

# Richard Adams... a life of stories and animals

During 2015 Richard Adams has celebrated both his 95th birthday and Oneworld's publication of a beautiful new full-colour edition of his most famous title, *Watership Down*. Richard told Carousel that "it is splendid to have an illustrated edition". Back in 2008 he met the illustrator, Aldo Galli, at an exhibition of his *Watership Down* paintings and commented, "I'm delighted with these pictures, they show great merit indeed. Aldo is a young painter who took a lot of trouble and has stuck closely to my book." Richard was, therefore, very pleased when Aldo was chosen as the illustrator of the new edition.

This famous tale, of a band of rabbits facing danger whilst searching for a new home, was originally told to his two daughters, Juliet and Rosamond, whilst travelling in their car. "It is quite true that *Watership Down* first appeared as stories that I told on long car journeys and on morning trips to school. It owes its continued popularity to the insistence of my daughters that I should go on telling them stories about the characters in *Watership Down*."

*Watership Down* was first published in 1972, but not without previously receiving several rejections. Rex Collings, who owned a one-man publishing firm, decided to take the risk! He is reputed to have written, "I've just taken on a novel about rabbits, one of them with extra-sensory perception. Do you think I'm mad?" We asked Richard why he felt it was so difficult to get published. "First, they all said that older



children wouldn't like the book because it was written in a style they would think of as babyish – rabbits! And younger children wouldn't like it because it was too difficult. I never thought about the audience, I just wrote the story as it occurred to me. They said it was far too long and they also said the language was too difficult, but I believed that if the reader really liked the stories they would overcome the difficulties. Also, they didn't like El-ahrairah, the rabbit folk hero, who is absolutely essential to the book."

But the gamble paid off and it was received with great acclaim! Why did Richard believe *Watership Down* was so successful; why, once published, it sold millions of copies, won several prestigious awards and became regarded as a children's classic? He told us "The stories are exciting and emotional in themselves; they have a very wide appeal. They were not altered or told down to children. They were simply told as 'those who have ears to hear, let them hear' – and they did. The book won the Carnegie Medal and also the Guardian Award for Children's Literature. No other book had ever won both in the same year before, so it was a great achievement. I can only reply, and I hope it does not sound conceited, but it was on sheer merit and appeal."

The origins of *Watership Down* lie in the author's deep-seated love of animals which began when very young. "There were a lot of animals about when I was a boy. We lived out in the country in a village called Wash Common, outside Newbury. We lived with the front of the house along the Andover Road, down which animals were always being driven, particularly cattle and sheep and I became used to seeing farm animals on the roads quite often. As a small child I was familiar with trips to rivers and we were allowed to walk in the fields where there were wild animals – weasels, stoats and owls which were very

common in those days. Of course, we were quite used, in my family, to finding animals, both tame and wild, in proximity and this developed my love of animals while I was still a little boy."

This love of animals was reinforced in the books that were read to him and the stories he was told. "I am happy to say that both my parents read to me extensively. My mother read Beatrix Potter and so she read most of them to me: also, for slightly older children, the works of A. A. Milne who wrote about animated stuffed animals including Pooh, Piglet, Eeyore and Rabbit. My father told me stories about a wonderful character called Hedgehog. His characters had adventures that were connected with things that were happening in reality for me, for example picnics and adventures on the river."



Books and reading were very important to Richard as he was growing up and he told us which titles were the most memorable. "Principally the works of Beatrix Potter, who came to fame in the 1900s with her first book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. I especially loved *The Tale of Mr Todd* and his encounters with the badger, Tommy Brock. Then, of course, the Pooh books of A. A. Milne, and his books of light verse, including *When We Were Very Young*, which contained many verses, some of which I can still remember. When older my father introduced me to Hugh Lofting's eight or nine *Dr Dolittle* titles about the doctor who could speak animal languages. I discovered for myself *The Three Mulla-Mulgars* by Walter de la Mare. This completely captured me and I have kept it on my desk for immediate reference ever since. It is, I think, the best fantasy about animals in English literature. Growing up, I very much liked *The Jungle Book* and *Stalky & Co.* by Rudyard Kipling, as well as *The Gorilla Hunters* and *The Coral Island* by R. M. Ballantyne."

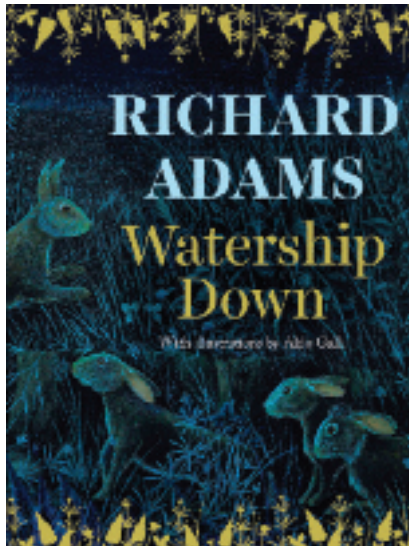
We mentioned that he has been quoted as referring to *Little Black Sambo* as one of his favourite books as a child. Did he think the furore that occurred in the 1960s, resulting in its being banned, was justified? "*The Story of Little Black Sambo* and *The Story of Little Black Quibba* were some of my favourite books as a child and it was quite unnecessary and unjustified to ban the stories. To ban stories just because the hero is black is ridiculous and the ban of the 1960s was quite unnecessary."

Opinions are divided on the topic of anthropomorphism, the idea of giving animals the human attributes of feelings, speech, social habits, dress and stature. Having heard and read, imagined, told and written, so many stories involving animals did he have any strong feelings on the subject? "My central point on this is that anthropomorphic stories are some of the oldest we have and anthropomorphism goes back thousands of years. It is not to approve or disapprove - it is basic to the world of storytelling. Uncle Remus told slave stories, that is to say in Africa there were stories peculiar to the African civilisation, and they came across the Atlantic to be accepted in America. Anthropomorphic stories are as old as time and will be with us for many, many years to come. My strong feeling is they are here to stay."

Although he doesn't write any more we wondered what his thoughts were on the current world of children's books. "When I was a young writer there was no such thing as children's books. There were just books that children would enjoy reading. Now, it has become an industry on its own. Nowadays, there is a children's market! I rather preferred the way it was before, when books were written and children read them or not. I think a lot of the things that are churned out as children's books are not very good. However, I think Roald Dahl is a fine novelist, and also J. K. Rowling is very popular and successful."

In any good bookshop you will, after over forty years, still find *Watership Down* nestling amongst these modern titles. This worldwide bestseller has stood the test of time, having seen reprints and editions too numerous to mention. But this new edition is something special, an edition to be treasured. It will be bought and cherished both by the new young reader discovering it for the first time and the older reader revisiting precious memories of their youth. Even if you already own a copy of the book you will still want to add this edition to your collection.

Martin and Sinead Kromer



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