



Protocols of Reading: The Little Books of Beatrix Potter

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Margaret Meek on what children could learn from the 'little books'.

In the summer of 1992 the Beatrix Potter Society held its conference at Ambleside to discuss 'the little books' and invited me to talk about them as texts for modern children now learning to read. The exercise engaged me in ways I hadn't anticipated, not least because the many current versions of the stories - big books, videos, the ballet, plates, calendars and the rest - create a different context for looking at the originals. So I invited my audience of Potter experts to re-read the words and pictures of the little books with me as something 'anthropologically strange' to see what children could learn from the texts that might be 'protocols' for their later experiences. Here, taken more or less directly from the talk, are some of the things I still think about.

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The importance of the little books of Beatrix Potter in children's reading is the same as that of any others they enjoy to help them to know what reading is like and what it is good for. These are superb stories which become complete and memorable reading acts. As they listen to adults reading them, children do not know that they are hearing not only the words of the author, but the tune of the reader's, and the author's, recollected childhood. As their familiarity with the stories increases they begin to realise that, in each story, everything is not quite as it seems. The world in the tale, in both words and pictures, has certain unfamiliarities, especially to modern city children for whom Mr McGregor's garden is an allotment. The interesting and strange thing is that they are quite ready to accept the convention of animals who talk and wear clothes, but are perplexed by the hints that earlier readers would take up more quickly, that is, references to all the other stories Beatrix Potter assumed her readers already knew. This intertextuality is the distinctive mark of children's literature in English. Some children learn it earlier than others.

Here is Jemima Puddle-duck; not really, but in a picture of a conversation between her and a foxy gentleman: her eager, upturned talking face; his condescending tilt of the head, his hands behind his back under his 'tail' coat. Adult readers grasp the semiotic significance of this at once, but children's experience of this kind of interpretation is still a-growing. The full detail of the picture contrasts with the laconic nature of the words. 'Indeed! how interesting!', the foxy gentleman is saying. So the readings include interpretations of facial expressions, steps (see the placing of the feet), flowers (fox-gloves, with a hyphen). 'You would not find my earth - my winter house - so convenient?', is typical Potter: deliberate use of the right word, followed by what seems like an explanation for the inexperienced reader, but, at the same time, a piece of double play with Jemima's ignorance. Can you recollect when you came to this kind of understanding? When, do you think, children have a conscious grasp of it? My experience suggests that they are intrigued by 'what's going on' some time before they can explain it. They catch the implications in the adult reader's tune and emphases as particular to this author.

Like most of the little books, **The Tale of Jemima Puddle-duck** is a story about hints, of not saying what is meant. As experienced adult readers we know *not* to treat most of the things and incidents illustrated in the pictures as they are presented: the feathers piled up in the 'tumble-down shed... made of old soap-boxes' are 'comfortable and very soft'.

Then there is the foxy *politesse*: 'he promised to take great care of her nest'. Next comes the piling up of the threats by hints of association, 'sage and onions' in the context of 'a dinner-party all to ourselves!'.

This is the play of significant details of the cultural code to be interpreted as *menace*. As we watch children discovering it, we might ask ourselves how we learned to construct understanding on at least two levels of awareness, as when the author tells us that the hound puppies are 'out at walk with the butcher'. The faithful dog, Kep, does not tell Jemima, so the readers are left to speculate about the part they played in her release. The story moves to its climax - Jemima hears a noise outside and doesn't quite know what is happening. The words are simply: 'and nothing more was ever seen of that foxy-whiskered gentleman'. Right from the start we have been made aware of Jemima's inadequacies: a wearying stubbornness and a lack of nous come in phrases such as 'not much in the habit of flying' and 'rather fancied a tree-stump amongst some tall fox-gloves'.

Unlike music, the score of Beatrix Potter's texts has no expression marks. The reader has to orchestrate all the polysemic layers of implications from the words and pictures alone. We are impressed by the shop-keeperness of **Ginger and Pickles**, the turned-aroundness of the rat problem in **Samuel Whiskers**, the brutish anger of **Squirrel Nutkin**, the frantic housekeeping of **Mrs Tittlemouse**. We discover how economical their creator is with details. Chase that red cotton handkerchief from the onions to Mrs Tiggy-winkle and we are really in the know. Detect the exaggerated niceties of politeness - like the greeting in the street - in **The Tale of the Pie and the Patty-pan**. Notice the enchantment of naming - not just characters but also actions: 'some are coughing in a fat voice', or the secrecy of the rats saying 'I fear we shall be obliged to leave this pudding'.

