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The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame



**Specially Illustrated by Les Morrill
With an Introduction by Roger Sale**

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Illustrated by Les Mo

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THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS

A Bantam Book

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Kenneth Grahame

was born in Scotland in 1859. His mother died when he was five years old. Soon after, his father left him in the care of his grandmother, a stern woman who lived in a great rambling house in Berkshire, on the banks of the Thames. The riverbank may have served the boy as an idyllic refuge from an unhappy childhood, for it reappears as the setting of *The Wind in the Willows*. The young Grahame's dream was to attend Oxford University, but his relatives insisted he go into business instead. A clerkship was arranged for him at the Bank of England, where he would remain for the rest of his working life.

While the public Grahame toiled at the bank, rising gradually to a prominent position, the private Grahame escaped into fantasy, writing sketches and stories that were published in *The Yellow Book* and collected in two volumes, *The Golden Age* (1895) and *Dream Days* (1898). These were tales that made gentle fun of children and adults, and they came to be admired by English and American readers of all ages.

Grahame did not marry until he was forty, already an officer at the bank and a published author. The marriage seems not to have been a happy one, but it did produce a son, and it was the boy's need for a bedtime story that provided a new outlet for Grahame's imagination and an occasion for his most enduring work.

The boy, Alastair, born in 1900, was nicknamed Mouse. Grahame began telling him an extended story one night in 1904 and committed parts of it to paper a few years later when the child was away from home. He was finally prevailed upon to put it into book form, and *The Wind in the Willows* was published in 1908. The book was immensely popular from the beginning and remains a classic. But it was Grahame's last literary effort. He left the bank the same year it was published and spent much of his time traveling, often alone. His son died tragically in 1920, and Grahame never wrote another book. He died in 1932.

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Introduction by Roger Sale

In May 1906 Kenneth Grahame moved from London to the Berkshire village of Cookham Dene in the Thames valley. The wind blows through the willows and the reeds there, backwaters and weirs make "bijou riverside residences" for water rats, pastures near the water have mole holes, and Quarry Wood has ancient trees that make the ground deep in shade even on a sunny summer day. Within a year of the move, the episodes that make up *The Wind in the Willows* were being written down, and within eighteen months the book was finished.

The valley had always been part of Grahame's life. He spent an unhappy childhood in Cookham Dene, and after he went to London and rose to be secretary of the Bank of England (when the Bank was the center of the world's finance and therefore of its power), he made day and weekend trips to Berkshire, which was no more than an hour from London by train, but light-years away in feeling and atmosphere. We are not to understand that the permanent move there transformed Grahame from a cooped-up man of the city to a delighted and nearly retired man of the country. We can say, though, that the move released longings in him, some dating back to childhood, some as recent as an unhappy marriage made in 1898; the longings involved moving to a world of beauty and delight, but involved also the acknowledgment that what he really wanted he could find only in an ideal world he himself had to create.

Shortly after *The Wind in the Willows* was published in 1908, Grahame wrote to one admirer, President Theodore Roosevelt, that "its qualities, if any, are mostly negative—i.e.—no problems, no sex, no second meaning—it is only an expression of the very simplest joys of life as lived by the simplest beings of a class that you are specially familiar with and will not misunderstand." The statement is itself too simple, but can be used to begin to understand the book's singular and lasting appeal. Grahame wrote on the jacket of the first edition that it was "perhaps chiefly for youth," but he really was saying he did not know who would enjoy it, and it seems to have turned out that, like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (though for very different reasons), it has been much enjoyed by children but probably more by older people. It is a book of seasons, of moods that seasons evoke; its scale is small, but not that of a child at all. There is an excitement in the release of early spring, a mystery in late midsummer nights that soon become midsummer dawns, a hankering in the first sign of autumn, a danger in the first snowfall, a glorious snugness in home as darkness falls in winter. Children know most of these feelings, though often not very consciously, but the older one is, perhaps, the greater the pleasure of being reminded of them, of having experiences frankly celebrated that for most of us are fleeting and private.

Grahame was certainly right to say that the book's primary qualities concern freedom: from work and schedules, from sex and other entangling relations, from authority and the guilt authority can create and play on, from concern about the past and anxiousness about the future. All these are human concerns, which is why, in creating characters free of them, Grahame made his a society of animals. Given their clothes, their food, their fires, their money, they may not seem much like animals at all, since they are

also recognizable as retired gentlemen of leisure. Grahame was not the careful observer of animals that, say, Beatrix Potter and E. B. White were, and he could even let a toad ride a horse, which they would never have allowed. But Grahame knew what he wanted. He knew he was a sojourner or vacationer in a world in which rats, toads, moles, and badgers were permanent residents. He wanted to take his longings for and delights in that world and give them to the animals.

