



Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature

Linda Lear

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Peter Rabbit, Mr. McGregor, and many other Beatrix Potter characters remain in the hearts of millions. However, though Potter is a household name around the world, few know the woman behind the illustrations. Her personal life, including a romantic relationship with her publisher, Norman Warne, and her significant achievements outside of children's literature remain largely unknown. In Linda Lear's enchanting new biography, we get the life story of this incredible, funny, and independent woman. As one of the first female naturalists in the world, Potter brought the beauty and importance of nature back into the imagination at a time when plunder was more popular than preservation. Through her art she sought to encourage conservation and change the world. With never before seen illustrations and intimate detail, Lear goes beyond our perennial fascination with Potter as a writer and illustrator of children's books, and delves deeply into the life of a most unusual and gifted woman--one whose art was timeless, and whose generosity left an indelible imprint on the countryside.

Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature Details

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From Reader Review Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature for online ebook

Melanie says

Don't be fooled by Beatrix Potter's charming drawings -- this was a tough, unsentimental woman who loved the nitty-gritty, dirty work of farming and animal-breeding, negotiated with the best to create vast swathes of land for Britain's National Trust, and managed her own merchandising better than any publisher. I read this book slowly, savoring the details of her scientific explorations (fungi, animals), her scrupulous editing of her wee picture books, her marriage, and her friendships. (One, with American children's librarian Anne Carol Moore, especially delighted me - I wrote about her for one of my favorite papers in graduate school.) Highly recommended!

Laura says

From BBC radio 4 - Book of the Week:

Lindsay Duncan reads from a Linda Lear's biography of the 20th century's most beloved children's writer and creator of Peter Rabbit, Beatrix Potter.

1/5: This opening episode reveal Potter's north country ancestry and the landscapes that nurtured her creative imagination.

2/5: Linda Lear's biography of the author reveals how Peter Rabbit and Jeremy Fisher came to be born.

3/5. Potter's initial success as a writer was paralleled by an increasingly close relationship with her publisher Norman Warne.

4/5. When she reached middle age, Potter immersed herself in the Cumbrian landscape and the routines of farming life.

5/5. At the end of a long life, Beatrix Potter had become a major landowner, a successful north country farmer and significant benefactor to the National Trust.

Abridged by Alison Joseph

Producer: Kirsteen Cameron

First broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2006.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007726w>

Carl Rollyson says

What did children do before Disney? They read Beatrix Potter. They still do. Her Peter Rabbit, who first

appeared in 1902, still has a world audience, and royalties from her other books and "licensing kingdom" (as Linda Lear's publisher puts it) earn something like \$500 million a year. The new film about Potter's life, starring Renée Zellweger and Ewan McGregor, will make that gross even more.

Unlike Disney's Mickey Mouse & Co., Potter's Peter & Co. were set in "a real place and in real, rather than imagined, nature," observes Ms. Lear in her new biography *"Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature"* (St. Martin's Press, 554 pages, \$30). This meant, for example, that Potter (an exquisite illustrator) dressed her rabbits in human clothes but pictured them in postures and positions these creatures habitually assume. My favorite illustration is of two rabbits in a potting shed. One is entering the building with a tray of flowers as another tends to a flowerpot. This pen-and-ink study vividly creates a gardening world, "replete with pelargoniums and fuchsias in claypots, with a collection of gardening tools — rakes, hoes, brooms, spades, forks and a large watering can."

Potter outdoes Disney and other animated cartoonists in her romance of details at the intersection of the animal and human worlds. From childhood on, Potter lived with animals, making pets of mice and rabbits and all sorts of wild things.

Potter did not become a children's book author until she was nearly 40. But her long apprenticeship as an observer and illustrator of the natural world served her well. She was an amateur scientist who put nature under her microscope and a conservationist who left a tract of land several times larger than New York City's Central Park.

Born in 1866, Potter belonged to a socially ambitious and wealthy family that expected their daughter to marry upward. When she fell in love with her editor, the family rejected his proposal of marriage, since anyone in publishing was considered no better than "in trade." Potter thought her parents' pretensions were ridiculous, since the family fortune had been built on the cotton trade. But there is no snobbery quite like that of the *nouveau riche*, which places a premium on social climbing.

