

## WHO WAS BEATRIX POTTER?

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Picture of Beatrix Potter is by courtesy of The Victoria & Albert Museum



The White Rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland* by John Tenniel

First and foremost, Beatrix Potter created the most beloved rabbit of all time. Just picture Peter with his cottontail, whiskers, and pale blue jacket; does a smile creep involuntarily across your face? Who created this curious, naughty, greedy, clever, brave, and irresistibly lovable animal?



Beatrix Potter was born nearly a hundred fifty years ago in Victorian London: July 28, 1866. It was a time of feverish creativity in literature and the arts. Mary Ann Evans was producing luminous novels under her masculine pen name George Eliot. The Pre-Raphaelite artists, championed by leading critic John Ruskin, were painting lyrical scenes of languid dreamy subjects in flowing lines and pastel colors, and a prominent member of their group, John Everett Millais, was friendly with the Potters when Beatrix was a little girl and showed her his work. Shy, whimsical, eccentric Charles Dodgson, installed at Christ Church College, Oxford, went rowing one famous afternoon with the dean's daughter and shortly thereafter---under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll---released the first edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Beatrix Potter encountered *Alice* at age seven and later drew her own illustrations. Algernon Swinburne, decadently poeticizing, penned lines that were to impress Oscar Wilde, whom the Potters met, and, indefatigably, William Morris redecorated England inside and out, while Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephens, clambered about on Alpine peaks and recorded his adventures for posterity. Randolph Caldecott, the inventive story artist par excellence (our best American picture books each year are awarded a medal in his honor), was publishing in the *Illustrated London News*, which was also a site for uncanny art of Gustave Doré, both artists' work known to young Beatrix Potter. Other children's book illustrators Kate Greenaway and Walter Crane were formative as well. And let's not forget the irrepressible, epileptic, and peripatetic Edward Lear ("The Owl and the Pussycat"), who was disgorging his books of notable nonsense, one of which was given to Beatrix Potter at the tender age of four and a half. All these contemporary artists and writers were influential and formed the cultural ambience in which her unique imagination took flight.

Potter was the first child and only daughter of Rupert Potter, a barrister and an avid amateur photographer, and Helen Leech Potter. The Potters resided in Bolton Gardens, Kensington, were endowed with inherited wealth, initially made in trade. This source seems to have mildly embarrassed Helen Potter,

whose abiding snobbishness caused her to express contempt years later for her daughter's suitors, one after another, on the dubious ground of class difference, so that the obedient Beatrix felt she had to conceal her affections as long as possible for fear of crossing her mother. Eventually her bother Bertram, six years her junior, secretly married and went off to live in Scotland rather than precipitate family dissension.

Nevertheless, the Potters' means provided them with a comfortable life in town as well as summers away in a series of rented properties in beautiful country settings, first in Scotland and later in the Lake District. These summers proved of inestimable value to young Beatrix, for she grew up immersing herself in a rustic life, tramping about on her own, delighting in the land and its native fauna and flora. She wandered freely, gathered specimens of insects and small mammals as well as mushrooms, which fascinated her, and she constantly sketched from nature. She expressed her strong preference for country over city years later in one of her most pithy picture books, the *Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse* (1918). With a plot line that follows Aesop's fable, Potter tells her child readers how Timmy Willie, a stout placid little country mouse, fell asleep one day in a vegetable hamper and was accidentally carted off to the city. There, despite being welcomed by his sophisticated rodent relations, he was perpetually on edge and terrified of the cat. His sleek cousin Johnny then took the reverse journey only to endure a different form of misery on Timmy Willie's tranquil farm. Potter, in the book's final sentence, confides her own clear preference for the country!

Beatrix Potter had a solitary girlhood. In keeping with the mores of her day, girls were not permitted to go to school but were tutored at home and not encouraged to play with children from other families. As Unitarian Dissenters, moreover, the Potters were consigned to the margins of Anglican London society, and this may have contributed to her shyness and social awkwardness. Like so many Victorian girls and women of her class, she was not encouraged to grow up. She lived with her parents well into her forties. She had no money of her own and not a shred of external independence. She wrote that, by age 28, she had never been anywhere by herself. With her parents, she moved seasonally from city to country and back, and in relation to them, she remained a child. We do know, however, that despite her dutiful demeanor and outward compliance, she felt rebellious, for she kept a coded journal and wrote many letters. Qualities she gleaned from the conditions of her personal life, from her repressive epoch, and from her close observations of nature found their way into her children's books and lent them their staying power.



