The Wind in the Willows ? Is it a Classic?

Peter Hunt considers

Peter Hunt argues that we have to be careful when classifying one of the most well known English books: it may be a ?Children?s Classic? but it?s not a ?Classic for Children?.

Of course The Wind in the Willows is a ?Children?s Classic?! It appears in every series of Children?s Classics from Oxford University Press to Ladybird Books (which edition cheerfully misinforms us that when it was published Kenneth Grahame was ?working as a secretary in the Bank of England?, rather than ? a small point ? the Secretary of). Leaving aside the cynical view that a ?classic? is something that publishers don?t have to pay royalties on, or is simply a book that is famous for being famous, The Wind in the Willows surely ticks all the right boxes. It is about talking animals (very children?s book-y), and about home and warmth and security (especially after a little scariness in the Wild Wood). There are picnic baskets and groaning tables full of food (children are, as C. S. Lewis ironically observed, thought to be ?greedy little beggars?); there are small adventures (on a peaceful river) and knockabout farce (escaping down a rope of sheets, stealing cars, commandeering a railway engine). There are a lot of (apparently) uncomplicated friendships: a vulnerable child-figure (Mole) and a rebellious child-figure (Toad) to empathise with, a father figure (Badger), and a brother figure (Rat) to aspire to or to rebel against. There is a very satisfactory cartoon-violent resolution ? and on top of all that, the book has that copper-bottomed trademark of the children?s classic: it originated, like Alice?s Adventures and Treasure Island in stories told to a particular child. What?s not to like?

And yet, any adult who reads it as an adult, and especially one who encounters the difficulty of reading it to children (even to very bookish children, such as my own grandchildren) may have some doubts. Whatever its origins, in its published form The Wind in the Willows was never intended for children. Not Grahame, nor his publishers, nor the original reviewers thought it was. It may have started out as Grahame?s bedtime stories and letters to his son, but, like Alice and Treasure Island, it developed into something very different. It?s not about talking animals (Mr Toad is, in his own words, ?the well-known and popular ? landed proprietor?): the main characters may have animal names, but apart from three or four small incidents (as when the urbane Otter suddenly gets a taste for dragon-flies instead of cold beef and pickled gherkins) these are leisured, upper-middle-class (well, maybe Mr Mole is lower-middle) men, who smoke, drink, drive cars, write poetry, own houses, give dinner parties, and are rather averse to women.
But isn't it about happy childhood things? Unfortunately, no — there is more about repression than adventure here. Take Mr Rat's response to the enthusiastic and naive Mr Mole, about what lies beyond the river:

> Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wide World,? said the Rat. ?And that's something that doesn't matter, either to you or me. I've never been there, and I'm never going, nor you either, if you've got any sense at all. Don't ever refer to it again, please. Now then! Here's our backwater at last, where we're going to lunch.

Later on, the indoctrinated Mr Mole stops his friend from escaping to Italy — and then both of them gang up on Mr Toad to make sure he doesn't let the side down by doing anything childish (or spontaneous or adventurous).

Home, warmth and food? Certainly, these are here, but they are set in a world of nostalgia — nostalgia for a lost Arcadia, complete with Thomas Hardy's carol singers, nostalgia for a land of safety and innocence ("clean," as Grahame notoriously put it, "of the clash of sex"). But what on earth has nostalgia got to do with childhood, or books for children? Children look forward, not back: it must be a rare, and sad, child, who is nostalgic for a better childhood!

And friendship? OK, if you're male. As the great Margaret Meek (who did not like the book) pointed out in *BfK* 68 back in 1991: "at no time did I want any of that male company." It was a Gentleman's Club — that represented too many kinds of social exclusion. Notably of women.

No, here is a book by a man who had written about childhood (in *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days*) — but never for children. Grahame was comfortably well off, moved in high circles, and was essentially lazy — as he said himself, he had no need of the money, or desire for the notoriety that more writing would bring. But he came under pressure from two remarkable women — his wife Elspeth and the polymath feminist Constance Smedley — and so he took the 16,900 words that he already written to his son and added to them. What he added were gentle pastiches of the fashionable genres of the day — river stories, caravanning expeditions, motorcar thrillers, and pseudo-mystic rural dreams. Sometimes the borrowing is very close, as with the main characters in Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, or the parodies of Gilbert and Sullivan (when Mr Toad is arrested), or Rat and Mole becoming Holmes and Watson arguing outside Mr Badger's back door in the snow.

Grahame then playfully (or mischievously) populated the book with (generally affable) caricatures of his friends (Toad is at least party to his friend Sir Charles Brook-Rose, the eccentric car-owner), and disguised comments on (among much else) his life at the Bank of England (his brother Roland worked there and his nick-name was ?Ratty?). He smuggled in his own dreams of escape (to Italy) and his own fears (the Wild Wood) and his own aspirations (to be an insider). The prose is rich, and allusive, and kaleidoscopically witty. There are tiny, residual moments when he appears to be addressing a child, but for 98% of the time, his target is a reader as well read, sophisticated, and ironic as himself. This is not to say generations of children have not enjoyed reading the book, but whatever the publicity says about timelessness?, it is profoundly a text of its time. Styles and reading habits change, and children now mostly encounter *The Wind in the Willows* in versions that cut anything reflective or complex from the language.

So, if it is not for Children, how on earth did it become a ?Children's Classic??
The simple answer is that it was, like many other books of the same period, adopted by adults as a book that *should* be for children. Children's books were (and to a large extent still are) dominated not by children's tastes but by adults' tastes?and for much of the 20th century these were MALE adults' tastes, strong on nostalgia, rural settings, safe and conservative resolutions, and food (instead of sex). And the snowball effect, which is behind the status accorded to many classics, was, in the case of *The Wind in the Willows*, assiduously helped by excellent management of ?The Brand? by Grahame's oft-maligned wife, Elspeth, and his literary agent, Curtis Brown.

?Classic?? Yes: it's part of the culture. How else could the probably only moderately literary readers of *The Sun* understand the front-page headline on 10 January this year on sleaze in Westminster: ?CODE OF TOAD HALL??


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