He did this, I suspect, because he envied them, as many others have envied animals in nature, for whom their surroundings are the whole world, and present time is all the time there is. Their natures are complete in every moment. But they do not know this about themselves, not having the kind of consciousness that can know, to say nothing of utter, "I am complete," "This place is all there is," or "There is only the present in which to live." Grahame has it both ways by giving his characters the unselfconscious completeness of animal participation and the conscious human knowledge that this is happening:

The Mole waggled his toes from sheer happiness, spread his chest with a sigh full of contentment, and leaned back blissfully into the soft cushions. "What a day I'm having!" he said. "Let us start at once!"

We who have known such moments often are too shy to express their joy at the time, and learn very young that such moments pass and are a source of nostalgia later. The moment passes for Mole too, but that, too, can be joy:

This day was only the first of many similar ones for the emancipated Mole, each of them longer and fuller of interest as the ripening summer moved onward. He

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learned to swim and to row, and entered into the joy of running water; and with his ear to the reed-stems he caught, at intervals, something of what the wind went whispering so constantly among them.

There is nothing molelike in this, except the instinctive entering into the moment of each activity, which is something we can do but rarely, and cannot sustain. For Mole what happens, no matter how trivial, is enough, his new home is his whole world. "Oh, my, oh, my," he keeps saying, and we can eagerly echo our assent.

We start with places, then, with rivers, fields, and woods that release us from family, or the Bank of England, or other requirements of responsible human life, and into holiday. We give these feelings to animals, as though they could express or sustain them better than we:

It all seemed too good to be true. Hither and thither through the meadows he rambled busily, along the hedgerows, across the copses, finding everywhere birds building, flowers budding, leaves thrusting—everything happy and progressive and occupied. And instead of having an uneasy conscience pricking him and whispering "Whitewash!" he somehow could only feel how jolly it was to be the only idle dog among all these busy citizens. After all, the best part of a holiday is perhaps not so much to be resting yourself, as to see all the other fellows busy working.

The descriptions of place may be perfunctory, but they serve to remind us that often our scale is too big and our pace too hurried to be alert to the nest-building, the flower-budding, or the leaf-thrusting, of early spring. Mole is, first of all, delighted because he has been released from the double bondage of

winter and of household chores below ground. He is also small enough and inexperienced enough to see everything as fresh and new. He is, finally, free enough to know this is holiday. There are few opening chapters in literature as beckoning as this one.

What Mole needs next is what we often seek on vacations but do not always find, something to sustain and even to heighten the original feeling. In his case, it is the river:

Never in his life had he seen a river before—this sleek, sinuous, full-bodied animal, chasing and chuckling, gripping things with a gurgle and leaving them with a laugh, to fling itself on fresh playmates that shook themselves free, and were caught and held again. All was a-shake and a-shiver—glints and gleams and sparkles, rustle and swirl, chatter and bubble. The Mole was bewitched, entranced, fascinated.

He is quickly alert to sound, small activity, great variety. So what he needs now is a host who can invite him into this new world and initiate him into its pleasures.

For this the Rat is perfect. He is simultaneously busy and on holiday, Mole's superior in knowledge and just another idle dog. After Rat proposes a trip in the boat, and Mole exclaims: "*What a day I'm having!*"

"Hold hard a minute, then!" said the Rat. He looped the painter through a ring in his landing-stage, climbed up into his hole above, and after a short interval reappeared staggering under a fat, wicker luncheon-basket.

"Shove that under your feet," he observed to the Mole, as he passed it down into the boat. Then he untied the painter and took the sculls again.

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“What’s inside it?” asked the Mole, wiggling with curiosity.

“There’s cold chicken inside it,” replied the Rat briefly: “coldtonguecoldhamcoldbeefpickledgherkins saladfrenchrollscresssandwidgespottedmeatgingerbeer lemonadesodawater—”

“Oh, stop, stop,” cried the Mole in ecstasies: “This is too much!”

Rat invites Mole into a charmed circle. Inside are friendship, sharing, the longest word in the world, and an afternoon to devour all the items it names. We all may have glimpsed these wonders and dreamed about them, but often, too, we are shy when they are offered, feel unworthy or wonder what the catch is. Mole is wonderful because he can enter its courts with thanksgiving and praise.

