Around the Rosie" was about the Black Death). The language of some of these poems was shocking back in 1969, but, of course, today these words would not cause a ripple on a rap album. However, what is important is that here we are decades later and do any of us doubt that the world of which this poems speak still exists? This volume contains the text of the 1982 expanded edition, with a new introduction by poet Nikki Giovanni, and ten full-color paintings by David Diaz. Final Note: You know, the "real" Mother Goose (Elizabeth Vergoose) is buried in Boston's Old Granary Burial Ground, along with the victims of the Boston Massacre, John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and Paul Revere. Given her final resting place is amongst the patriots of the American Revolution, no, I do not believe she is spinning in her grave over Merriam's poems.

Dubbed a "powder keg" by LIBRARY JOURNAL when it was first published in 1969, THE INNER CITY MOTHER GOOSE is probably Eve Merriam's most influential, provocative, and controversial book. It was the source of two musical plays, INNER CITY, which opened on Broadway in 1971, and STREET DREAMS, which opened in 1982, the same year a new edition of the book was

released. A third edition, with an introduction by poet Nikki Giovanni, was published in 1996. Like the original Mother Goose rhymes, *THE INNER CITY MOTHER GOOSE* delivers social and political commentary. It is less subtle than Mother Goose rhymes, however. It will take many readers outside their own neighborhoods -- and their own comfort zones -- as it vividly depicts the brutal reality of life in contemporary urban areas: the poverty, the violence, the oppression, the filth, the corruption, the desperation. Still, readers are likely to recognize that they share many dreams with the *INNER CITY* characters: for love, fairness, education, a decent home, gainful employment. Many of the rhymes echo the words and/or the rhythm of familiar Mother Goose rhymes, creating the illusion of playfulness and innocence. Often the last line of a poem takes an unexpected twist that ambushes the reader as if he or she were being mugged on a dark street. Eve Merriam said, "I have been told that *THE INNER CITY MOTHER GOOSE* was at one time the second most banned book in the country. I didn't write it for children. It was never intended to be a children's book. But it has percolated down, certainly to high school and junior high." *THE INNER CITY MOTHER GOOSE* offers much food for thought and discussion -- from the forms it mimics to the social situations it portrays. Teen and pre-teen readers might need guidance to distinguish between a lifestyle described and a lifestyle endorsed.

While the language of Eve Merriam's *Inner City Mother Goose* seems shocking at first glance, it is a very accurate depiction of the happenings in the inner city. As a future educator, I firmly believe that the words in this book can be used to reach these less fortunate children far better than the book's counterpart. Not only did Merriam's book create controversy, but it created a bridge for those who live in that world to those who have not experienced it. The language is depictive of the society, and Diaz's illustrations and use of color illuminate the child's eye view of their world. This book is a required reading for any person who deals with children from this background in order to not only gain a better understanding of the child, but of your own world.

This book powerfully and accurately portrays the struggles of the inner city and the attitudes of those who have not experience or turn away from the very real problems. This is a wonderfully written and illustrated book, revealing the many truths behind the apparent innocence of nursery rhymes that originated from rich white societies.

I enjoyed and recommend this book because Merriam writes from the point of view of a person living in the situation, not of one looking down on it. She portrayed things the way they were then,

and sadly, the way they are now.

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