



## INTRODUCTION

*The Wind in the Willows* may be the greatest case of mistaken identity in literature: it is commonly accepted as an animal story for children—despite being neither an animal story, nor for children. When it was first published, the announcement from its British publisher, Methuen, read:

now at last Mr Grahame breaks his long silence with *The Wind in the Willows*, a fantastic and whimsical satire upon life—or allegory of life—the author’s amusing device being to show the reader the real thing as if it were the play of small woodland and riverside creatures.<sup>1</sup>

Equally, Graham Robertson, a close friend of Kenneth Grahame (and a closer one of Oscar Wilde), did not think that the public would mistake its intentions; he wrote to Grahame:

Don’t you think Methuen himself, in his preliminary announcement of the Book, should mention that it is not a political skit, or an allegory of the soul, or a Socialist Programme or a social satire?

It would save critics a good deal of unnecessary trouble.<sup>2</sup>

It was reviewed, with its adult peers, in the *Times Literary Supplement* (22 October 1908) immediately above Virginia Woolf’s anonymous review of E. M. Forster’s *A Room with a View*. Arnold Bennett, reviewing it in *The New Age* (24 October 1908), observed, presciently:

the book is fairly certain to be misunderstood of the people . . . The author may call his chief characters the Rat, the Mole, the Toad,—they are human beings, and they are meant to be nothing but human beings . . . The book is an urbane exercise in irony at the expense of the English character and of mankind. It is entirely successful . . . and no more to be comprehended by youth than ‘The Golden Age’ was to be comprehended by youth.<sup>3</sup>

Modern critics of children’s literature agree: Barbara Wall’s analysis reveals a book ‘in which the narrator shows no consciousness at all of

<sup>1</sup> Maureen Duffy, *A Thousand Capricious Chances: A History of the Methuen List 1889–1989* (London: Methuen, 1989), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Bodleian Library MS Eng. misc. d. 529: 16.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Books and Persons: Being Comments on a Past Epoch, 1908–1911* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1917), 57–8.





an implied child reader for chapters at a time'; and Humphrey Carpenter is clear that '*The Wind in the Willows* has nothing to do with childhood or children, except that it can be enjoyed by the young'.<sup>4</sup>

Even Kenneth Grahame, whose reputation, when *The Wind in the Willows* was published, rested on two books *about* childhood and children's relationships with the adult 'Olympians', *The Golden Age* (1895) and *Dream Days* (1898), did not claim that it was a children's book. Asked to supply 'some material for a descriptive paragraph for the announcement list', he wrote:

A book of Youth—and so perhaps chiefly *for* Youth, and those who still keep the spirit of youth alive in them: of life, sunshine, running water, woodlands, dusty roads, winter firesides; free of problems, clean of the clash of sex; of life as it might fairly be supposed to be regarded by some of the wise small things 'That glide in grasses and rubble of woody wreck' [a quotation from 'Melampus' by George Meredith].<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, *The Wind in the Willows* does not fit comfortably into the history of children's literature, if at all, although it is often cited as a key text of the first 'golden age' of children's books (1865 to 1914). It has little to do with the child-centred empathy of Lewis Carroll, the romanticism of Frances Hodgson Burnett, or the 'beautiful child' cult exemplified by J. M. Barrie. Grahame was probably influenced by specific books, such as Florence and Bertha Upton's exuberant 'Golliwogg' series, and the subtly ironic miniatures of Beatrix Potter, but the only underlying elements that *The Wind in the Willows* shares with contemporary children's books are a faith in the rural—and in rural England, especially—and an uncomfortable awareness of threats to the status quo. (The book that best sums up these preoccupations is Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, published in 1906.)

Nor is this a book about animals, despite the ink that has been spilt attempting to link it to animal fictions. For virtually all of the time the characters are, as Margaret Blount puts it, 'Olympians, middle-aged men . . . doing nothing as becomes animals, yet very much involved

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 142; Humphrey Carpenter, *Secret Gardens* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 168.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick R. Chalmers, *Kenneth Grahame: Life, Letters and Unpublished Work* (London: Methuen, 1933), 144–5.





with the real world . . . For animals, read chaps.<sup>6</sup> Fred Inglis regards the heroes as ‘the model men of private means whom its readers once hoped to become . . . The four friends translate readily into the heroes of John Buchan and Sapper [and] P. G. Wodehouse.’<sup>7</sup> Of course, as Roger Sale noted, the characters are more than chaps: ‘It will not do to say that they are human beings, because Grahame’s fantasy depends on his being able to . . . not give them an age, a biography, a past’.<sup>8</sup> Thus they are partly creatures of fable, unencumbered by at least some of the complexities attached to human life (such as servants and—except in Otter’s case—relatives), and this enables them to be simultaneously universals and many-layered individuals. As Richard Middleton wrote in a contemporary review in *Vanity Fair*: they ‘are neither animals nor men, but are types of that deeper humanity which sways us all’.<sup>9</sup> (Paul Bransom’s grotesque illustrations for the 1913 American edition, which portrayed the characters as natural animals, make the point.)

