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Overlooked No More: Beatrix Potter, Author of ‘The Tale of Peter Rabbit’

She created one of the world’s best-known characters for children, and fought to have the book published, but she never sought celebrity status.

By Jess Bidgood

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This article is part of Overlooked, a series of obituaries about remarkable people whose deaths, beginning in 1851, went unreported in The Times.

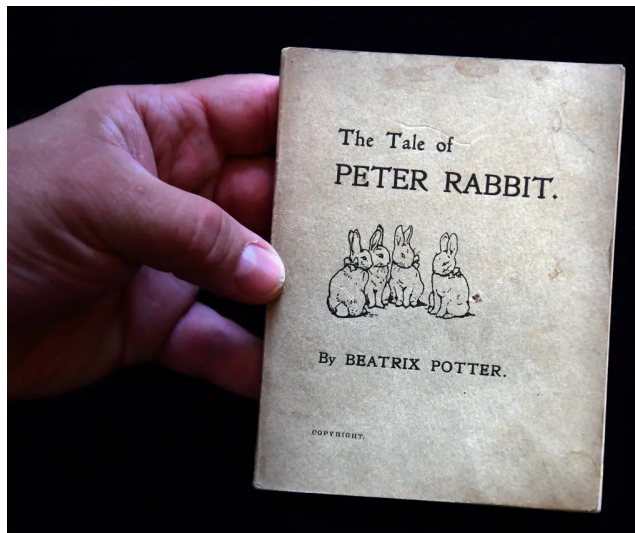
With “The Tale of Peter Rabbit,” Beatrix Potter created what would become one of the world’s best-known children’s book characters.

The book, about a cheeky rabbit who steals vegetables from the garden of one Mr. McGregor and loses his coat and shoes in a narrow escape, became a literary juggernaut that has sold more than 45 million copies. It also spawned a merchandising empire and has left an indelible imprint on children’s book publishing.

But Potter’s manuscript was initially dismissed by publishers.

The year was 1900, and Potter, then in her mid-30s, had submitted her book, complete with her own intricate illustrations, to at least six publishers, according to her biographer Linda Lear.

As the rejections flowed in, she unloaded her frustrations in a letter to a family friend, including a sketch depicting herself, little book in hand, arguing with a man in a long coat. “I wonder if that book will ever be printed,” she fumed.



The first edition of “The Tale of Peter Rabbit.” Potter initially had the books printed herself before it was published in 1902 by Frederick Warne & Co. Carl Court/Getty Images

She finally decided to print it herself. The next September, she took her savings to a private printer in London and ordered 250 copies of the book, which she distributed herself. The demand was so great that she soon needed to print 200 more. One early admirer, she wrote in a letter, was Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries.

Finally, in 1902, Frederick Warne & Co., a London publishing house that was among those that had initially rejected the manuscript, released “Peter Rabbit” to a wider audience.

As the books flew off shelves (or hopped off, as the case may be), Potter sensed a merchandising opportunity. She designed a Peter Rabbit doll, injecting the legs with lead to help it stand up, and registered it as patent No. 423888.

Soon there were china figurines, wallpaper and more dolls — products she jokingly called “sideshowes” even as she involved herself in their design, copyright and quality control.



A scene from "The Tale of Peter Rabbit," which Potter illustrated herself. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, via Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd.



Potter sketched insects, frogs, mice, rabbits and other things she saw in nature. Here, drawings based on her magnified studies of a ground beetle. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, via Frederick Warne & Co Ltd

"If it were done at all, it ought to be done by me," she wrote to her editor, Norman Warne, after a reader approached her with another wallpaper design in 1904.

"The idea of rooms covered with badly drawn rabbits," Potter added, "is appalling."

Potter died of heart ailments and complications of bronchitis on Dec. 22, 1943, during World War II. She was 77. Though the death was not initially reported by The New York Times, for reasons lost to history, the newspaper referred to it in subsequent weeks and months, noting that she left behind an estate worth \$845,544 (about \$15 million in today's dollars) and that Queen Elizabeth, the queen mother, had bought all 15 copies of "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" from a London bookstore to keep at Buckingham Palace.

In her lifetime, Potter went on to write 22 more books, whimsical but razor-sharp stories about soon-to-become enduring characters like Jemima Puddle-Duck and Benjamin Bunny. Her characters, dressed in waistcoats and bonnets, were rendered with meticulous attention to anatomical detail, an outgrowth of Potter's long interest in natural science.

Her deep involvement with the business side of book writing — dealing with licensing, for example — was unusual at a time when unmarried women's economic and social standing were limited.

“It is just historically remarkable that we have this female author, a children's author in particular, who had such control over her work,” Chloe Flower, an assistant professor of English literature at Bryn Mawr College, said in an interview.

