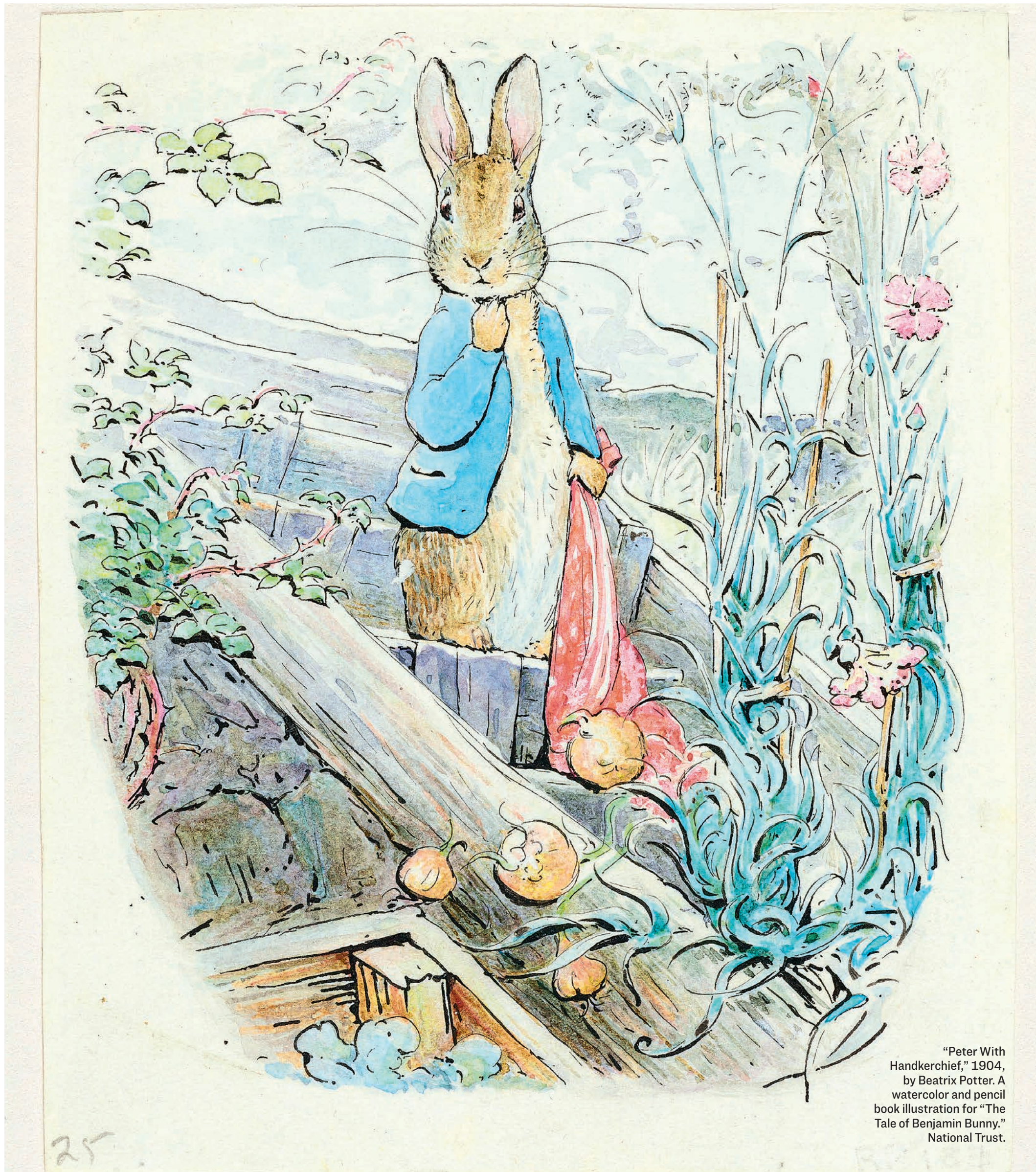


THE EPOCH TIMES

ARTS & CULTURE

NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES



"Peter With Handkerchief," 1904, by Beatrix Potter. A watercolor and pencil book illustration for "The Tale of Benjamin Bunny." National Trust.

ILLUSTRATION

More Than Bunnies

Beatrix Potter's Surprising Legacy

The 'Beatrix Potter: Drawn to Nature' exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum

LORRAINE FERRIER

Beatrix Potter's "Peter Rabbit" first emerged in a picture letter to 4-year-old Noel Moore, the son of her former governess. It began: "I don't know what to write to you so I shall tell you a story."

Years later, Potter borrowed that letter to create "The Tale of Peter Rabbit." People usually know Potter through Peter, but the tale of her life is more fascinating. Not only

was Potter a writer and illustrator, but she was also an avid naturalist, sheep farmer, and conservationist.

"Beatrix Potter: Drawn to Nature" is the first major exhibition to focus on Potter's life, beyond her books' characters. It's a collaboration between the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Trust (a UK land and conservation charity). Both institutions hold the UK's largest collections of Potter's work.

The exhibition demonstrates the impor-

ance of Potter's legacy beyond children's literature.

Her love of the land and its traditions resulted in her preserving the endangered Herdwick sheep, a robust breed that has lived in the Lake District, in the far north of England, for thousands of years. She left 4,000 acres and 14 farms to the National Trust so that the British public could forever enjoy them.