The characters very rarely morph into animals (most notably in the virtuoso encounter between Toad and the Barge-woman), and the ways in which they behave as humans are (despite Grahame’s sleight of hand) unrelated to actual animal characteristics (Mr Toad’s hyper-active behaviour is scarcely toad-like). Beatrix Potter, whose characters are animals and humans simultaneously, missed this point when she objected to Toad combing his hair:

Kenneth Grahame ought to have been an artist—at least all writers for children ought to have a sufficient recognition of what things look like—did he not describe ‘Toad’ as combing his hair? A mistake to fly in the face of nature—A frog may wear galoshes; but I don’t hold with toads having beards or wigs!<sup>10</sup>

But, for all that, *The Wind in the Willows* is, to the world at large, a classic children’s book, an archetype—perhaps *the* archetype—of

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Blount, *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children’s Fiction* (London: Hutchinson, 1974), 148.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Inglis, *The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children’s Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 118–19.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Sale, *Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E. B. White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 168.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Peter Green, *Kenneth Grahame, 1859–1932: A Study of His Life, Work and Times* (London, John Murray, 1959), 259.

<sup>10</sup> Leslie Linder, *A History of the Writings of Beatrix Potter* (London: Frederick Warne, 1971), 175.





what adults think that a children's book should be—retreatist, rural, resolved, full of unthreatening physical pleasure and comfort—and predominantly male.

It has also become, as A. A. Milne wrote in 1920, a 'Household Book': 'By a Household Book I mean a book which everyone in the household loves and quotes continually ever afterwards; a book that is read aloud to every new guest, and is regarded as the touchstone of his worth.' Not, note, a children's book. Twenty years later Milne pursued his point:

One does not argue about *The Wind in the Willows*. The young man gives it to the girl with whom he is in love, and if she does not like it, asks her to return his letters. The older man tries it on his nephew, and alters his will accordingly. The book is a test of character.<sup>11</sup>

This, then, is a book marketed for and given to children across the world, and read and undoubtedly enjoyed by children—although not all. Margaret Meek, in 'The Limits of Delight', observes caustically that as a child she disliked 'this Arcadian world [because it] 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.'<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, this may be one key to what can be read as a complex *roman à clef*: the characters in *The Wind in the Willows* are not complex *as characters*—but as the book spirals from farce to mysticism, from nostalgia to social comment, and from ironic humour to sentimentalism, they emerge as complex reflections of the character of the author and the society in which he lived. As Grahame observed:

You must please remember that a theme, a thesis, a subject, is in most cases little more than a sort of clothes-line, on which one pegs a string of ideas, questions, allusions, and so on, one's mental undergarments, of all shapes and sizes, some possibly fairly new, but most rather old and patched; and they dance and sway in the breeze, and flap and flutter, or hang limp and lifeless; and some are ordinary enough, and some are of a rather private and intimate shape, and rather give the owner away, and show up his or

<sup>11</sup> A. A. Milne, 'A Household Book', in *Not That it Matters* (London: Methuen, 1920), 88–9; 'Introduction' to *The Wind in the Willows*, illustrated by Arthur Rackham (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1940), n.p. [4–5]; and see Ann Thwaite, *A. A. Milne: His Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 225–6.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Meek, 'The Limits of Delight', in Chris Powling (ed.), *The Best of Books for Keeps* (London: The Bodley Head, 1994), 27–31 at 31.





her peculiarities. And owing to the invisible clothes-line they seem to have some connexion and continuity.<sup>13</sup>

The continuity of *The Wind in the Willows* lies in the reaction of a conservative man (and a conservative society) to radical change. The agricultural depression of 1870–1902 had seriously damaged a rural way of life (lamented in the work of Thomas Hardy, Richard Jefferies, and Edward Thomas); the Boer Wars of 1899–1902 had shown that the British military was not invincible. The working classes were on the move with the Trades Union Amendment Act of 1876—and in 1906 twenty-nine MPs were elected representing the Labour Representation Committee (later the Labour Party). The National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was founded in 1897; the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 had focused unsettling light on male behaviour. The countryside was under threat from suburban developments—as Grahame put it in his essay 'Orion' (*National Observer*, November 1892 and *Pagan Papers*), 'the desolate suburbs creep ever further into the retreating fields', and by 1903 cars could travel legally at 20 mph. All of this was profoundly disturbing to a man who described himself in his last lecture ('A Dark Star', delivered to the Pangbourne Literary, Dramatic and Musical Guild in the early 1930s) as a 'mid-Victorian'.<sup>14</sup>

### *The World of the River Bank*

There was nothing simple about being a mid-Victorian, and *The Wind in the Willows* starts with a cacophony of symbols. The Mole has about him the air of a respectable suburban clerk, a Mr. Pooter figure straight from the pages of George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892), or one of H. G. Wells's downtrodden heroes, or even one of John Davidson's urban workers ('For like a mole I journey in the dark, | A-travelling along the underground | . . . To come the daily dull official, round').<sup>15</sup> If obviously not a child, Mole begins by doing something childish—he escapes into holiday sunshine (where everyone else is working), and almost at once finds himself in the bohemian world of the River Bank, a world of independent means and subtle class-distinctions. The Water Rat,

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Green, *Grahame*, 239, and Chalmers, *Grahame*, 216–17.

<sup>14</sup> Green, *Grahame*, 341, Chalmers, *Grahame*, 286–310.

<sup>15</sup> John Davidson, 'Thirty Bob a Week', *The Yellow Book* (July 1894).

