

**A Conversation with Linda Lear,  
author of**

***Beatrix Potter: A Life in Nature***



*(photograph by Clay Blackmore)*

**Q. We're hearing a lot about Beatrix Potter these days. Your new biography is just out, along with the release of *Miss Potter*, a bio-pic starring Rene Zellweger. Did you know that this was going to happen?**

I had no idea that there was a film in the works—but I'm delighted that she's getting the attention that is long overdue! The fact that the biography is finding its way in the world at the same time as the movie is a happy coincidence.

**Q. What made you decide to take on Potter?**

I discovered Beatrix as a subject for biography purely by happenstance. Eight years ago I was visiting London when I stumbled on an exhibit of her fungi watercolors. I knew nothing about her skill as a botanical artist, her importance as a natural scientist, or her life as a countrywoman in the Lake District. It seemed very few others knew about this other life either, so I decided to tell her amazing story.

**Q. Most people know Beatrix Potter as simply a children's author and illustrator. What else would you like them to know about her?**

There are so many extraordinary facets to her life, and so much that's been neglected in the focus on her children's writing and art that it's impossible to give a short answer. Beatrix Potter came from a merchant family with artistic skills and reformist inclinations. She was the first children's storyteller to see the possibility of merchandising her literary characters, and she shrewdly patented a Peter Rabbit and Jemima Puddle-duck doll, drew wallpaper friezes, designed tea-sets and handkerchiefs, even created a Peter Rabbit board game with rules, long before her publishers caught on to what a business opportunity she had laid out.

She was a talented naturalist, but born into a world that discounted the contributions of amateur scientists, especially women. She discovered how fungi reproduce, did microscopic drawings of the process, and was the first person in Great Britain to theorize the process of symbiosis between algae and fungi into a new organism, though no one listened. She even understood and observed the anti-bacterial properties of penicillin.

Most importantly, at a time when nature was viewed as a commodity to be exploited, Beatrix Potter had the vision and environmental understanding to preserve a unique landscape. She bequeathed more than 4000 acres to the National Trust, the largest gift of that time, and was instrumental in preserving much of what we know of the Lake District National Park today.

**Q. You present Beatrix's as a life in three acts. Tell us more.**

Beatrix had a talent for reinventing herself. She was driven by her imagination, and by a desire to do something useful with her life. Whenever one avenue of creativity and purposefulness was closed, she found another way.

So when her contributions to natural science were dismissed, she turned her earlier letters to children into books, and finally found a publisher for what became the famous Little Books that have been read by generations the world over.

Crushed when her editor/fiancé died just a month after their engagement, Beatrix bought a working farm and began a new life in the Lake District as a farmer and sheep breeder. Eventually her country life became all-consuming and led to her visionary stewardship of the land.

**Q. It's been a century since the publication of Potter's books, but her work remains enduringly popular. Why is this true?**

Just one look at her illustrations and stories for children will tell you the answer to that question. Potter was both writer and artist, and one of the very few who illustrated her own work, and no one else's. She loved language as well as landscape. She understood cadence and word play, and the importance of blank space on a page to heighten suspense. Her art and her storytelling were integrated in a way that has never really been matched. Her characters may have been anthropomorphized, but Peter, and Benjamin and Mrs Tiggy-Winkle never lost their essential animal natures.

Beatrix was a child herself and she was in love with childhood. Her stories were authentic interpretations of animal nature and her illustrations were a perfect rendering of the countryside and country life that inspired her. Her books have an integrity that has made them both ageless and priceless.

**Q. You learned that after Miss Potter became Mrs. William Heelis, she was much less interested in producing more children's books. But her books were still popular. Why did she no longer want to write them?**

Beatrix was a fascinating combination of traditionalist and reformer. She always thought marriage was the "crown of a woman's life." When Norman Warne, her editor and fiancé, died in 1905 she was devastated and poured that grief into creativity in the Little Books that followed for the next decade. When William Heelis, the country solicitor who had first helped her buy property in the Lake District, asked her to marry him, she became Mrs. Heelis, farmer, sheep breeder, and countrywoman. Her life was now centered in the countryside, its farms, fells and sheep. Coincidentally, her publisher, Frederick Warne & Co. fell on hard economic times. They pressed her for more books, which for a time, she dutifully turned out.

But she was heartily sick of rabbits. As she grew older, drawing and painting became increasingly difficult and she had enormous farms to manage and thousands of sheep and cattle to care for. She was ahead of the times in animal husbandry, and instrumental in preserving a unique breed of fell sheep, the Herdwick, in the Lake District. In 1928 she brought an immense property for the National Trust, and in her seventies personally managed it until the Trust could take it over. She actively worked to protect the unique architecture and

crafts of the countryside. Whenever there was time to write, she wanted to write about country life; when she painted, she drew the beauty all around her.

When she died, many of her neighbors never realized that Mrs Heelis had been Beatrix Potter, the creator of famous stories for children, in another lifetime.

**Q. Hill Top Farm has become a tourist mecca and Potter merchandise generates hundreds of millions of dollars a year. Yet Beatrix Potter herself was eager to maintain a private and simple country life when she was alive. How do you think she would feel if she could see her legacy is playing out?**

Potter cared deeply about how she would be remembered, but never felt confident that she was taken seriously as a children's writer and illustrator. She would be endlessly gratified to see how popular her work remains, and how beloved her stories are. She would be amazed to see how her ideas of creative merchandising to extend her characters and tales for children has multiplied and expanded in to a multi-million dollar empire with items that remain faithful to her original work.

As far as Hill Top Farm is concerned Beatrix wanted it to be a museum of her life and work in the countryside. She herself arranged her china and porcelain, her artwork, and her antique furniture as she wanted them to be viewed. She would be deeply gratified to know that thousands of tourists come each year to find Tom Kitten's garden and to look for Jemima Puddle-duck's missing eggs. She would be equally proud that some of the farms she donated to the National Trust offer teas for tourists, allowing them to visit the old houses and see fell farming at first hand. She believed that visitors should be able to walk freely over the fells, so long as they took care and respected the land.

But Beatrix Potter also understood that the Trust faced a precarious balancing act in preserving a unique landscape and at the same time providing for a self-sufficient agriculture. Her imaginative stewardship of the land is as much a part of her creative legacy as her art and stories for children.

Linda Lear, a professor of environmental history and author of the prize-winning biography *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, is an enthusiastic horticulturalist and collector of botanical art. She lives in Bethesda, Maryland. Visit her website at [www.lindalear.com](http://www.lindalear.com).