Continued on Page 4

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During the Middle Ages, libraries were bastions of civilization. The library of the Strahov Monastery.

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Our Libraries: Bastions of Books, Culture, and Community

JEFF MINICK

Libraries, private and public, have long served as treasure houses of culture. The most famous library in the ancient world was the Great Library of Alexandria. That vast collection of scrolls helped make the city a chief intellectual center in the Mediterranean for centuries, until the library entered a slow decline because of a fire and a lack of funding during the Roman period. The emperor Trajan founded The Bibliotheca Ulpia in Rome in A.D. 114, another famous repository of literature and historical documents.

From the early Middle Ages onward, monasteries and later universities like Oxford, Paris, and Bologna preserved manuscripts and expanded their libraries. These treasures helped spark the Renaissance and an interest in history and philosophy, which led in turn to the creation of even more libraries and a vibrant interest in book collecting among the wealthy.

Here in America, the Founding Fathers also understood the importance of libraries. Ben Franklin was one of the creators of The Library Company of Philadelphia, an organization that remains in existence today. Other towns and cities followed his idea of a subscription service, whereby patrons paid a certain fee for the privilege of borrowing books. After the British burned the congressional library, in 1815 Congress bought Thomas Jefferson's enormous collection of books, which served as the foundation for today's Library of Congress. Less than a century later, steel mogul Andrew Carnegie spent over \$60 million of his fortune to build more than 1,600 libraries around the country.

Of Infinite Value
Carnegie's gift of libraries, and those by other men and women who founded various types of public and university book collections, had an enormous effect on the nation's growth. Writers as diverse as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and Betty Smith of "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" fame all credited the library for their education. Many others used the library as an information center for research in business, commerce, and agricultural techniques, for study in school, and for expanding their knowledge of the trades.

These libraries served other important functions as well as the imparting of knowledge. On those shelves and in those stacks were books about Western culture, histories, and biographies that kept alive the memories of past traditions, figures, and events.

Libraries have nourished creativity not only in adults but also in children. In the online article "12 Ways Libraries Are Good for the Country," we learn that

Gallo wines, I Can't Believe It's Yogurt, and the billboard company Metromedia owe their existence and wealth to young entrepreneurs who used the library for the research that would grow their dreams.

As this same article states, libraries also indicate "the extent to which a democratic society values knowledge, truth, justice, books, and culture." That noble statement comes to us from the American Library Association. But does it still hold true today?

Book Battles

Some patrons lodge complaints against the library these days. Parents have become distressed when a few of these institutions have sponsored a transgender reading hour. Some libraries include books aimed at adolescents and children that are blatantly pornographic. And from all sides of the political spectrum, people often disapprove of some of the selections that make their way onto the library shelves.

At least one librarian has spoken out about the political correctness that has now infected some libraries. In "Watching My Beloved, Once-Eclectic Library Become Just Another Bastion of Orthodoxy," retired librarian Greg Barkovich takes to task some former colleagues for their one-sided selection of books and their adaptation of partisan politics. He begins his essay by quoting a



Once you could find adults reading in libraries. "The Bookworm," circa 1850, by Carl Spitzweg. A reproduction of the original work housed at the Museum Georg Schäfer, in Schweinfurt, Germany.

New York Times op-ed by sociologist Eric Klinenberg: "Libraries stand for and exemplify something that needs defending: the public institutions that—even in an age of atomization, polarization and inequality—serve as the bedrock of civil society."

After delivering some examples of how libraries have become more politicized, Barkovich writes: "Certainly, it is possible to be highly progressive (or conservative) in one's personal views while also being careful to maintain an objective approach in one's professional life." He then notes that "ideological commitments" have recently blurred these former boundaries. Many library directors have "seemed to more openly take on the role of activists," he reports, "and their staff quickly learned to fall into line." As a remedy, Barkovich calls on library boards and local politicians to restore balance to this situation.

The materials found in our public libraries reflect our current culture.

The Looking Glass

The materials found in our public libraries reflect our current culture in other ways as well.

In my local library, for instance, I recently undertook an informal inventory of the books. James Patterson novels? With duplicates, I counted more than 140 of that author's novels. There were 34 Lisa Jacksons on the shelves, dozens of books—most of them "modern romances" that qualify as pornography, and scores of volumes by writers like Dean Koontz and Stephen King. Meanwhile, award-winning writers Walker Percy and Mark Helprin each have only four books here.

And here's another huge change in reading preferences over the last 20 years. In the adult section, I found approximately 1,120 graphic books. In the young people's section, there were at least 1,600 of the same. Are these additions an indication that we have become dependent on pictographs—essentially what used to be called comic books—for communication rather than the written word? Perhaps. But judging by how few of these books seemed to be in circulation, it's safer to say that we're becoming a culture that reads few books, graphic or otherwise, but would prefer to poke about on digital media.

Which brings me to this point: Thirty years ago, whenever I visited the library, there were adults reading books. On my recent visit on this particular morning, 10 patrons were seated in the adult section, each of them on a computer or mobile device. No one was reading a book.

Now for the Good News

On that same visit, my public library was offering a well-attended children's singalong. Throughout the week, it also hosts adult and teenage book clubs, story and craft hours for adolescents, a tiny book shop that raises money for the library and also allows patrons to pick up some marvelous deals, and other activities.