But what of Potter before 40? Did she have no beaux? Ms. Lear takes her time explaining that Potter was shy and disliked the elaborateness of Victorian courting rituals. And by the 1890s she was too old to behave like one of those "new women" that H.G. Wells and Bernard Shaw had so much fun writing about.

Potter was quite willing to defy her parents when the right man came along, but her editor died a month after the announcement of their engagement. A devastated yet resilient Potter eventually found love again when she married her solicitor, another suitor whom her parents had rejected.

Potter's attitude toward her family and marriage reminds me of Charlottes Brontë's. Both women wanted to be good daughters, but they had the independence of mind to seek happiness outside the patriarchal home when it was offered to them. Potter was fortunate in that her only two suitors were sensitive to her genius, and in that other men, too, did their best to promote her talent within the strictures of Victorian society.

In Ms. Lear's account Potter emerges as a determined woman, yet one who was in no hurry to develop her talent, which began with copying pictures she liked, studying the anatomy of animals, and then adapting her knowledge to "picture-letters" she sent to children.

The photographs, drawings, and watercolors in this biography require considerable study. There is a portrait, for example, of a sheep's head that is done with such gravity and care that it rivals any presidential portrait I've seen. "Her skill impressed her shepherds," Ms. Lear notes.

Compare the photograph of a beaming Potter holding her Pekinese dogs, Tzusee and Chuleh, to one of her parents adopting dour poses for the camera. That the ebullient Potter could have emerged out of that rigid world to live on in such triumphant old age is surely a great achievement, one this biography superbly commemorates.

Ms. Lear's ability to meld narrative and analysis is very impressive — so much so that whether you know much or little of Beatrix Potter, you will be enchanted by this story of a supremely gifted and ultimately happy human being. Potter's story has been told before, of course, and Ms. Lear gives due credit to her predecessors. But this book's level of detail and acuity makes it as nearly definitive as biography can be.

Bettie? says

Not for me at this time.

(clickerty)

Read by Lindsay Duncan.

Broadcast on:

BBC Radio 7, 3:00pm Monday 16th August 2010

Duration:

15 minutes

Available until:

3:17pm Monday 23rd August 2010

Categories:

Drama, Biographical

Donna says

Beatrix Potter came of age in England during the Victorian era, born to a newly rich, leisure class London-based family. She was a socially shy and awkward child with overly controlling parents but had artistic talent, a keen sense of imagination, and great powers of observation. During yearly summer-long visits to the country she developed a love of nature that lasted throughout her life.

Like most young women of her status, she was educated at home where she studied art and drawing among other things. The Victorian craze for natural history manifested itself in Beatrix as a passion for fungi and fossils. Although discouraged as an “amateur” at a time when science was a jealously guarded professional brotherhood, her curious and brilliant mind led to a complete immersion into a study of lichens and fungi such that her portfolio of watercolor fungi is used to this day for identification purposes by mycologists.

Always sketching and storytelling, Potter’s first stories appeared as picture letters to the children of friends and family. Children’s literature was becoming popular and lucrative for publishers. When Warne Publishers agreed to publish *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, it was received with a level of success that neither party could

have predicted and marked the beginning of Potter's fame, financial success and independence finally from her parents.

After the death of her fiancé and publisher, Norman Warne, Potter began a new life as the owner of Hill Top Farm in the Lake District where she became known as a successful farmer and sheep breeder. She eventually married William Heelis and together they began in earnest to work toward the preservation of the natural beauty and the farming culture of the Lake District, leaving over 3000 acres of unspoiled land to the National Trust upon their deaths. Potter was a woman ahead of her time who left her mark both in children's literature and in awakening an interest in environmentalism and protecting natural landscapes.

I became interested in finding out more about Beatrix Potter after visiting England's Lake District and getting a glimpse of her far reaching impact on the area beyond her delightfully illustrated children's books. It's difficult to imagine a more thorough treatment of her life than this excellent biography. It is gently told with meticulous detail - perhaps not a book to read straight through, but to savor a few chapters at a time.

Deborah says

Linda Lear's biography of Helen Beatrix Potter reveals the life of a woman whose passions, pursuits, and legacies extend far beyond the tidy realm of her fame as an author and illustrator of children's books. Potter was also a talented landscape painter and an award-winning sheep breeder. She was an accomplished amateur mycologist; she is thought to be the first person to successfully reproduce fungi from spores. Her scientific drawings of fungi and insects are so accurate, they're still referenced today in texts on those subjects. An early champion of nature conservation and the preservation of fell farms, she accumulated significant property holdings in England's Lake District and bequeathed them to the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest and Natural Beauty.