The heart of Grahame’s intuition is that the essence of his perception of animal life, and the essence of human friendship, are very similar. In each case the individual is always complete, in need of nothing, so that Rat could have had a wonderful afternoon, we know, messing about in his boat even if Mole had never appeared. Yet animals, and the human friend, can accommodate other animals and the new companion, instinctively we say of animals, with grace and ease we say of friends. Animals may only dimly perceive and quickly forget their accommodating, but I can see there is food enough in my backyard for the chickadees and the robins and the squirrels so that none needs to fuss the presence of the others. What we see in nature is, we know, largely illusory, since in my backyard there may not be food enough for all, cats can come to prey, crows can attack robins, and the survival rate of birds in nature is about twenty percent. But it is the illusion that Grahame needs to blend his sense of animal life and his ideal of human

friendship. Other loving, which involves sex, or parents and children, is often entangling, capable of creating anxiousness, guilt, misery, a sense of incompleteness often too ingrained to be overcome. But the part of love that is friendship corresponds to what we may envy in animals, a sense that we are complete and so is the other. It may be what explains why readers at all experienced in entanglements of sexuality and family often respond more strongly to *The Wind in the Willows* than those less experienced; their feeling of release is greater.

This sense of friendship dominates the early chapters of the book. We see it in Rat's first drawing of Mole into river life and in Mole's excited entrance. We see it in Badger, who, despite his dislike of "Society," opens his lair and larder to anyone, and when one entertains at home one can eat with elbows on the table and talk with a full mouth. We see it best of all in "Dulce Domum," where Rat performs a miracle of friendship: He welcomes Mole into Mole's own home. Mole must go home because its smells have imperiously claimed him and yet he must be ashamed because his home is so plain compared to Rat's or Badger's. For Rat to urge him in, praise the larder, use the caroling field mice to make a feast, is to show us how friendship teaches that the opposite of "giving" need not be "taking," but can be "receiving with love," and for both parties.

Which brings us to the most famous character in the book, Mr. Toad of Toad Hall; there may not be a dozen better-known figures in twentieth-century literature and none is more easily recognizable or memorable. Grahame had in fact begun to tell Toad stories to his son Alistair even before the move to Berkshire, and it was only after the move, after he had begun to write these down, after he saw he had a book on his hands, that he wrote the others, his chapters for himself, which center on Rat and Mole. In some ways

the two sets of episodes do not quite splice, especially since Toad's adventures get us involved in human society while so much in the Rat-Mole chapters depend on human society being only "The Wide World," "something that doesn't matter." There are many more inconsistencies, or unresolved complications of scale, in the Toad chapters, as if Grahame thought he could get away with something with his five-year-old son that he would never dare do when writing what was closest to his own heart. Nonetheless, Toad is not only a memorable character in himself; he plays a large role in showing us, by his contrasting presence, what Grahame most admires in the other animals, especially Rat.

Early on, Mole asks Rat if they can visit Mr. Toad, about whom he has already heard. Of course, says Rat, for Toad is "the best of animals":

"It's never the wrong time to call on Toad. Early or late he's always the same fellow. Always good-tempered, always glad to see you, always sorry when you go!"

Thus far Toad is exactly what we have seen and most loved about Rat himself. Toad also is single, a generous gentleman who enjoys whatever he is doing, and who never pries into the affairs of others. So he, too, must belong inside the charmed circle.

Except that he does not. He has no sense of place or season, no natural habitat, so that, seen as an animal, he is not animal enough. He is also incapable of friendship, though quite capable of friendliness, so that seen as a person, he is not human enough, or, we might say, too much a child, too self-absorbed to see the need for or the joys of friendship. One can easily imagine that some children might respond by feeling they are being laughed at in the figure of Toad by the "adult" Mole, Rat, and Badger, though such

children and many others might exult with Toad at the moment when Badger solemnly announces that he has gotten Toad to repent, and Toad says, when told to say he is sorry, "No! I'm *not* sorry. And it wasn't folly at all! It was simply glorious!" Still, one has problems being Toad, and one knows Grahame is not usually sympathetic to them.

When Mole first leaves his hole, and then when he returns to it, when Mole and Rat set out on a midsummer night to find Otter's son Portly, there is something commanding in the place and season—"imperious" is Grahame's code word for this event—and it is their animal nature to obey the claim. Toad, by comparison, is his own emperor. Thus Toad exults in the second chapter about caravanning on the open road: "This is the real life for a gentleman! Talk about your old river!"

"I *don't* talk about my river," replied the patient Rat. "You *know* I don't, Toad. But I *think* about it," he added pathetically, in a lower tone: "I think about it—all the time!"