Present that day as well were several bands of homeschool families: moms surrounded by a tribe of kids, all of them loaded down with books from the children's department. In the vestibule was an older woman tutoring two children in mathematics. In one of the conference rooms was a small class of

students, undoubtedly homeschoolers since it was a school day. And sitting in a corner of the young adult section was one of the most beautiful sights on the planet: a young reader utterly absorbed in a book.

Wanted: Readers and Patrons

If we want to keep our libraries alive—and I do—we must realize that they are businesses offering goods to the community. Chief among these commodities are the books on the shelves. Most libraries must justify their continued existence by a variety of criteria, one of which includes the number of books in circulation. This explains those 140 copies of the James Patterson novels in my town's library. It's simple, really—patrons prefer Patterson to Walker Percy. It also explains why my public library is so fond of those book-loving homeschool kids. As one librarian once told me, "Thank heavens for them! They help keep us afloat."

Unfortunately, and unlike those youngsters, adult Americans these days are reading fewer books than in the past. In her excellent article "You Don't Read as Many Books as You Think You Do," Emmarie Hodge points out that the average bookworm actually spends only minutes a day reading a book while at the same time devoting hours to television or a computer screen. She writes: "According to the Pew Research Center, the average adult American reads 12 books a year, with half of Americans reading 4 or less. Those with a college degree do pick up more books at 17 a year, with half reading 7 or less, but it's not that much of a difference in the grand scheme of things."

Want to help our local libraries survive? Check out some books. And if we want to help ourselves, we'll read some of them.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels, "Amanda Bell" and "Dust on Their Wings," and two works of non-fiction, "Learning as I Go" and "Movies Make the Man." Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See JeffMinick.com to follow his blog.

What Our Readers Say (#30, part 2)



Unbiased news you can trust to tell the truth. **During this particular time in history, I want to leave a truthful record of events for my great grandchildren.** My plan is a large binder of front page stories from The Epoch Times so they will be able to read and absorb what "really" happened during these troubling times in our history.

CARLENE FORREST



Truly a great newspaper! It's rare that I've been interested in reading a news source cover to cover but with The Epoch Times, that is exactly what I find myself doing. **I leave my paper behind after finishing it hoping someone in the coffee shop or library will pick it up and take interest.** Truth is a precious commodity and is becoming difficult to find. Thank you for your excellent analysis and in-depth reporting. And of course the online version that keeps me in the know until my hard copy arrives is wonderful. I'm embarrassed to say I used to feel this way about the new york times (yes the absence of capital letters is intentional), but that feeling passed over 20 years ago. Please keep up the great work and continue as the beacon of hope so many of us need! Thank you.

CHUCK DYMERT



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JOHN A NELSON

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"Mrs. Rabbit Pouring Tea for Peter," 1902, by Beatrix Potter. Book illustration for "The Tale of Peter Rabbit."

ILLUSTRATION

More Than Bunnies

Beatrix Potter's Surprising Legacy

The 'Beatrix Potter: Drawn to Nature' exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum

Continued from Page 1

Learning Art

Potter didn't go to school. A governess taught her subjects such as Latin, French, geometry, and math until her late teens. She also introduced Potter to great art in London's museums and galleries near the family's home in Bolton Gardens, South Kensington.

Potter was overwhelmed by her first visit to the Royal Academy of Art when she was 17 years old. "I never thought there could be such pictures. It is almost too much to see them all at once—just fancy seeing five magnificent Van Dyck's [sic] side by side, before me who never thought to see one. It is rather a painful pleasure, but I seldom felt such a great one," she wrote in her journal dated Jan. 13, 1883.

She loved Sir Joshua Reynolds's work, but she especially admired Angelica Kauffman. The exhibition's co-curator Helen Antrobus believes Potter saw Kauffman's painting "Design," one in a series of four paintings on the elements of art. In "Design," a woman painter is copying an ancient statue of a man's torso. Of Potter's viewing the paint-

ing, "I think she was inspired by Kauffman's talent," Antrobus said by telephone.

Although Potter had formal drawing lessons, she learned a lot by copying great art and artifacts at the Natural History Museum and the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum). No object was out of bounds: "It is all the same, drawing, painting, modelling, the irresistible desire to copy any beautiful object which strikes the eye," she wrote.

She'd copy paintings by John Constable and Thomas Gainsborough, illustrations by Randolph Caldecott, textiles and decorative arts such as delicately embroidered 17th-century clothing, and Wedgwood's Jasperware ceramics that were often true to ancient designs.



Beatrix Potter, aged 15, with her dog Spot, circa 1880–1881, by Rupert Potter. Print on paper. Linder bequest, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Tom Storey and Beatrix Heelis with prize-winning ewe, Sept. 26, 1930. Photographic print, published by the British Photo Press.

Art at Home

Art and creativity in the Potter home also inspired her. Her father, who was a barrister, had sketched in his youth, her mother painted in watercolors, and her brother enjoyed landscape painting. Her parents were modest art collectors and owned a Caldecott painting. She copied the bookcovers of her grandmother's "Iliad" and "Odyssey," which John Flaxman had illustrated. Flaxman had also designed many of Wedgwood's sculptural reliefs that Potter once copied in clay.

