

THE COOL WEB

The Pattern of
Children's Reading

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The author as exemplifying the actual transformed by the imagination and memory

Beatrix Potter wrote this account of herself in 1929 for an American audience. She had been asked to speak about the 'roots' her work had sprung from. In her biography, Margaret Lane makes it clear that the life of the author of 'Peter Rabbit' was far from being as straightforward as this account suggests. So that in common with all other writers of stories, Beatrix Potter makes one up about herself to hold the experience she used in her books. See how the needs of the invalid child, the audience for Peter Rabbit, focused the writing. Note the author's persistence in the face of publishers' reluctance: a conviction of worth which transcended rejection. Then compare this account with Maurice Sendak's, and see how the double facet of author-artist works. In both cases the remembrance of things read and seen in childhood is central. The enclosed world of Beatrix Potter is now open to every critical wind that blows, but the process of writing for children has a remarkable continuity.

'Roots' of the Peter Rabbit Tales Beatrix Potter

The question of 'roots' interests me! I am a believer in 'breed'; I hold that a strongly marked personality can influence descendants for generations. In the same way that we farmers know that certain sires – bulls – stallions – rams – have been 'prepotent' in forming breeds of shorthorns, thoroughbreds, and the numerous varieties of sheep. I am descended from generations of Lancashire yeomen and weavers; obstinate, hard-headed, *matter-of-fact* folk. (There you find the downright matter-of-factness which imports an air of reality.) As far back as I can go, they were Puritans, Nonjurors, Nonconformists, Dissenters. Your *Mayflower* ancestors sailed to America; mine at the same date were sticking it out at home; probably rather enjoying persecution. The most remarkable old 'character' amongst my ancestors – old Abraham Crompton, who sprang from mid-Lancashire, bought land for pleasure in the Lake District, and his descendants seem to have drifted

back at intervals ever since – though none of us own any of the land that belonged to old Abraham.

However – it was not the Lake District at all that inspired me to write children's books. I hope this shocking statement will not distress you kind Americans, who see Peter Rabbits under every Westmorland bush. I am inclined to put it down to three things – mainly – (1) the aforesaid matter-of-fact ancestry; (2) the accidental circumstance of having spent a good deal of my childhood in the Highlands of Scotland, with a Highland nurse girl, and a firm belief in witches, fairies and the creed of the terrible John Calvin (the creed rubbed off, but the fairies remained); (3) a peculiarly precocious and tenacious memory. I have been laughed at for what I say I can remember; but it is admitted that I can remember quite plainly from one and two years old; not only facts, like learning to walk, but places and sentiments – the way things impressed a very young child.

Does not that go a long way towards explaining the little books? I learned to read on the Waverley novels; I had had a horrid large-print primer and a stodgy fat book – I think it was called a *History of the Robin Family*, by Mrs Trimmer. I know I hated it – then I was let loose on *Rob Roy*, and spelled through a few pages painfully; then I tried *Ivanhoe* – and the *Talisman* – then I tried *Rob Roy* again; all at once I began to READ (missing the long words, of course), and those great books keep their freshness and charm still. I had very few books – Miss Edgeworth and Scott's novels I read over and over.

I only cared for two toys; a dilapidated black wooden doll called Topsy, and a very grimy, hard-stuffed, once-white, flannellette pig (which gradually parted with a tail made of tape). The pig did not belong to me. Grandmamma kept it in the bottom drawer of her secretaire. The drawer had to be solemnly unlocked, and I nursed the precious animal, I being seated on a crossbar underneath the library table; the tablecloth had a yellowy green fringe, and Grandmamma also had very hard gingernap biscuits in a canister. I remember one of my teeth (milk-teeth) came out in consequence (on purpose?) while I was under the table. Children were much better brought up in those days. Thank goodness, my education was neglected; I was never sent to school. Of course, what I wore was absurdly uncomfortable; white piqué starched frocks just like Tenniel's

Alce in Wonderland, and cotton stockings striped round and round like a zebra's legs. In those early days I composed (or endeavoured to compose) hymns initiated from Isaac Watts, and sentimental ballad descriptions of Scottish scenery, which might have been pretty, only I never could make them scan. Then for a long time I gave up trying to write, because I could not do it. About 1893 I was interested in

a little invalid child, the eldest child of a friend; he had a long illness. I used to write letters with pen and ink scribbles, and one of the letters was Peter Rabbit. Noel has got them yet; he grew up and became a hard-working clergyman in a London poor parish. After a time there began to be a vogue for small books, and I thought *Peter* might do as well as some that were being published. But I did not find any publisher who agreed with me. The manuscript – nearly word for word the same, but with only outline illustrations – was returned with or without thanks by at least six firms. Then I drew my savings out of the post office savings bank, and got an edition of 450 copies printed. I think the engraving and printing cost me about £11. It caused a good deal of amusement amongst my relations and friends. I made about £12 or £14 by selling copies to obliging aunts. I showed this privately printed black-and-white book to Messrs F. Warne and Company, and the following year, 1901, they brought out the first coloured edition. The coloured drawings for this were done in a garden near Keswick, Cumberland, and several others were painted in the same part of the Lake District. Squirrel Nutkin sailed on Derwentwater; Mrs Tiggywinkle lived in the Vale of Newlands near Keswick. Later books, such as *Jemima Puddleduck*, *Ginger and Pickles*, the *Pie and the Patty Pan*, etc., were done at Sawrey, in this southern end of the Lake District. The books relating to Tom Kitten and Samuel Whiskers describe the interior of my old farmhouse, where children are comically impressed by seeing the real chimney and cupboards.

I think I write carefully because I enjoy my writing, and enjoy taking pains over it. I have always disliked writing to order; I write to please myself. I made enough by books and a small legacy from an aunt to buy a home at the Lakes which has gradually grown into a very large sheep farm, and I married very happily at forty-seven. What are the words in the *Temperer*? 'Spring came to you at the farthest, in the latter end of harvest.' I have always found my own pleasure in nature and books.

The reason I am glad I did not go to school, it would have rubbed off some of the originality (if I had not died of shyness or been killed with overpressure). I fancy I could have been taught anything if I had been caught young; but it was in the days when parents kept governesses, and only boys went to school in most families.

My usual way of writing is to scribble, and cut out, and write it again and again. The shorter and plainer the better. And read the Bible (*unrevised* version and Old Testament) if I feel my style wants chastening. There are many dialect words of the Bible and Shakespeare – and also the forcible direct language – still

in use in the rural parts of Lancashire.

Sawrey, near Ambleside, 1929

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