I enjoyed learning about the real pets and people and places behind the charming tales of critters like Peter Rabbit and Jeremy Fisher. I had to laugh when I read that she settled a dispute with her publisher about the color she'd used in an illustration of Jeremy by bringing the frog to the publisher's office. I was also intrigued to learn that when the various Potter pets (mice, snakes, lizards, rabbits, hedgehogs, to name a few) died, they weren't buried; some were stuffed, but most were boiled, and their skeletons were then cleaned, measured, and displayed in the children's nursery!

While Potter's character shines through as fascinating, I wasn't satisfied with Lear's narrative. As a biographer, she took no liberties of speculation and expressed few opinions of her own. The book has about 300 pages of text and 100 pages of end notes, which made it heavy reading--both in the academic sense and in the physical sense. (I hated lugging that thing around with me!)

I also found the structure of the book irritating. It's roughly chronological, but Lear attempted to chronicle Potter's life in terms of milestones, naming chapters after them: Roots, Exposures, Transitions, Experiments, etc. Real life, however, doesn't follow such contrived chapters, so there's quite a bit of overlap--and hence redundancy--among the chapters of the book.

steph says

This is a HUGE book so I've been reading it for over a month on my lunch breaks and it's incredibly interesting. I've never been a fan of Beatrix Potter's stories, I'm not a huge animal lover and I don't really like books with animals as main characters which is like EVERY ONE OF HER CHILDREN'S BOOKS. But I picked this up on a whim because I liked the cover and wow, I was sucked into it. Beatrix Potter's life is really incredible, interesting and worth the read. I say that with it being over 500 pages. This memoir is worth the read. Completely.

Roberta says

I have a new appreciation from reading this book of the oppression of women in Victorian society. Beatrix was an amateur naturalist, but it seems to me they were all amateurs in the 1800's. She wasn't allowed to attend the meeting of the Linnean Society when her paper was read on how mushrooms propagate. Honestly. And there was a statement near the end of the book about Beatrix's father not even realizing that a woman would desire a life of her own outside the home. He thought she was artistically talented and all, but beyond that, he didn't get it. I was totally unaware of all the other things she did beyond writing and illustrating children's books. You'll have to read it to find out more.

Susan Albert says

If you have fond memories of the Tale of Peter Rabbit from your childhood; or if you have an interest in women who bravely challenged a social destiny that seemed foregone and inevitable; or if you are interested in naturalism and the history of preservation, you will enjoy and learn from Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature, by environmental historian Linda Lear.

Beatrix Potter was born in London in 1866 to wealthy Victorian parents. From early childhood, she was passionately interested in the natural world and drew what she saw in meticulous, painstaking detail, using as models the many animals that she and her brother collected during family holidays. These animal drawings became increasingly imaginative until they at last came to life in the delightful characters that populate The Tale of Peter Rabbit, The Tale of Mrs. Tiggly-Winkle, The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck and other books, all of which became phenomenal bestsellers.

In 1905, after the death of her fiancé and editor, Norman Warne, Potter used the royalties from her books and a small inheritance from an aunt to purchase a farm in the hamlet of Near Sawrey, in the Lake District. There, she met Willie Heelis, a country lawyer who in 1913 became her husband, and together they set about fulfilling a dream they shared: preserving and protecting the Lake District from the despoliation of commercial development. They lived and worked happily together until 1943, when Beatrix Potter Heelis died.

Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature is the most exhaustive and rigorous examination of Potter's life to date. Linda Lear skillfully covers the material that's been made available by earlier biographers, Margaret Lane and Judy Taylor: the solitary childhood, the astonishing literary success, the dutiful attention to elderly parents, the retirement to marriage and rural farming life. But Lear breaks a good deal of new ground, as well, taking us deep into the experience of a gifted but very private woman with a "talent for reinventing herself." She not only tells the riveting story of a woman who seems to have led three lives, but also fully and meticulously documents her sources. Scholars will appreciate the endnotes, sources, references, and lists

of primary and secondary material that Lear has provided, for it is the first time in the history of Potter scholarship that such a full and complete documentation has been made.