Beatrix's father was a keen amateur photographer, a skill he passed on to his daughter. He supplied photographs for the Pre-Raphaelite painter Sir John Everett Millais whose studio was nearby. Beatrix often visited Millais' studio with her father, where she could see Millais at work. Antrobus explained that Millais once said to Potter that a lot of people can draw, but she could observe. "She's meticulous about getting the details right," Antrobus said. Potter drew so true to nature that even today we can stand on the same land as she did and recognize the places she drew.

All Creatures Great and Small

Potter's parents encouraged her drawing and study of the natural world. Growing up, she and her brother had a menagerie of pets from the usual dogs and rabbits to the wilder ones, such as a bat and an owl. Potter is estimated to have had 92 pets over her lifetime; most she made detailed studies of, and many became characters in her books.

Potter knew animals well, as she carefully studied them at home and in nature. For instance, she once stalked a deer just so she could see its expression when it spotted her. In her sketchbooks, Potter made meticulous animal studies, such as one of a mouse she drew scurrying across the page, where she captured its every move.

Although Potter loved her pets, she wasn't sentimental about them. When her rabbit Benjamin Bouncer died, the pet she based Benjamin Bunny on, she kept his pelt as a study aid. That's displayed in the exhibition. And there are instances when she and her brother had written down the best ways to preserve their specimens.

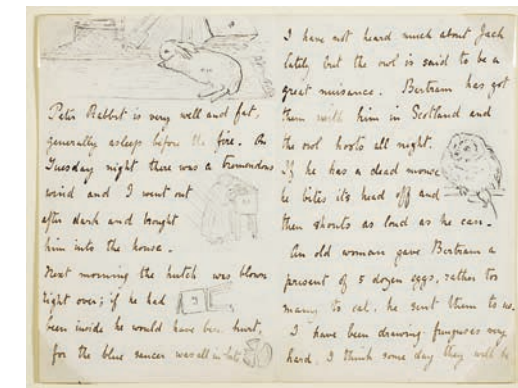
Naturalism was a common hobby at the time. Potter and her brother filled their schoolroom with all manner of specimens. Fossils, birds' eggs, and insects such as beetles and butterflies were kept in a collectors cabinet, which is in the exhibition.



1.



2.



3.

1. Magnified studies of a ground beetle (*Carabus nemoralis*), circa 1887, by Beatrix Potter. Pencil, watercolor, and pen and ink. Leslie Linder bequest, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

2. Page from a sketchbook, circa 1875, by Beatrix Potter. Watercolor over pencil on paper. Leslie Linder bequest, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

3. Picture letter to Walter Gaddum about rabbit, owl, and squirrel, by Beatrix Potter. March 6, 1897. Leslie Linder bequest, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

4. "View Across Esthwaite Water," Nov. 21, 1909, by Beatrix Potter. Leslie Linder bequest.



4.

The siblings took some of their pets and specimens with them on their long summer vacations in the countryside. For three months each summer, the Potter family leased a house in the country—a common practice of wealthy townfolk keen to escape the oppressive city smog.

The Potters spent many summers in Scotland, the West Country, and then later in the Lake District (in the far north of England near the Scottish border), where Beatrix drew inspiration from the land. "Potter bundled her pets into boxes and baskets to accompany her on holidays and invariably came home with new friends," wrote Emma Laws in the exhibition catalog.

Potter spent most of her 20s and 30s conducting experiments at the family home. She was particularly fond of studying fungi and could have had a career as a mycologist. She was one of the first to demonstrate how spores worked, and she even presented a scientific paper at The Linnean Society of London, a prestigious natural history society.

Leaving Peter Rabbit Behind

Potter stressed that although she and her brother were both born in London, they were most at home in the northern countryside. Her great grandfather had once owned land in the Lake District, and her family members were of northern descent.

She called Hill Top farm with its 17th-century farmhouse "as perfect a place as I've ever lived" and Esthwaite Water, a 280-acre natural lake in a glacial valley, as "ultra romantic." Beatrix reflected that sentiment in a watercolor of Esthwaite Water that's in the exhibition.

Potter bought Hill Top farm in the Lake District in 1905, the year her fiancé Norman Warne (her publisher's son) died. But it wasn't until 1913, when she married local solicitor William Heelis, that she was one of those few. She did everything she could to capture its detail. Her love of nature was constant throughout her life.

Toward the end of her life, Potter wrote: "Thank God I have the seeing eye, that is to say, as I lie in bed I can walk step by step on the fells and rough land seeing every stone and flower and patch of bog and cotton pass where my old legs will never take me again."

Potter clearly saw beauty, and she made sure that others could see the land she loved and the traditions she held dear by preserving them for generations to come.

For Antrobus, Potter left many legacies, but what stands out for her is Potter's wish to live the life she wanted to: "I find Beatrix a very courageous person, ... not many people would leave behind a comfortable life to pursue a life that would make them truly happy. And that's what she did."

on preserving local farming traditions and saving the dwindling numbers of Herdwick sheep.

She applied the same ardor and attention to detail to her sheep farming as she did to her children's books, and her sheep won many prizes. She learned that saving the Herdwick sheep wasn't just about buying up pastoral landscapes; it needed the preservation of the local farms and traditional farming practices.

