



# Two Children Tell: Beatrix Potter's Clothes

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[Virginia Lowe](#) [1]

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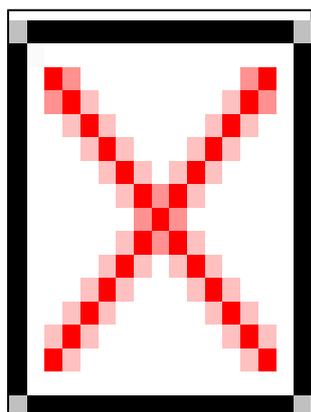
Byline:

What did Rebecca and Nick make of **Beatrix Potter**?

In the latest of her series describing children's early responses to stories and language, **Virginia Lowe** describes her children's responses to **Beatrix Potter**'s characters, and to their outfits in particular.

I will be waiting eagerly to see what part clothes play in the new Beatrix Potter story, to be released in September with Quentin Blake's illustrations.

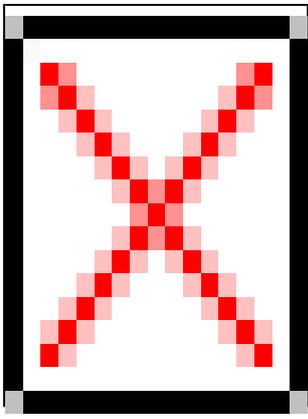
Potter herself was a biologist, and certainly very aware that she was imposing anthropomorphism on her animal characters, both in their being able to speak, and especially in their wearing clothes.



She even refers to this in the texts. In **Tom Kitten** she remarks that the kittens have 'dear little fur coats of their own'. Nevertheless, their mother insists on dressing them in 'elegant uncomfortable clothes' before sending them out to play in the garden until the company arrives 'with the inevitable, disastrous results. The torn and dirty clothes donned by the Puddleduck family were lost in the pond, where they have been diving, 'looking for them ever since'. Rebecca knew 'articles' only as the academic articles I was writing, and queried it in 'Mr Drake Puddleduck picked up the various articles'. From here on, she often referred to clothes as 'articles'. Unlike his sister, Nick did not immediately identify with the kittens, asking 'Why were they uncomfortable?' at 4y8m.

My two children acquired much interesting vocabulary from the Beatrix Potter tales, especially their central theme of clothes.

Peter Rabbit is always losing clothes 'those he left in Mr McGregor's garden were 'the second little jacket and pair of shoes



that he had lost in a fortnight?. Toddler Nick (1y2m) discovered the shoe among the cabbages, and made his 'shoe' word while pointing to it in excitement. The significance of the clothes seemed clear to Rebecca, whose byname for Peter Rabbit was 'shoes in Mr McGregor's garden' at 2y3m. Jeremy Fisher loses his mackintosh and galoshes to the pike who fortunately spits them out again so Jeremy himself is not swallowed. This however worried Nick at 2y11m.

N: I'm scared of the bitings.

V: What about if I read it and you sit on my lap, then you won't be scared?

N: Okay ? and I'll look over there [i.e. not at the book].

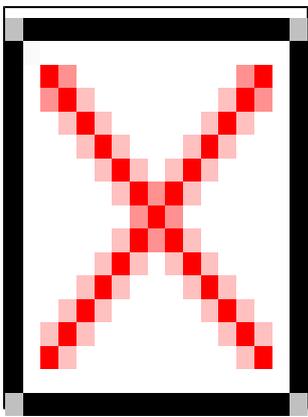
The book in which clothes have the biggest part to play is **Mrs Tiggy-Winkle**, where it is obvious how much of a chore laundry work is: washing, starching, drying, airing, ironing, goffering (whatever that is). Rebecca noted at 5y0m:

R: Tabby Kitten and Sally Henny Penny are both on this farm.

V: That's right, they are!

R: I wonder what she did with their things? Perhaps she gave them to her [to Lucie].

But the text says that when they reached the stile there was nothing left to carry except Lucie's one little bundle ? where were the farm animals' clothes? Thinking about this now, I realise this is the one Potter tale where there is a human protagonist. Of course Lucie wears clothes, but like the kittens, in the beginning Sally Henny Penny says, 'I go barefoot barefoot barefoot' and later the laundress remarks on her wearing the heels out of her stocking, 'She'll very soon go barefoot!'.  
barefoot!?.



Mrs Tiggy-Winkle's clothes fade away and she couldn't have sent the animals' clothes back to them because of course in the non-fantasy world they don't wear them. As Nicholas said at 3y7m (the book had just turned up again and he didn't remember hearing it), 'There's a porcupine [sic] who's a person, and at the end it's one that isn't a person!' Perhaps 'little Lucie had been asleep upon the stile' as Potter offers as an afterword ? this is the only time in her oeuvre that the words break the illusion.

Rebecca queried 'starch?': 'But why would you want things stiff??' Almost a year before (4y1m), she had enjoyed acting the story out. One day she was washing in a basin outside. When I asked if she was Mrs Tiggy-Winkle she replied, 'No,

because I'm not a hedgehog?, but when she came inside again, her legs covered in mud, she explained, 'That's because I'm Mrs Tiggy-Winkle. She was brown all over.' Two days later she was a 'pet blackbird' outside. She came to me explaining, 'This bird can iron, too. This bird's middle name is Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, that's why it can iron so well. It's called Mrs Tiggy-Winkle for short.' The next day she told her aunt the story including, 'She's going up the mountains. There were little white clouds up there and she thought they were hankies?.'

Rebecca was given **Samuel Whiskers** as a big sister present. Knowing it existed from 'I shall have to make another, larger, book, to tell you more about Tom Kitten' she had been wanting it for a year. She proposed wrapping the infant Nicholas up as a roly-poly pudding, as the rats do with Tom. When I objected to play dough on his clean clothes, she consented to do it with a clean nappy. It transpires that this was a sort of scientific experiment. She was confused by Potter's picture, and thought that perhaps the rolling pin worked the way it was pictured, because it was something alive inside the pastry, so she wanted to try it with Nicholas. He was amused by this story at 1y9m and repeated it to an adult friend.

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. She is the proprietor of [Create a Kids' Book](#) [3], a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-4153-9724-7, £29.99 pbk).

Beatrix Potter books mentioned, all published by Warne, £5.99 hbk

**The Tale of Mr Jeremy Fisher**, 978-0-7232-4776-0

**The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle**, 978-0-7232-4775-3

**The Tale of Peter Rabbit**, 978-0-7232-4770-8

**The Tale of Samuel Whiskers, or, The Roly-Poly Pudding**, 978-0-7232-4785-2

**The Tale of Tom Kitten**, 978-0-7232-4777-7

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