However, Lear never allows her responsibilities as a scholar to overshadow her fascination with the human story of Beatrix Potter. With tact, sensitivity, and a profound respect, she goes deeply within her subject to bring us a woman whose tragedies and triumphs seem very personal, compellingly immediate, and entirely real. Lear demonstrates that throughout Potter's long life, her imagination was fueled by a passion for nature, whether this was expressed in drawings of rabbits in blue coats with brass buttons, or in paintings of fungi, lovingly rendered, or in her love for the tenacious Herdwick sheep that populated the hills of the Lake District, or in her profound admiration for the traditional Lakeland lifeways of farmers and artisans. Within the larger context of environmental history that this biography provides, it is easy to see why and how Beatrix Potter became one of England's most important preservationists and greatest benefactors, leaving some 4,300 acres, including 15 farms, dozens of cottages, houses, and over 500 acres of woods to the National Trust. It was a magnificent gift, a model for gifts to come, and still, to this day, unique.

Linda Lear's biography is unique, as well, a fitting tribute to a woman whose many and varied accomplishments are just being recognized, long after her death.

Julie says

Despite that Goodreads insisted on giving this a 2-star rating, on my behalf, even before I finished reading it, I enjoyed this book very much. While it was read at quite a gallop because ILL was calling it back, it nonetheless made an impression on me which I will go back and revisit when I have more time.

Linda Lear is the perfect biographer, providing the reader with just the right balance of good story-telling and solid research. I appreciated that she didn't fall into the realm of conjecture, as many biographers do, thus colouring the reader's perception in favour of the biographer's inclinations; and I doubly appreciated the thick pages of notes that followed, at the back of the book. (I'm an inveterate note reader, and chaser.)

I was always fascinated with Beatrix Potter, all the more so because she wasn't part of my cultural background: I didn't come to her until I started reading these to my own daughter, many years ago. I don't know, in the end, who delighted in them more, for we were both enthralled, spending many, many hours rereading them when she was just a wee little thing. (I confess to reading them on my own later and delighting in them all over again.)

But, what I knew about Beatrix Potter, the woman, could have been placed into the tailor of Gloucester's thimble, and so I was thrilled to find the gifted natural scientist behind the paintings. She was doubly blessed to have the talent to observe and record the natural world, both as a scientist and an artist. I was as fascinated with her life as I was with her children's books. She was a strong, independent spirit who took life on her own terms, without sacrificing herself to the Victorian moralities, and the too-often penance of selling oneself to the highest (male) bidder.

Linda Lear includes a respectable number of photographs from different phases of BP's life, as well as a small collection of the artist's paintings.

I will have to buy this book -- and return to it at leisure.

~?~Autumn♥♥ says

Fascinating and highly detailed account of the life of Beatrix Potter.

Marcia says

I am still reading this book but have learned how industrious B. Potter was. She perserved with her painting and sketching, always trying to make her pictures true to nature. She was an entrepreneurial business woman, something I did not suspect from reading her books. It turns out, she was the best promoter of her books and all the other products which grew from the success of her writings.

Louise Leetch says

Linda Lear's story about Beatrix Potter opens up a world so very far beyond the image of a Victorian author dabbling in children's books. Ms Potter was a self-taught naturalist who also happened to write stories and poetry for children. If you stop and really look at her illustrations, you understand how intimately she knew each animal she drew.

The first part of the book heavily concentrates on Beatrix's studies of fungi and her struggle to have her research accepted by the Natural History Museum's "experts". It is painfully obvious that she is being treated like a silly woman who doesn't really understand things like germination of spores and symbiotic relations, even though she was better informed than they. Beatrix will run into this chauvinism throughout her life but has the mettle to persevere until she succeeds. In 1942 when the antibiotic properties of penicillin were being investigated as having curative possibilities, Potter wrote in her notebook of how she and her mentor, the naturalist Charles McIntosh, had speculated about the application of a number of fungi in the same manner.

