



## *In the Twinkling of an Eye*

*The Cheshire Cat, editor*

---

### **Caedmon: Found in the Potting Shed - an excerpt from *Bachelor Brothers' Bedside Companion***

Bill Richardson

Douglas and McIntyre, 1996  
Reprinted with the permission of the publisher

---

I was out in the potting shed, checking to see that all was in readiness for the spring planting, and found a pile of old magazines. This is the kind of diversion I can never resist. I sat down and had a flip-through. In one of these periodicals--and this was ironic, considering the venue--I found an article about Beatrix Potter. It was written by a British psychiatrist, and in it he attests that Squirrel Nutkin--the eponymous protagonist in one of her tiny, perfect children's nature tales--suffers from Tourette's syndrome. He observed that while Twinkleberry and the other bushy-tailed rodents are hard-working and assiduous, Nutkin is given to disruptive behaviour and inappropriate expostulations. "Hum-a-bum! buzz! buzz! Hum-a-bum buzz!" he will exclaim, while dancing up and down "like a sunbeam." He also engages in obsessive, repetitive activities and makes odd whirring noises. Casebook Tourette's, n'est-ce pas?

Most readers of such a news item, particularly if they are fond of Beatrix Potter, will roll their eyes heavenward and dismiss these shrink-wrapped insights as yet another instance of the evils of the publish-or-perish imperative. However, I have gone back and examined Potter's oeuvre, mostly published between the turn of the century and the First World War, and I can report that she was astonishingly insightful and anticipatory of many of the psychosocial issues and controversies that now tumble about in the lines of some of her artful fables.

Consider *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle*. Superficially, this is the quaint story of the meeting between a stout washerwoman and a girl called Lucie, who is searching for her mislaid handkerchiefs and pinafore. But scratch the surface of this simple tale, and you will find the far-seeing Potter's warning against the terrible dangers of drug abuse. Carefully deconstructing her text, we see that Potter intended Lucie--whose name, after all, means light--as the embodiment of innocence in peril. Directly she enters Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle's dark hillside workroom, where the laundress is ostensibly ironing, Lucie notices "a hot singey smell," an odour familiar to anyone who has ever stumbled into a crack den while looking for change for the gum machine. Furthermore, we are told that Mrs. Tiggy-winkle's "little black nose went snuffle, snuffle, and her eyes went twinkle, twinkle." Those who have witnessed the effect of cocaine use will recognize these indicators as certain signs that everything is not on the up-and-up with the genial Mrs. T! Any doubt about Potter's deeper motivations is cast off in the closing pages of the book, when Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle strips off her clothes and is proven to be a hedgehog, covered in needles. Potter's bright warning shines through the anthropomorphic conventions of children's literature, leaving us only with the hope that the vile Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle thought to use her laundry bleach to sterilize her syringes before reusing or sharing them.

There's much more to be divined from the Potter canon, once you know where and how to look. For instance, in Mr. Jeremy Fisher, Potter is full of astonishingly prescient advice about what we now call safe sex. Mr. Jeremy Fisher, a bachelor frog, goes down to the pond for an afternoon of trolling. He sensibly wears his macintosh and galoshes. A trout seizes him but finds the taste of protective coating so off-putting that he spits out the well-wrapped frog. In other words, Mr. Jeremy Fisher was saved by wearing rubbers.

In *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Potter foretells the rudiments of sociobiology and anticipates the very recently published research which posits that compulsive novelty seekers owe their behaviour in large measure to a surfeit of a chemical disinhibitor called dopamine, which they are, in effect, programmed



to produce. Peter's siblings, Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail, who are "good little bunnies," heed their mother's warning not to go in Mr. McGregor's garden. Peter, however, cannot help himself. Evidently, he inherited his restlessness from his father, who perished during just such a raid and was baked in a pie. Despite this, Peter tempts fate by encroaching on the farmer's turf. Ever the moralist, Potter makes no attempt to excuse the delinquent rabbit's conduct. She is clear that although our behaviour may owe something to our genetic mix, we must still be held accountable for our actions. Hence, Peter's famous humiliation: he is sent to bed with a dose of chamomile tea.

Finally, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle Duck* is a highly charged tract about the need for family planning. You will recall how Jemima Puddle Duck is not allowed to hatch her own eggs. Rather, they are given to a hen who is a more reliable brooder. Distraught, Jemima devises a plan to nest on her eggs away from the barnyard and very nearly runs afoul of a fox. Thanks to the intervention of Kep the collie, who represents wisdom, she is saved from the whiskered villain, who symbolizes untrammelled fertility. In the end, Jemima manages to become the happy mother of four wee ones, which should be enough for any one duck.

Beatrix Potter lived a long and fruitful life but is only now gaining the recognition she deserves as an activist, prophet, social critic and tactician. As Pigling Bland, Miss Moppet, Tom Kitten, the Tailor of Gloucester and all the others begin to surrender their secrets, we can expect to see Beatrix Potter in all her glory, revealed to us as what she is, was and always will be: a writer for now, for then and for the dawning millennium.

---