Young Beatrix Potter courtesy of the Beatrix Potter Society



Timmy Willie and Johnny Town-Mouse



The Garden at Little Ees Wyke, painted by Beatrix Potter in 1902. By kind permission of the Linder Collection



Mrs. Tittlemouse

Potter, moreover, like many authors and artists famous for literature and art addressed to children, such as Hans Christian Andersen (fairy tales), Robert Louis Stevenson (*Treasure Island*), Margaret Wise Brown (*Goodnight Moon*), P.L. Travers (*Mary Poppins*) and Maurice Sendak (*Where the Wild Things Are*), never became a parent. One external cause of her childlessness was the sudden death in 1905 of Norman Warne, her beloved fiancé and son of her London publisher, with whom she had gradually fallen in love during protracted negotiations over her earliest children's books, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *The Tailor of Gloucester*, and *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*. Warne died of undiagnosed lymphatic leukemia as Potter was nearing forty. Later, with money earned from the sale of her books, she purchased a farm of her own, Hill Top, in the Lake District. She married a country solicitor named William Heelis, but her childbearing years were over. It is intriguing to consider what role childlessness may have played in shaping Potter's sensibility and her extraordinary ability to communicate to children via the natural world. As stated, it may have freed her from constraints of over-protectiveness, which tend to put on brakes and blinders. Naïve sweetness is nearly always deceptive in her work. She enjoyed children at a distance, rather as an extension of her own unbroken link with childhood. In writing to and for them (many of her books began as picture letters addressed to a particular boy or girl, most famous of them being Noel Moore, the son of her former governess Annie Carter Moore, for whom she wrote her first, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*), one senses she is also addressing a still vital aspect of herself, and this is typical of the finest children's authors, especially those who have not crossed the divide into parenthood.

A telling example of her stoicism and a clue as to her enduring attitudes toward children and animals may be found in her surprising opposition to a proposed addition to the British Protection of Animals Act (1911) that would have prohibited children from witnessing or participating in the slaughter of animals. Potter, who knew and loved animals, reasoned that, since human beings do indeed butcher animals for food, even appealing animals like pigs, ducks, and furry rabbits, children should not be kept innocent of that truth. Moreover, despite her lifelong care for the well-being of animals and her adoption of them almost exclusively as the characters in her stories, Potter was devoid of sentimentality toward them. Exceptions were made for one or two of her most cherished long-term pets, including the hedgehog she kept on a leash on whom she based the eponymous Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle and a beloved mouse called Hunca-Munca, who died falling off a chandelier and also became a character. Staunch realism along with whimsy pervade Potter's children's books, and her clear-eyed approach to life enabled her to probe emotional depths beyond their pretty pastel

surfaces. Their wise unflinching truth is in part, I believe, what has enabled them to survive for over a century.

Children and animals seem almost interchangeable in Potter's inner world, and in real life she took on the care of many pets over the years, including frogs, lizards, snakes, hedgehogs, mice, rabbits, and pigs, as well as dogs and cats. These pets became subjects for her endless sketchbook studies. She enjoyed leading one of her rabbits Benjamin by a leash and fed it gooseberries. Unlike Aesop and La Fontaine, she observed animal behavior not merely in order to reflect on the morality of humans; she wanted to capture them as they are, true to species. Yet, her animals are drawn so that we can identify readily with them. Potter's Peter, for example, is both rabbit and boy: the more rabbit, the more boy, and vice versa, so that he confronts us with our own groundedness in the natural world.

Today, when so many children ignore the natural world and have their eyes glued to screens, robotic gadgets, and other electronic devices, the fauna and flora that Beatrix Potter loved so much go unheeded. Her exemplary life, during which she eschewed self-pity, and her crisp forthright picture stories, leavened with that marvelously wry sense of humor, matter more than ever. When we revisit them and introduce children to them (there are more than thirty), they re-attach us to pulsating out of doors life, to gardens, brooks, and woods, to tender, trenchant, sometimes cruel lessons, and to the wonder of our precarious place in it all.



Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle was a hedgehog!



Benjamin Bunny and Peter Rabbit