Her relation with Publisher Norman Warne brings her books and illustrations to publication; but more importantly, it gives her the financial independence which she seeks. It's not that she feels a burden to her parents, I think quite the opposite. They are, in fact, dependent on her to keep the house and staff running smoothly as well as arranging the moves to the properties which her father leases each summer in the Lake District. Thus her mother resists Beatrix's desire to marry Norman, judging him most unsuitable as a man in trade. She carries on, making up stories and poems and drawing the nature surrounding her. Her picture letters to the children of her former nanny form the basis for Peter Rabbit as well as Benjamin Bunny. The sketchbooks from a lifetime in the country provide the background to her stories, from Farmer McGregor's remarkable resemblance to Charles McIntosh to the pictures of fabrics she copied from the Victoria & Albert and used in *The Tailor of Gloucester*.

As Beatrix gains financially she buys Hill Top Farm near where the family spent their summers. The author's descriptions of the Lake District and Beatrix working to preserve the area through the National Trust make you yearn to jump on the next plane so you can walk the fells, visit Near Sawry and see for yourself Hill Top Farm and Castle Cottage knowing that they're still exactly as they were in the first half of the 20th century. She was so firm in her intention to maintain the character of the district, she refused to have electricity put into Hill Top Farm. Her writing and painting seem to have become secondary to the

maintenance of her fell farms, breeding of Herdwicke Sheep & the preservation of the Lake District. She used her royalties plus the not inconsiderable inheritances from her family to enlarge her holdings. All of her properties were left to the National Trust & are all now contained in the Lake District National Park, just waiting for us to visit.

Even with her devotion to the character of the Lake District, Beatrix will always be best known for her stories and her wonderful paintings. The royalties & copyrights were bequeathed to Frederick Warne upon her husband's death. Warne Publishing has issued Beatrix Potter: The Complete Tales. It is a welcome companion to Linda Lear's book which suffers only because there is not room for all the illustrations. No need to have a grandchild in hand to enjoy these tales with their very personal illustrations. They are for all of us.

Katie says

Despite the intimidating heft of this book, I found it easy to read. It wasn't a fast read; Lear stuffs every page with fact upon fact. My negative comment would be that the textbook style of writing felt dry. Yet that dryness girds Lear's text with credibility. You can be certain Lear isn't fabricating what she writes.

Beatrix Potter's life lifts me up. She was a person who marched to the tune of her own cavalcade. Even though she wasn't a human without faults and weaknesses, Lear leads that judgement to the reader.

Overall, a very illuminating book that obviously took massive amounts of time to research and write. Be warned: it will take massive amounts of time to read. I took out the maximum amount of renewals on this tombstone of a book.

Susan Branch says

Getting to know Beatrix Potter has been a slow unfolding for me and started in a funny place. In my early twenties I worked in a record store that was next to a gift shop. That gift shop is where I fell in love with Beatrix Potter's little character figurines made by F. Warne & Co. Ltd. in Beswick, England in the 40's and 50's: Jemima Puddle-Duck, Foxy Whiskered Gentleman, Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle to name a few. I would get my paycheck at the record store where I worked behind the counter and run next door to make the hard choice: who would it be that day, which little spot of light would be next, Aunt Pettitoes OR Timmy Willy?

No matter where I've lived, these little critters have been on a shelf somewhere in my kitchen. Right now they are on a window ledge in front of my kitchen sink on Martha's Vineyard where I can see them as I do dishes or make dinner. I loved the colors used in these figures, very much like the colors in the old quilts I collected. For me, it really wasn't Beatrix Potter's "little books" that first attracted me. It was color, and as I learned more about Beatrix Potter the person, it was simply just her.

As the years passed, bit by bit, her life story came into my knowing, and the more I knew, the more interested I became, until it became clear that I was going to have to go "find her" in the Lake District in England ~ go to her cottage called Hill Top Farm, which she left (to be opened to the public) exactly as it was when she died in 1943. I finally did that last year, walked past the little lamb meadow, down the garden

path to Beatrix Potter's house ... you can read about that visit and see photos here:
<http://www.susanbranch.com/beatrix-po...>

I think I've read almost everything about her now. I loved being immersed in this book, it was like being there with her. It's a scholarly book, with many, many details. But I loved every one of them. Beatrix Potter was a brave, hard-working, determined, inspired woman, who never let reality get her down, rose above all, and carved out an original life all her own. I love her. Thank you to Linda Lear and everyone who contributed to this book for their in-depth gathering of the facts because inquiring minds do want to know.