"The Fairy Caravan"

Despite never leaving the UK, Potter corresponded with her overseas fans, some of whom became her friends.

Antrobus explained that Americans often wrote to Potter through "The Horn Book Magazine," an American publication that she wrote for and where she'd often sell fundraising illustrations to preserve parts of Lake Windmere, England's longest and largest lake in the Lake District.

Potter believed that Americans had a better appreciation of children's literature and that they took it more seriously than perhaps people did in the UK, Antrobus said.

In 1929, she published "The Fairy Caravan" exclusively in America with publisher Alexander McKay. Antrobus explained that "The Fairy Caravan" is a departure from Potter's previous books. It's about a traveling caravan and its journey through the Lake District, with stories about all the animals that meet along the way. And parts of Potter's life in the Lake District are in the story. Readers can learn about the hardy Herdwick sheep and the sheepdogs that herded them. She dedicated the book to a young American fan.

A Legacy of Observing Beauty

Potter once wrote that "very few see the beauty of nature." Potter knew this, as she was one of those few. She did everything she could to capture its detail. Her love of nature was constant throughout her life.

Toward the end of her life, Potter wrote: "Thank God I have the seeing eye, that is to say, as I lie in bed I can walk step by step on the fells and rough land seeing every stone and flower and patch of bog and cotton pass where my old legs will never take me again."

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The exhibition is curated by Victoria and Albert Museum curator Annemarie Bilclough and National Trust curator Helen Antrobus. An exhibition catalog is available.



The "Beatrix Potter: Drawn to Nature" exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, aims to tell the tale of Beatrix Potter's life beyond Peter Rabbit. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

How the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra Kept Its Name

ANDREW DAVIES

The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's (RPO) recent 14-concert tour began in Santa Barbara, California, on Jan. 11 and ended at New York's Carnegie Hall on Jan. 31, under the baton of its new music director, Vasily Petrenko.

I once had the very good fortune to film the RPO on a previous U.S. tour as part of a documentary I made to celebrate its 50th anniversary and then added to it to mark its 60th anniversary. Titled "Batons, Bows and Bruises," it enjoyed a six-year run on the Sky Arts Channel in the UK.

The orchestra's grand title gives the impression that it is a pillar of the British music establishment, but it exists today more in spite of than because of those institutions. Back in 1963, its fate depended entirely on the efforts of one extraordinary American, the "superagent," Ronald Wilford (1927-2015).

Superagent

Wilford ran Columbia Artist Management Inc. (CAMI) for over 50 years and was known as the ultimate powerbroker in classical music.

In his illustrious career, he managed some of the world's most renowned conductors and performers, including Herbert von Karajan, Mstislav Rostropovich, Neville Mariner, Seiji Ozawa, Leonard Bernstein, Claudio Abbado, Kurt Masur, Daniele Gatti, Sir Colin Davis, Riccardo Muti, Yehudi Menuhin, Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Kathleen Battle, Grace Bumbry, Marilyn Horne, Frederica von Stade, and Samuel Ramey.

He was also famous for not giving press interviews, so I was extremely fortunate to get an invitation to film him at the CAMI offices, then across from Carnegie Hall on 57th Street.

He gave me his time out of respect for the RPO, and I was eager to know more about how he had prevented its crucial 1963 U.S. tour from being canceled. If that had happened, it could have been the end of the orchestra itself.

Impresario Founder

The RPO had been founded by Sir Thomas Beecham in 1946. It was the fourth and final orchestra that Britain's leading musical impresario created, one of which was the London Philharmonic Orchestra. But he conducted many others, including the Seattle Symphony, where he was its music director, and the Metropolitan Opera during the wartime years.

To be able to use the "Royal" title in its name, he needed permission from the Royal Philharmonic Society. The conditions stipulated were that the orchestra could use the title only so long as Beecham was in charge, and that the society would receive royalties from RPO recordings. For the players who had just survived a war, it was enough to be back playing again, and especially for the biggest name in classical music at the time. None of them thought about what would happen after his death.

The first violinist and orchestral leader from 1959 to 1965, Raymond Cohen, explained what ensued when that sad day came in March 1961: "He left us with a doubtful title—The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra—and without subsidy from the Arts Council, which all the other orchestras had. So, we were really left to fend for ourselves and the whole future of the orchestra was in jeopardy."

The RPO's vice-chairman and a member of the viola section, Harry Legge, added: "He [Beecham] had an orchestra that he [Beecham] used, but he never thought about what would happen to it when he left, not really."

The Arts Council is a UK governmental body that was set up after World War II to fund groups and individuals across all fields of the arts. Beecham, having inherited a fortune from his father whose company later merged to become GlaxoSmithKline, plus having access to independent funding, felt no need for such charity.

After his death, at age 81, the ownership of the RPO went to his third wife and former secretary, 28-year-old Shirley Hudson. But the players soon began to doubt the artistic and business directions that she and her management team were taking, including its decision to cancel a forthcoming U.S. tour, which was being arranged by Ronald Wilford at CAMI.

After Beecham's death, the RPO's musical



Vasily Petrenko conducts his first tour to the United States as the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra's music director.



Ronald Wilford, CEO of CAMI.



