

Title	<i>The Three Robbers</i>				
Author (Text & Illustration)	Tomi Ungerer				
Publication Year	1961	Publisher	Phaidon Press		
Translated Versions	Japanese translation available.				
Words	350	Pages	48	YL Level	2.4
Synopsis					
<p>Three thieves, who had been robbing travelers every night to collect gold and silver, attacked a carriage, as usual, one day, and found a little girl. Tiffany, who was being taken to live with a wicked aunt, was happy to meet the thieves. The thieves carefully took Tiffany back to their hide-out. The next morning, when she saw the pile of treasure, she asked the thieves a simple question: "What is all this for?" The thieves, who had never thought of this, were bewildered, but then they gathered a group of underprivileged orphans, bought a castle, and started living there. One by one the children grew up and got married, and built a village around the castle. They built three high towers there for the trio.</p>					
Introduction					
<p>In this book, "antisocial people" who are thieves accidentally start to raise orphans. Thieves as protagonists would be unthinkable in a conventional picture book, and according to the official website of the author, Tomi Ungerer (1931–2019), it was even controversial to depict an ax on the cover of a children's book at the time. Ungerer was known for his sharp social satire and strong anti-establishment streak as a writer. He was also an artist who always tried to push the boundaries of what a picture book could be.</p> <p>To begin with, thieves are often fascinating protagonists in stories. Whether it is Phantom Thief Lupin or Dola and her family from <i>Laputa: Castle in the Sky</i>, there are many characters who are thieves but are also full of humanity and fascinate us. In that sense, I think the title of the Japanese version, "The Fantastic Trio," is probably better than the English "<i>The Three Robbers</i>" in describing the charm of the main characters.</p> <p>However, an interpretation like "These thieves were actually good people" or "It's a good thing that bad guys changed their mind and became philanthropists" would be too shallow. I think the book asks the reader to question something more profound. It can be read as a message on how the government or the community is supposed to be responsible for saving orphans in the first place, and thieves taking over the role of rescuing orphans says something about the world.</p> <p>What you also notice in the way the story is told is that the only specific dialogue in this picture</p>					

book is Tiffany's one line, "What is all this for?" By contrast, the trio has no lines and we do not even learn their names. While the other characters are illustrated in color, the trio is in black costumes, like Kuroko, the stagehands in traditional Japanese theater. But the trio is symbolized by their trademark hats. The coat of arms of the castle has three hats, and the towers built by the children look just like the trio's hats. Also, strangely, all the children who are taken in are dressed in red cloaks. The contrast of black and red is reminiscent of Stendhal's novel *The Red and the Black*, and you cannot help but wonder if it has any significance.

The commentary in the translated version states that Ungerer dedicated this work to his daughter. I do not know what the author meant by that, but sometimes the presence of a child can be a catalyst that gives meaning to a person's life. Some men live aimless lives before finding their purpose after meeting little girls.

When I read this work as a child, I perceived a vaguely frightening atmosphere, with only the orange ax and robbers' tools standing out against the black and azure background. However, re-reading it again with adult eyes, I was overwhelmed by the depth of this work.

Ungerer left behind 140 works and was awarded the Andersen Award (Illustrators Award) in 1998, which is called the Nobel Prize of children's literature.

(Text: Megumi Kobayashi)