

## Beatrix Potter

Potter was born into a wealthy London family who lived in Bolton Gardens, Kesington. They were very controlling and restrictive. Horrified of their humble class origins in trade, the Potters did not let Beatrix socialize. She was educated at home, studying books, music and watercolour painting. She was a gifted watercolour painter and felt attracted to nature and animals. During her holidays in the Scottish country side and the Lake District she sketched flowers, mushrooms and rabbits, and later in her life when she became a farmer, cows, pigs and sheep. She kept two rabbits as her pets, Peter Piper and Benjamin Bounce. Her interests were more scientific than artistic at the beginning, she had a theory about fungi, but the science world was close to women at that time and had to content herself with illustrating works of natural history.



During her youth (1866-1897), she tried to make a living for herself and gain independence from her family by illustrating books and making commercial cards. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, her first work, was rejected by many publishers, so she had it printed privately. A first edition appeared in 1901 and sold so well that she paid for another edition only two months later. One of the publishers who had rejected her offered then to do the book if she would do the illustrations in watercolour instead of black and white. Her career as a children's author was launched. Peter Rabbit was followed by some sequels featuring Peter –*Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, *Tale of Mr Tod*, and *Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*–, and was the first in a series of twenty-three Peter Rabbit books including *The Tailor of Gloucester*, *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, *The Tale of Johnny Town-Mouse*, *Appley Dapply's Nursery Rhymes*, or *Cecily Parsley Nursery Rhymes*. After 1913, there was a decline in her literary output because she became involved in farming and local politics in the Lake District. With the money she had made from her writing she bought many acres of land in the Lake District to prevent them from being developed –tourism, industry- and eventually donated it to the National Trust.

*The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was created from an illustrated letter that Beatrix Potter had sent to four-year-old Noel Moore, one of the children of her last governess, The letter began as follows: “I don't know what to write to you so I shall tell you the story about four little rabbits whose names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cottontail and Peter. They lived with their mother in a sand bar under the root of a big fir tree” (1893). Annie Moore suggested that she could turn the letters into books, which she did, borrowing the letters back and reworking them.

The Peter Rabbit books are child-size. Potter's biographer, Margaret Lane, writes that “the form of the book was decided according to her ideas of what a small

child's book should be –very small itself with only one or two simple sentences on each page, and a picture every time one turned over”. Unity of proportion runs through these tiny books: small characters move in a small world through a plot which comes full circle in a short amount of time. Furthermore, in her language and in her illustrations, Potter advances her story in small units and uses small details. The simple plot of *Peter Rabbit* is predictable but exciting. It has the typical circular structure of children's stories, Peter, a child rabbit, moves from the security of home to the danger of the unfamiliar, before arriving home again. For over half of the book, Potter puts Peter into trouble and gets him out of it again. His venture into the garden is a venture into experience.

Potter is a central figure in the development of the modern picture book. Her text and illustrations are mutually dependent, and the latter enhance the former. After receiving a copy of Dr Seuss's first book *And to Think that I saw it on Mulberry Street* (1937), she called the book “the cleverest book I have met with for many years. The swing and merriment of the pictures and the natural truthful simplicity of the untruthfulness. I think my own success was largely due to straight forward lying, spontaneous natural bare-faced! Too many story books for children are condescending, self-conscious inventions”.

Some critics have seen the rabbit books as a reflection of Potter's own struggles with her parents and the constraints of Victorian-Edwardian society. Other critics have seen social themes in some of her works, especially *The Tailor of Gloucester* and *Squirrel Nutkin*. Potter was writing at a time of social unrest in England –Irish nationalism, working class gaining political franchise, labour unions, women's movement. She nearly always writes of a male protagonist. When there are female protagonists –*Jemima Puddleduck*, *Mrs Tiggy-Winkle*, *The Pie and the Patty-Pan*– she often criticizes traditional womanhood, but her rebels tend to fail. The successful rebels are the males, with whom she identified.

Contemporary children's encounters with stories are often filtered through commodities, adaptations, merchandising that grow around a popular text or author and that are known as the *post-text*. Beatrix Potter and her rabbit books have generated a great post-text, beyond anything she might have imagined, although the truth is that Potter herself was the first to see the commercial possibilities of her books. Eager to become independent from her constricting family, she became a business woman. She registered a patent on a Peter Rabbit doll in 1903 and made copyright arrangements for games (“I think it is a game that children might find exiting if they were fond of the book”), more dolls, wall paper and china. Beatrix Potter merchandising was in full swing in 1908. She also allowed her characters to be used for charities.

### **Bibliography and works consulted**

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Mackey, Margaret ed. *Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow, 2002.

Kutzner, Daphne. *Beatrix Potter: Writing in Code*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

**Picture:** “Beatrix Potter Plaque”. (c) Leo Reynolds, 2007. In flickr, with cc licence.

Who was Beatrix Potter? Watch this story, one of our 'British tales' videos about characters and people from British history, to find out! Preparation. Story by LearnEnglish Kids. Animation by Slurpy Studios. Game. Documents. Have you ever read any Beatrix Potter books? Did you enjoy them? Have you got a favourite writer? Write a comment and tell us about it! Average: 3.67213. Average: 3.7 (183 votes). Engage your students with these Beatrix Potter Books Book Unit. Members receive unlimited access to 49,000+ cross-curricular educational resources, including interactive activities, clipart, and abctools custom worksheet generators. These Beatrix Potter Books Book Unit are great for teachers, homeschoolers and parents. FILTER THIS CATEGORY: What's This? 1. In this classic Beatrix Potter tale, a naughty Tom Kitten gets tangled up in Samuel Whiskers Roly Poly Pudding, totally unable to escape. Will Samuel Whiskers have kitten pie for dinner, or will someone come to Tom's rescue? This version compiled and formatted by Kiwi Opa (Peter Whittaker) is suitable and best viewed on screen. The story of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter is a tale which has entertained children for generations. Herewith the classic children's story is provided in a downloadable and read online format designed in a manner similar to the feel of the original Beatrix Potter books. Naughty Peter disobeys his mother and goes into Mr McGregor's Reviews (14).