Sir Thomas and Lady Beecham.

reputation remained in safe hands with world-class conductors such as Rudolph Kempe and Sir Malcolm Sargent. But they too were struggling with the orchestra's new owners.

Wilford recollected, "I received a call from Sir Malcom Sargent (RPO conductor for the U.S. concerts) saying this tour is going to fall apart." He added: "So, I was not only going to be working with an orchestra on a tour that might be canceled, but which had a name that might be removed."

Wilford flew to the UK and was able to persuade the RPO management that the U.S. tour could financially sustain the orchestra. He was also able to convince the Royal Society to allow the orchestra to keep its "Royal" title—at least for the tour.

But there would be one more twist to this story when Lady Beecham decided to give up control of the troubled orchestra. With no experience to draw on, 50 of the players decided to form a self-governing company, "Rophora," to run the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra.

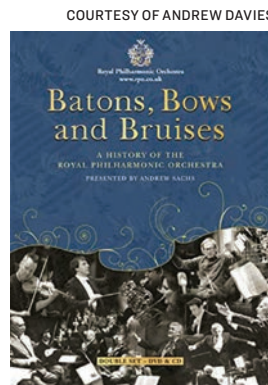
US Tour

Without any of the Beecham funds to depend on, the survival of the orchestra really did not depend on the tour's being a success. Sargent said later, "We were fighting for our lives." But after six long weeks and 57 concerts, the players reached Alaska, knowing that it had been a triumph.

Wilford reminisced: "I remember the posters. I remember Sir Malcom with his carnation in his lapel, and that most of the impresarios who presented them around the country had great success in their sales, and that the audiences were ecstatic, just ecstatic."

This wouldn't be the end of the RPO's financial difficulties as it would take another two years before it received Arts Council funding, and another year after that before the Labour government of Harold Wilson granted it use of the name "Royal" in perpetuity. Wilford's tour did, however, get the orchestra through its initial difficulties and, very importantly, galvanized the players' will to continue.

The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra players reached Alaska, knowing that the U.S. tour had been a triumph.



The DVD "Batons, Bows and Bruises" was directed by the author, Andrew Davies.

Arm Twisting

Throughout his career, Wilford had a business reputation as a hard-nosed negotiator. One orchestral president told Spectator Magazine: "If you were a young artistic administrator, you did not say 'No' to Ronald Wilford. If you did, it was curtains for you."

I can attest that, as a person, he was charming, polite, and very easy to talk to, although I did experience something of the control he had over his artists.

The virtuoso pianist and conductor André Previn was the RPO's music director from 1985 to 1988 and then its principal conductor from 1988 to 1992.

I really wanted to have him say something about those times in my film, but I was told by his secretary that he had rehearsals and performances booked in Baltimore on the days I would be in New York. So, that appeared to be that.

I mentioned my disappointment in an email to Wilford's secretary, who must have informed her boss, as a few days later she replied: "No problem. Mr. Wilford has told André to be at the CAMI offices ready to be interviewed by you straight after him." I remember thinking, now that is one powerful man.

The DVD version of Andrew Davies's 60-minute film is available at <https://ept.ms/BatonsBowsBruises>



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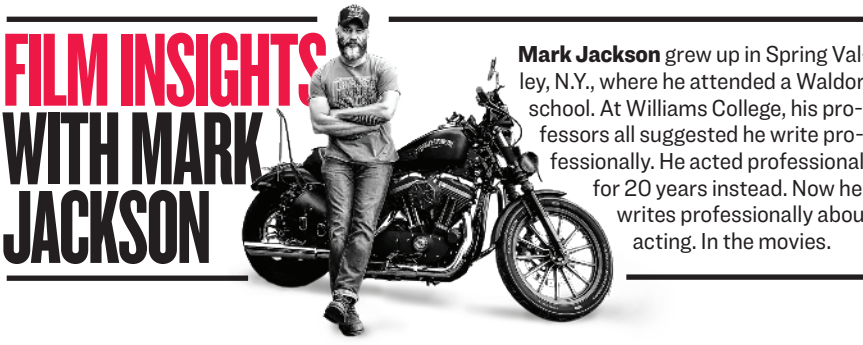
ALL PHOTOS BY WARNER BROS. PICTURES



Bruce Wayne (Robert Pattinson) is now a goth hero, in "The Batman."



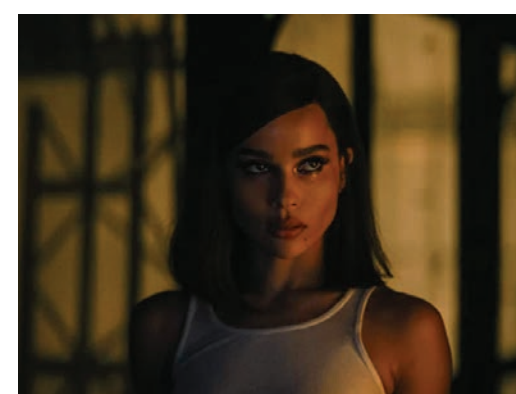
Jim Gordon (Jeffrey Wright, L) and Batman (Robert Pattinson), in a very dark and dismal Gotham City.



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.



Batman (Robert Pattinson) standing next to the best Batmobile of all time, in "The Batman."



Zoë Kravitz is Selina (Catwoman).

