The Rabbit Who Printed Himself

Beatrix Potter was not your average Victorian lady. While other well-off young women of her day were expected to pour tea and wait politely for a husband, Beatrix preferred the company of animals.

Published 30 October 2026 · Updated 1 November 2026 · 4 min read

Read online: fogbottom.com/learn/the-rabbit-who-printed-himself/



Beatrix Potter was not your average Victorian lady. While other well-off young women of her day were expected to pour tea and wait politely for a husband, Beatrix preferred the company of animals. She kept rabbits, mice, and a hedgehog, and she drew all of them with the patience of a scientist and the eye of an artist.

She also wrote very good letters.

In 1893, a little boy named Noel Moore was sick in bed. He was five years old, and his mother, Annie Carter Moore, had once been Beatrix's governess. Beatrix wanted to cheer him up, but she wasn't sure what to say. So she did the sensible thing. She told him a story about four little rabbits, and she drew the pictures right there in the letter.

One of those rabbits was named Peter. He did not listen to his mother. He squeezed under a gate into Mr. McGregor's garden, ate far too many vegetables, and very nearly ended up in a pie.

Noel liked it a great deal.

Six Polite Refusals

Several years later, Beatrix had an idea. If one sick little boy enjoyed Peter's adventure, surely other children would too. She borrowed the letter back, expanded the story, and prepared a proper manuscript with drawings.

Then she sent it to publishers.

There was only one problem: the publishers didn't want it.

Six of them turned it down. Part of the trouble was size. Beatrix had a very firm opinion about what a children's book ought to be. She wanted it small, small enough for a child to hold comfortably in two hands. The publishers had other ideas. They wanted something bigger, a book they could charge more money for.

Most people, after six rejections, would put the manuscript in a drawer and go back to drawing hedgehogs. Beatrix was not most people.

Doing It Herself

If nobody would publish her book, she decided, she would simply publish it herself.

Beatrix took money from her own savings and paid to have the book privately printed. In December 1901, when she was 35 years old, 250 copies of "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" rolled off the press. They were small, exactly the way she wanted them. The illustrations inside were black

and white, with a single color picture at the front.

And here is the part that must have been very satisfying: people wanted more. The first 250 copies were not enough, and she had to print another 200.

Today we would call this self-publishing. In 1901 it was an unusual thing for anyone to do, let alone a quiet woman who sketched rabbits in her parents' house in London.

The Publisher Changes Its Mind

Here is the funny thing about one of those six publishers who said no. Frederick Warne & Co. had turned down the manuscript the first time around. But they took a second look, and by the time her private edition came out in December 1901, Warne had agreed to publish the story after all.

They did have a few conditions. They wanted color illustrations throughout. So Beatrix went back to work, painting new pictures in soft watercolors and trimming the story to fit. The tidied-up version kept something very important: its small size.

Frederick Warne published the new, full-color "Tale of Peter Rabbit" in October 1902. By Christmas, it had sold 20,000 copies. More than 56,000 copies were in print within a year.

Peter, it turned out, was just as good at escaping bookshop shelves as he was at escaping Mr. McGregor.

A Very Long Hop

Beatrix Potter went on to write and illustrate more than twenty little books with Warne. She gave the world Squirrel Nutkin, Jemima Puddle-Duck, Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, and a whole parade of small creatures in waistcoats and bonnets.

"The Tale of Peter Rabbit" has since been translated into dozens of languages and has sold more than 45 million copies. It is one of the best-selling books in history. Not bad for a story that began as a get-well note.

What We Can Learn From a Rabbit

It would be easy to say Beatrix Potter succeeded because she had talent. She certainly did. But plenty of talented people have a manuscript sitting in a drawer.

What Beatrix had was something a bit more stubborn. She knew exactly what her book should look like, and she believed in it enough to pay for it herself. When the publishers told her no, she didn't argue with them. She simply went around them, printed the book she had in mind, and let the readers settle the question.

The readers did. They have been settling it for more than a hundred years.

So if you are holding a story that six people have turned down, take a page from Beatrix. Keep it the size you want it. Find a way to get it into small hands. And remember that the gate into Mr. McGregor's garden was never meant to stop a determined rabbit.

From Fogbottom: practical writing guidance and free creative software for independent authors. The original article, with any updates, is at fogbottom.com/learn/the-rabbit-who-printed-himself/.