It also gave Potter a pathway out of the overbearing home life that confined most women in her day.



Potter with her pet mouse Xarifa in 1885. She made regular trips to the Natural History Museum in London to find specimens to draw. Cotsen Children's Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library

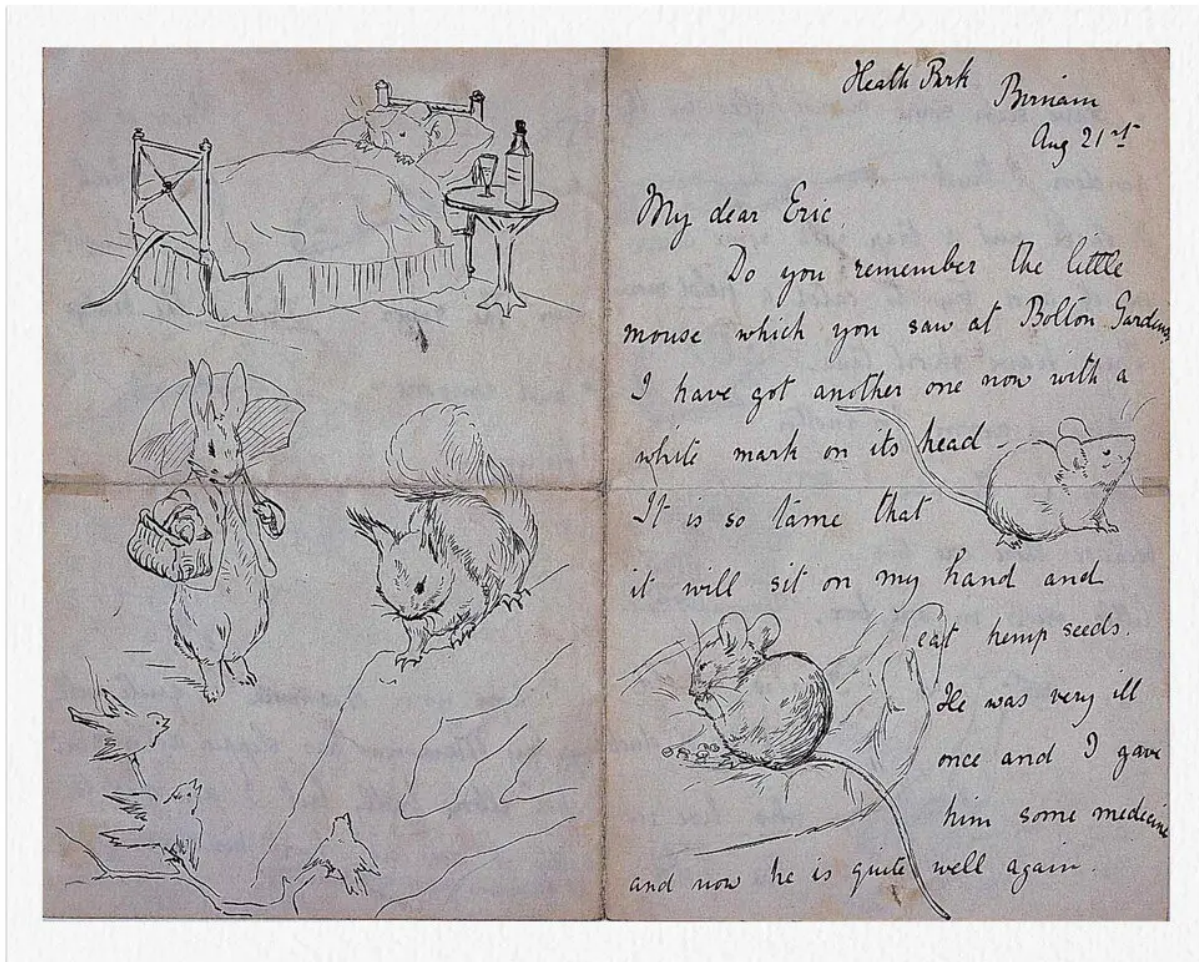
Helen Beatrix Potter was born on July 28, 1866, in London to Rupert and Helen (Leech) Potter. Her father was a barrister, her mother a daughter of a successful merchant. (Potter's paternal grandfather had been a wealthy calico trader and a member of Parliament.) Beatrix's upbringing was a whirlwind of country houses and idyllic vacations — but it was stifling, too, hemmed in by a narrow set of expectations for women, a tense relationship with her mother and a paucity of friends.

Nature gave her an escape and a sense of purpose. She and her younger brother, Bertram, collected insects and frogs, caught and tamed mice and trapped rabbits to observe them. She drew them — and just about everything else — endlessly, binding her sketchbooks with string at first, according to her biographer Lear, who wrote “Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature” (2006).