A Goth-Emo-Furry-Hobbit Batman

MARK JACKSON

During the entire three long hours of "The Batman," I'm sitting there trying to think of whose mouth lead actor Robert Pattinson's looks like as it mutters underneath the bat mask. Because that's really the only relatable point of focus with a Batman, you know? It's all you see. "Is it James Gandolfini? No. Is it principal Ed Rooney from "Ferris Bueller's Day Off"? No. Who is it??"

A few hours after the movie ended, it hit me (and I'm going to tell you so you don't waste your time thinking about stupid things like this and can focus on this, er, splendid movie). Ready? Here it is—former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Can you picture that peculiar lopsided delivery with the slight lisp? Once you see it, you won't be able to un-see it. You're welcome. And, you know, since Gotham is loosely based on New York City, it would be kind of an amazing tribute from an actor playing Batman—whose mission is to clean up Manhattan—to mimic the mayor responsible for cleaning up Manhattan. But I'm fairly certain it didn't go that deep.

What It Is

Director Matt Reeves's "The Batman" is the first live-action solo Batman movie in 10 years. Ben Affleck's Batman was always working with Wonder Woman, Superman, and so on. This one also has nothing to do with other recent DC Comics movies, so Aquaman doesn't cameo here, either. It's also not an origin story.

It's a slice of the Batman life a couple of years into his Bat-Signal-responding, crime-and-corruption-stomping, Gotham-City-streets-purging prime. Granted, there's enough mentioning of the childhood trauma (mugging and murder of his parents) that drove the young trust-fund billionaire Bruce Wayne to dress up as a bat and compulsively help people in need so as to adequately inform anyone left in the universe who hasn't seen a Bat movie.

The three-hour-long "The Batman" has very few jokes and is far and away the grimmest Bat movie. Its Gotham City pays homage to the constant rain in "Blade Runner" and the early 1970s pimps-winos-drug-paraphernalia Times Square of "Taxi Driver," featuring dank alleys, dance club backroom mob hangouts, and bloody crime scenes. It borrows from the horror genre by using church choirs (in this case, "Ave Maria"), which, when combined with the above-mentioned visuals, provide an extra measure of creepiness. But it's PG-13 creep-lite.

What Happens

In this setting, "The Batman" basically focuses on a serial murder case. The serial killer is the classic Bat villain The Riddler (Paul Dano), who, instead of the lime-green, question-mark-infested unitard of the comic books, wears a dark olive drab, rubber-raincoat-and-duct-tape costume, a very DIY-type costume.

We are now going through a Bat phase

of realistic costumes—and realistic evil—ever since Joaquin Phoenix's "Joker." Actually, since Heath Ledger's Joker. Batman's villains are being realistically rendered as originally more or less innocent children who, by dint of horrible circumstances, spiraled into maniacs and psychopaths.

The Riddler leaves fiendish clues for Batman at each crime scene. Not just Batman, but every ensemble member contributes to pulling on the strands of yarn the Riddler presents, which are intended to unravel the sordid, corrupt entanglement of mob, law enforcement, and political scheming that amounts to a giant, symbiotic parasite preying on the city of Gotham.

Performances

Dano's Riddler is not bad as an epic tantrum-throwing, soft boy-man similar to his role in "12 Years a Slave," switching from singsong-y genius geek to apoplectic frothing insanity in a heartbeat. Joining the ranks of Christian Bale, Gary Oldman, and Bob Hoskins as Brits who pull off impeccable New York accents is (Irish) Colin Farrell. Farrell, whose "fat" makeup rivals that of Jared Leto in "House of Gucci," has such a blast playing the Penguin, as more of a mafioso than a supercreep, that it's almost infectious.

Jim Gordon (Jeffrey Wright) is a perfectly serviceable cop who assists Batman every step of the way. They convene and mutter in corners about clues every 10 minutes.

And Zoë Kravitz, daughter of rockstar Lenny Kravitz and stepdaughter of Aquaman's Jason Momoa, is most likely hereby catapulted to superstardom as Catwoman: a motorcycle-riding, lock-picking, Taekwondo-kicking mini-thief who plays both sides of the law and smooches Batman a couple of times. They seem to have more fun racing motorcycles than kissing, though. John Turturro plays a mob boss as only Turturro can.

The Bat Performance

I submit that this is a goth Batman. I'd kept hearing "emo" banded about as descriptive of Pattinson's performance, but I mean, c'mon—does the man not live in Gotham? He's a goth Batman. I had to go look up the difference between emo and goth:

"Emo rock is associated with being emotional, sensitive, shy, introverted, or angry. It is also associated with depression, self-injury, and suicide. Goths are associated with dressing all in black, being introverts, and preferring to be secluded."

What'd I say? Goth Batman. OK, I'll concede on the self-injury; this Batman's Bat suit being, as mentioned, exceedingly low-tech as supersuit armor goes, results in a number of scars and bruises on the Bat bod that the camera lovingly pans.

As bruised as Batman gets, the movie is low-action except for one car chase and a final act rescue sequence that seems out of place due to its high energy. Speaking

The movie is low-action except for one car chase and a final act rescue sequence.



The Riddler (Paul Dano) in drab olive green.

