



Blind Spot: The Wind in the Willows

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Margaret Meek voices her reservations.

Must we love 'great' books? Should the acknowledged quality of a text preclude personal dislike? **BfK** launches an occasional series in which established figures in the children's book world admit to ... well, a blind spot. We begin with one of the most celebrated of all children's classics, **The Wind in the Willows**.

Margaret Meek

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My long drawn-out unease about **The Wind in the Willows** stems from the same roots as the pleasure of more discerning readers. Those who tell me they like the book, and many genuinely love it, praise the very features of it which give me a frisson of mild disgust. The prejudices which survive my every re-reading, (I try hard, once a decade) reveal the boundaries of my conscious awareness of reading as *desire*. So, let me confront the limits of my delight in books for children, remembering always, that both author and reader are subject to the laws of the unconscious, where time doesn't exist.

Bordering the garden of the house where I lived until I was 12 was a small but fast-moving stream - a 'burn' in my dialect. To play on the bank was forbidden, therefore always attractive. In summer, when the water level was lower, crawling along the branches of an overhanging elder, and catching minnows in jam jars were tolerated activities. Raucously bad-tempered ducks sometimes appeared, but for the most part the burn belonged to skinny, slimy boot-button eyed water rats who darted and scrambled out of holes with noises like soup-slurping. I was fascinated and appalled. I recall the nauseous horror of their presence in a second. I cannot love a rat, nor can I imagine one as the wise, tolerant, poetry-writing, picnic-provisioning hero of this particular arcadian novel.

Perhaps I could have grown into a tolerance of the bizarre behaviours, the language and snobbery of Rat, Mole, Badger and Toad had I met them in the early days when I enjoyed the naughtiness of Peter Rabbit, the bad temper of Squirrel Nutkin, and the vague menace of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. Or, when, as an adult, I first admired the matter-of-factness of **Charlotte's Web** and the fabulation of **The Sheep Pig** I should have taken the trouble to understand more of the late adolescent boys' attachment to Toad, Winnie the Pooh and The Hobbit. I could have found my way into the world of the River Bank and the Wild Wood if I'd followed Jan Needle's retelling of the tale as a social satire, but none of these options takes away my feeling of utter exclusion from this fictive universe. True, I was reading boys' comics and Elinor Brent-Dyer when the librarian offered me a fine, clearly unread copy of **The Wind in the Willows** as a special treat. But it was already too late. Not even the enchantment of Ernest Shepard's drawings could entice me into that world. I knew exactly how Badger in his long dressing-gown and down-at-heel slippers would smell. At no time did I want any of that male company; it represented too many kinds of social exclusions. Three bachelors of a certain (or rather, uncertain) age, free from any real responsibilities, spending their days messing about in boats, and gossiping about the intolerable social habits of Toad whom they consider to be their friend just made me embarrassed. I knew what boys did in corners.

They formed exclusive clubs, discussed girls whom they looked at sideways without turning round, and taught each other how to exploit the superiority they recognised as theirs by right.

The world of the River Bank is a men's club, with Fortnum & Mason picnics for luncheon, and suppers in warm kitchens underground without the problems of shopping or washing up. When the Otter child goes missing, his father 'lonely and heartsore' watches by the ford where he taught the little one to swim. Mrs Otter appears only as the 'they' of 'the Otters', who insisted Rat should stay to supper, and 'keep it up late with his old comrade'. To believe in the artistic success of **The Wind in the Willows** one has to enter this enchanted circle of friends. Grahame's careful, devoted biographer, Peter Green, and his most important and discerning apologist, Humphrey Carpenter, do this well.

So my readings of **The Wind in the Willows** are those of a pagan, an outsider. I can't believe in the Piper at the Gates of Dawn, but I have learned a great deal about the embarrassment suffered by agnostics. The more I read about Grahame as a person, the more I see in this text the psyche of its author. The words open up an adult's longing to be a child granted an adult's freedom to do what he likes.

As for the famed humour of Toad's adventures, they are more irresponsible than funny. Most enthusiasts don't recollect the details of the text, but remember well-staged versions of **Toad of Toad Hall**. When John Betjeman explored, on television, the delights of going up the Thames Valley by rail, I caught a glimpse of irony and nostalgia that reminded me of Toad's social upstartness. But I'm not enticed by any commentator's attempt to turn the story into an allegory or social fable. It hasn't the required depth. So Toad remains a creature of stagey pranks (what my parents called 'carrying on'), which seem now a kind of fin de siècle buffoonery, like charades. I wonder if the laughter they provoke is ever less than caustic. Far from sustaining the illusion of an animal world that is preferable to that of humans, or even of one that, post Aesop, judges our frailties, Toad simply highlights his creator's ambivalences about the relations of animals and people. He is a pantomime personality. This is not the case with any of Beatrix Potter's subtler creations. I am never afraid for Toad, but Jemima Puddleduck provokes every scrap of my protective instinct.