Bertram was sent to school, but Beatrix was not; she was taught by governesses, took art lessons and made regular trips to the Natural History Museum in London to find specimens to draw. In the mid-1890s, she sold drawings of frogs and other work to a fine arts publisher.

“One must make out some way,” she wrote in her journal in 1895. “It is something to have a little money to spend on books and to look forward to being independent, though forlorn.”

She took a particular interest in mycology, the study of fungi, which she would examine under a microscope, and, despite her amateur status, sought out the experts at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in London.



Potter wrote what she called "picture letters" to the children of a former governess. The governess encouraged her to turn the letters into books and sell them. Cotsen Children's Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library

With encouragement from her uncle, a prominent chemist, Potter had a paper of hers submitted to the Linnean Society, an organization devoted to natural history, but it went unnoticed (a slight that the society apologized for after her death). By the turn of the century, Potter found herself over 30 and in need of something else to do.

Seven years earlier, she had written what she called "picture letters" to the children of a former governess — illustrated fictional tales about creatures in the garden.

"I don't know what to write to you," read one from 1893, "so I shall tell you a story about four little rabbits whose names were Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail and Peter."

It was the governess, Annie Moore, who suggested that Potter turn the letters into books and sell them.

Potter knew there was a market for books that were physically small, like Helen Bannerman's "The Story of Little Black Sambo" (1899), and she wanted her book to be affordable. About a year after Warne & Co. published "Peter Rabbit," there were almost 60,000 copies in print, Lear wrote.

In 1905, when she was 39, Potter got engaged to the editor with whom she collaborated, Norman Warne, although to her parents' disapproval; they believed a publisher could not be a good enough match for their daughter. But Warne died of leukemia a month later. Potter, for her part, continued to work with his family's publishing house, writing most of her books between 1900 and 1913.



Potter in the 1890s. She wrote 23 books, whimsical, razor-sharp stories about characters, like Jemima Puddle-Duck and Benjamin Bunny, that would endure. Express Newspapers/Getty Images

The world that Potter conjured in her books — whimsical but dark, full of bloodless observations about the food chain — appealed as much to adults as to children.

“It would never do to eat our own customers; they would leave us and go to Tabitha Twitchett’s,” remarks a yellow tomcat named Ginger, who, with a dog named Pickles, owns a shop patronized by mice and rabbits in Potter’s “Ginger & Pickles” (1909).

“On the contrary,” Pickles replies, “they would go nowhere at all.”

The stories are replete with consequences for rudeness, missteps and plain old bad luck, but they were also charming and warm. When the Tailor of Gloucester falls ill and is unable to finish making a waistcoat for the mayor’s wedding, a team of mice sew a cherry-red garment. And Jeremy Fisher, a frog, goes on a misadventure to find lunch for his friends, Sir Isaac Newton and Alderman Ptolemy Tortoise, who only eats salad.

Maurice Sendak, who acquired rare copies of Potter’s books, acknowledged being influenced by her work.

“Peter Rabbit, for all its gentle tininess, loudly proclaims that no story is worth the writing, no picture worth the making, if it is not a work of imagination,” he wrote in “Caldecott & Co.: Notes on Books and Pictures” (1988), a book of essays.

Still, Potter never sought to be a celebrity. She used the money from her book sales to buy — and preserve — the farmland that had inspired her tales, and as she grew older and her literary output slowed, she increasingly devoted herself to life in the country.



In 1905, Potter bought Hilltop Farm, in England's Lake District, where she became a prizewinning sheep breeder and a conservationist. *The New York Times*

"Somehow when one is up to the eyes in work with real live animals, it makes one despise paper-book animals — but I mustn't say that to my publisher," she wrote cheekily to one of them in 1918.

She bought Hill Top Farm, in England's northwest Lake District, in 1905, eventually becoming a prizewinning sheep breeder and a conservationist, and continued buying land with William Heelis, a lawyer she married when she was 47.

By then, "very few people knew that Mrs. Heelis was also Beatrix Potter," said Libby Joy, a former chairwoman of the Beatrix Potter Society.

Potter's stories have been adapted into films, including one of a 1971 ballet, "The Tales of Beatrix Potter;" and two adaptations of "Peter Rabbit" — a 1991 HBO movie with Carol Burnett and a 2018 animated version. Renée Zellweger played the author in the 2006 biopic "Miss Potter."

On her death, Potter left 4,000 acres of farmland to England's National Trust, a conservation charity.

Her posthumous books include a diary, which was written in code, deciphered and finally published in 1966; a belatedly discovered story called "The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots," which was published in 2016 with illustrations by Quentin Blake; and her mushroom illustrations, 59 of which appear in a 1967 natural history book written by a professional mycologist.

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