Wherever he is, Rat carries the river with him as the larger world of which he is always a part, so he can be said to be thinking about it even when he is not. Wherever he is, Toad carries with him nothing but himself, and can think of nothing else for more than a few minutes at a time, and of course can find nothing in life to be obedient to except his own whims and passions.

At the beginning, Toad seems to be all whims, moving from sailing to house-boating to punting to caravanning, always restlessly looking for new enthusiasms. But Toad does not need something new, necessarily, and, once he hears the "poop-poop" of the motor car, he never wavers in making car the object of his passion. But it is a passion; it is like the

joys of Rat and Mole because it is heightened pleasure, and unlike because it gains no release into a larger world but makes one restless again the moment the gratification is over. Seeing the tempting car, anticipating the gratification to come, Toad thinks he is becoming most himself:

Next moment, hardly knowing how it came about, he found he had hold of the handle and was turning it. As the familiar sound broke forth, the old passion seized on Toad and completely mastered him, body and soul. As if in a dream he found himself, somehow, seated in the driver's seat; as if in a dream, he pulled the lever and swung the car round the yard and out through the archway; and, as if in a dream, all sense of right and wrong, all fear of obvious consequences, seemed temporarily suspended. He increased his pace, and as the car devoured the street and leapt forth on the high road through the open country, he was only conscious that he was Toad once more, Toad at his best and highest, Toad the terror, the traffic-queller, the Lord of the lone trail, before whom all must give way or be smitten into nothingness and everlasting night.

This is thrilling, and all similar moments later soon come to seem only repetitions of it, attempts to get the thrill back again, but even here we know that Toad is dangerously wrong to think he is at his best and highest when actually he is only a vehicle through which giddy excitement passes. Still, when a friend of mine said from the backseat of a car I was driving shortly after I first learned how that I drove like Mr. Toad, he was not, to be sure, praising my driving, but he was honoring Kenneth Grahame for the vivid image he had given my friend. Toad is the most famous person in the book in part because he

insists on it, insists on sticking out, but in part because, like a character in Dickens, he is both vivid and "true," not part of an ideal world, but a perfect embodiment of a part of ourselves.

The Wind in the Willows has been able to break through some barriers, some kinds of objections from readers not born to its original milieu, that have managed to confine and specialize the audience of other books. It is very British upper bourgeois, pre-World War I, safe and snug. It is snobbish enough to long for a leisured class that excludes upstarts like stoats and weasels, and sexist enough to long for a world that excludes women. Also, Grahame can easily fall into "pretty" and breathless writing—see the opening of "The Wild Wood" and "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn"—which many find unpleasant: "Purple loosetrife arrived early, shaking luxuriant tangled locks along the edge of the mirror whence its own face laughed back at it." Not only does no one write like that now, but no one wrote like that ever without trying to be indulgently showy with words. He can be careless enough to write a chapter like "Wayfarers All," which starts out to be about the pleasures of winter migration and lapses into a private daydream of Grahame's about fleeing from his family and moving to the Mediterranean. If one were looking for objections to this book, one could find them in many places.

Yet in my experience, both rereading it many times and teaching it to students who tend to be sceptical, and often are unwilling to take a book of another time and place on its own terms, these objections seldom loom large. Some who are actively annoyed with minor inconsistencies in the imagined worlds of Potter or J.R.R. Tolkien are not when faced with Toad being unrecognizable as a toad just because he is dressed as a washerwoman, or Toad's being

outside the law just because he returns home. Most readers notice such things, yet with this book they seem content to let minor objections rest as minor objections. Somehow *The Wind in the Willows* has escaped its own time and has survived its own particular limitations and flaws. In classes where I have taught one or many items from the dazzling array of British "children's books" from *Alice* to *The Hobbit*, often including the best of E. Nesbit, Potter, Milne, and Kipling, *The Wind in the Willows* usually ranks close to the top of the books most fun to read and the books most fun to talk about.

Since this is true, since it has survived the passing of the world of its maker, there is now no reason that it should not survive for centuries. Those who do not enjoy it probably never would have; it is a book of mood and charmed circles, and there will always be some who are not in its mood and who are unattracted by its charm. It is also so frankly what it is that it seldom will be overrated or underrated. There is, it turns out, a part of us that longs for the life of Rat and Mole, and Kenneth Grahame can imperiously claim that part and make us treasure it. We can be taken out of clock time and historical era and put into season and natural setting, urged to be more free, more filled with friendship than we often let ourselves be. It satisfies longings that our lives on earth inevitably give us, and there are never enough books that do that.