My perpetual difficulty is with the actual language of the text, not the quotations, references, allusions, all of which stroke any reader's sensibilities with prideful pleasure at knowing a little Latin, nor yet the 'ornateness and wit' that Humphrey Carpenter says makes it difficult for the young. There's a hollow tone in the way the author handles the implications of social distinctions that is different from Lewis Carroll's steely shots. For example, Rat rummaging in Mole's house for things to eat encourages Mole to explain 'how that was thought out, and how this was got as a windfall from an aunt, and that was a wonderful find and a bargain, and this other thing was bought out of laborious savings and a certain amount of going without'. You can hear the rise and fall exactly, the implication being that Rat's tact made up for Mole's bad taste, when in fact Mole's lack of subtlety is exposed quite cruelly. Grahame knew as well as anyone about these economic devices, but here, as elsewhere, disdain wins out. The sentimental nonsense of the Piper at the Gates of Dawn put me off for years. Compared with my genuine panic in deep Highland forests, this rural deity makes me turn the page to avoid what now comes across in Shepard's illustration and Grahame's text as an advertisement for shampoo. Rat's longing to go south, repressed by Mole's fisticuffs, makes it seem that the author is, in this scene, being too hard on himself. Gauguin had already made such a trip respectable.

My particular interest is in the kind of reading experience **The Wind in the Willows** provides for children who have little contact with Victorian children's books and are outside the charmed circle of the author's friends. Humphrey Carpenter suggests that younger children like the 'story parts' and read the book 'for themselves with *complete enjoyment* [my emphasis] in adolescence'. His case that the River and the Wild Wood are 'more than adequate symbols for the deepest level of the artistic imagination' is, I think, over-generous. The book, as a whole, offers an image of childhood, as does **Peter Pan**, but not a general account of all childhoods. I guess it creates for some readers in each generation, notably those boys of quietist taste who are tentative about growing up, a place of reverie. Grahame was clearly ambivalent about adulthood, so his escape was to revisit this alternative world where he was safe from the responsibilities and demands of the everyday (his wife and his duties at the Bank of England), as he told the stories to his son. The much vaunted wisdom of the characters is too uncomplicated, so the book is less mature than is often claimed. It also has, for me at least, deep deceptions, which careful scholarship may even perpetuate as examples of poetic

skill.

Carpenter's view that **The Wind in the Willows** is 'the finest achievement of children's literature up to the date it was written and perhaps afterwards' seems excessive, although by now my limitations as a critic of it are clear. In the small, enclosed, excluding and exclusive world of the River Bank and the Wild Wood, even allowing for Toad's outbreaks and the threat of the ill-mannered weasels, and accepting the mock-heroic endeavours of Rat and his friends to emulate the champions of old, young readers meet a storyteller of distinct verbal felicity, in parts, but of clearly limited range for modern children. The excitement of reading is a dialogue with their future. Here they encounter the author's imagined past. For a time it may prove delightful, even re-creative. But this arcadian world is neither brave nor new; it has too few people in it. To meet them is to encounter the same person, the author, variously disguised as a Rat, a Mole, a Badger and a Toad, all equally egocentric and self-regarding. Pity.

Margaret Meek has a worldwide reputation for her books on reading. Her latest, **On Being Literate**, has just been published - see Ed's page for details and comment.

The biography by Peter Green mentioned in this piece is **Kenneth Grahame** (Murray, 1959); see also Humphrey Carpenter's **Secret Gardens** (Allen & Unwin, 1985). Sadly both titles are out of print but maybe available in libraries.

The Wind in the Willows was first published in 1908, but Shepard's famous illustrations weren't added until 1930. It is one of the most re-issued and re-illustrated of all children's books and is available in a large variety of editions.

Methuen Children's Books have recently published four small versions of stories from this much-loved classic. They are abridged and form an ideal introduction for young children:

The River Bank and The Open Road, 0 416 167128

The Adventures of Toad, 0 416 16722 5

The Return of The Hero, 0 416 16692 X

The Wild Wood and Mole's Christmas, 0 416 167020

The illustrations accompanying this piece are taken from the above books, which cost £2.99 each and are excellent value for such delightful miniature hardbacks. Despite Margaret Meek's 'Blind Spot', we recommend them to you.

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