Adults and other experts look for help with all this from the details of Beatrix Potter's life: mewed up in London, twelve painting lessons, illicit pets, close observation, a brilliant ear for conversations and a keen eye for looking. The rituals of conversational exchange, so clearly part of middle-class life in *The Boltons*, bring with them overtones of moral judgement and implicit criticism. Just how havoc-making are the two bad mice I realised quite late when, for the first time, I saw the dolls in the dolls' house as a couple whose universe was being turned upside down. The American critic, Robert Sale says that Beatrix Potter is constantly urging us to look at animals and to ask about 'the animalness of people and the peopleness of animals', because 'animals are the backbone of children's literature as we know it'. A boy whose mother I knew told me that although he wanted **The Tale of Samuel Whiskers** read to him at bedtime, he did not want the book in the room with him overnight. Beatrix Potter knew herself as a creator with power, the kind that authors want over their readers.

My suggestion so far has been that we cannot know how children read the little books, what they 'make' of them, unless we understand something of what we, the older generation, are up to when we read to inexperienced readers these laden texts from a culture that is part of our history but no longer present. Here are some short cuts through newish areas of awareness. First, children recognise pictures and drawings as feelings: 'She's sad?', 'he's angry?' are the easy ones. Their way into Beatrix Potter's stories is by means of the visual clues interpreted from the pictures because children know, from television and advertising, how to do that before they read print. They also learn to treat words as oral playthings, so they can adopt **Appley Dapply's Nursery Rhymes** as a book friend, and enjoy 'amiable' and 'periwig?' and the attraction of 'Tap, tap, tappit! Tap tappit! Why - I really believe it's a little black rabbit.'

The author's words linger in the ear by means of these vocalic textual devices. When certain phrases are well known we hear them repeated in other dramatic contexts; '"No teeth, no teeth, no teeth" said Mr Jackson.' 'Doing the voices?' lets the tune of the text be part of the feeling that comes with understanding the implications of the pictures. Word recognition comes last, and memory seals up the whole reading act as inner speech, so that young readers become, in their time, both the teller and the told. What they repeat as they re-read is what they keep - the pleasure of the text - the word play interwoven with the feeling for characters in dire straits.

Beatrix Potter was very fussy about the appearance of her words on the page. Scrupulous punctuation, phrase markers, are responsible for part of the build-up of Peter Rabbit's inevitable encounter with Mr McGregor. We hardly notice that one of the earliest lessons sorted out in these little pages is the English tense system: the past, within the past, in the past, 'Old Mrs Rabbit was a widow; she earned her living by knitting rabbit-wool mittens and muffetees. (I once bought a

pair at a bazaar).? One young reader stopped to ask, 'Does she use her own hair?'. How many questions of this kind arise from first encounters? ?She also sold herbs, and rosemary tea, and rabbit tobacco (which is what we call lavender)?. Do we? Not really. But some children remember later the link between the book and the bush.

The most impressive thing for me about Beatrix Potter's little books is the number of reading lessons that lurk in these brilliantly economical texts constructed to meet her exigent artistic demands. Children learning to read, especially after they go to school, are very conscious of the cost-benefit ratio. The texts *seem* easy, yet each re-reading confirms the protocols that beginners have to understand if they are to be successful. These are not simply about how to get the words right, but, equally, if not more importantly, beginners need experience of and attitudes towards reading which carry them beyond the early disentangling struggles.

Briefly, here are some of the reading experiences the little books make possible by giving young readers pleasure and showing reading as different from any other activity: word play, memorable phrases, unforgettable episodes remembered as images, splendid stories which set standards for all those that follow. Sense and sentences, actions and intentions are all subtly textured. In each story Beatrix Potter offers a totality of experience, thought and feeling woven together. The littleness of the books in their original format makes them undaunting. They are portable, for dipping into, remembering and resavouring. This pausability makes reading special; stopping to wonder, to ask about a world which makes questions about rabbit hair important, and offering the understanding that literature is, in the end, made of words, images and imagination. Only later do adults see that the miniature worlds which children enter with such pleasure are also worlds of *longing*, like the dolls' house, and of the beauty of fine almost invisible stitching on a wedding garment. Yet, throughout the little books there runs a good plain sense of what life is all about - all that household chattering.

Perhaps the most important reading lesson of the little books, and the one all children must learn is persistence, in both life and reading. Beatrix Potter encourages children to fix a level exploratory gaze on the intricacies of her words and pictures. She understood that reality is the fantasy we live by.

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For further information on The Beatrix Potter Society, write to The Membership Secretary, High Banks, Stoneborough Lane, Budleigh Salterton, Devon EX9 6HL.

Beatrix Potter's books are all published by Frederick Warne and we thank them for their help in using these illustrations. They produce a **Resource Pack for Teachers** costing £3.99 including p&p. Send cheque to Frederick Warne at 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ.

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