"The Batman"

Director: Matt Reeves

Starring: Robert Pattinson, Zoë Kravitz, Paul Dano, Colin Farrell, John Turturro, Jeffrey Wright, Peter Sarsgaard, Andy Serkis

Running Time: 2 hours, 56 minutes

MPAA Rating: PG-13

Release Date: March 4, 2022

★★★★★

of car chases—I highly recommend the new Batmobile. Now this is a Batmobile to covet. Not the 1960s campy original, or the riot-tank militaristic behemoth of the Christopher Nolan era—this is a muscle car to put all muscle cars to shame.

But back to Batman. Pattinson's Bruce Wayne is hardly the free-spending billionaire playboy of past Batman characters. Is he perhaps very thrift-minded? He's able to afford so much of a higher tech, Rolls Royce-like batsuit, like Ironman, but seems to prefer using eyeliner pencil to camouflage his eyes. Goths also enjoy wearing lots of eyeliner.

The problem with this low-tech approach is that it produces a "The Emperor is wearing no clothes" type of situation. If the superhero is high-tech, you immediately understand why a superhero would wear it. If it's low-tech, it becomes snicker-worthy: Why's that man wearing a rubber animal suit with a cape? He's obviously a very special kind of nerd-detective.

Speaking of supersuits, I'm personally tired of the gritty, dark, dreary, low-tech, realistic trend in Batman movies. But since the franchise won't be going away anytime soon, I'd like to see—in the same way the Tampa Bay Buccaneers like to bring back the old 1970s "Creamsicle" football uniform every once in a while—I'd like to see the next Bat movie bring back the original light gray Bat suit with the blue underworn worn on top of the tights, blue cape, boots, gloves, black-on-yellow Bat insignia, and the yellow utility belt. Let's see some actor try and animate that thing for a change.

I also submit that this Batman is a "furry." I had to look furry up, too. I only intuited that it might be a correct assumption having heard the term on occasion:

"Furries are people who have an interest in anthropomorphic animals, or animals with human qualities. Many furries create their own animal character, known as a fursona, which functions as their avatar within furry communities."

So this Batman is a goth furry. And Catwoman rounds out his furry community of two. However, seeing that Pattinson's Bruce Wayne acts like a bit of a grumpy ingrate toward his loyal butler, Alfred (Andy Serkis), and he's not in the least bit interested in continuing the philanthropist work his dad did—maybe he is an emo furry. Whatever.

Oh, one last observation: He's also so good at figuring out the Riddler's riddles, you suspect him of having some Hobbit genes. He doesn't even pause. This Batman knows riddles.

All in all, this is definitely the dingiest, dankest, most scabrous of the Bat stories: part serial killer murder mystery, part cautionary tale about institutional sludge and rot, with a goth-emo-furry-hobbit in the lead. Bat Baggins. Look for the Rudy Giuliani lisp. It's not a bad Bat movie, but it's definitely a too-long Bat movie.

FINE ARTS

Benjamin West

A Quaker Painter Pays It Forward

YVONNE MARCOTTE

When Benjamin Franklin loaned money to a man in 1784, he made this request: “When you meet with another honest Man in similar Distress, you must pay me by lending this Sum to him.” In other words, Franklin did not want to be paid back; he wanted that man to help someone else in the same way.

Early American artist Benjamin West (1738–1820) had a strong friendship with Franklin. West was raised in a Pennsylvania Quaker community that practiced mutual-aid and trust; he got his start as an artist from these and other goodhearted people. And he never forgot.

As artist Benjamin West made a name for himself in London, he remembered to pass on his good fortune.

Native Americans taught West how to make paint by mixing riverbank clay with bear grease. Influential people in the Pennsylvania colony soon saw what West could do with his natural talent. Gunsmith William Henry took him under his wing and encouraged him to make a painting of an engraving. This work caught the attention of William Smith, provost of the College of Philadelphia, who offered West an education and connections with important colonials.

Wealthy Pennsylvania merchants saw great promise in the young Quaker who could draw and paint. Two colonials paid for his trip to Italy for more training; William Allen, mayor of Philadelphia and later provincial chief justice, and William Smith. There, the young artist learned the painting techniques of Italian masters. He also studied the theories of art critic Johann Winckelmann on neoclassicism and his quest for ideal beauty through a study of classical art.

West learned about more advanced painting techniques from British colonist John Wollaston. These techniques included proficiency at painting satin fabric and almond-shaped eyes.

An American in London

West moved to London and settled there in 1763. It was a happening place when he arrived and by 1768 the Royal Academy of Arts was founded, with Joshua Reynolds as its first president. England was producing gifted artists doing impressive work: Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable, and of course, Reynolds.

West made his name in London by painting historical scenes in the neoclassical style. But he supported his family by painting portraits of wealthy aristocrats,



“Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity From the Sky,” circa 1816, by Benjamin West. Oil on slate, 13.4 inches by 10.1 inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

who were drawn to his natural charm and talent. Soon he drew the attention of the king and did portraits of the royal family.

West became a favorite painter of King George III (yes, that King George), who eventually appointed him the second president of the Royal Academy of Arts after Reynolds.

Paying It Forward, Artistically Speaking

As West made a name for himself in London, he remembered to pass on his good

fortune. He counseled, taught, and befriended three generations of American artists who came to England to study.

West provided everything from advice, instruction, and food to money and, in many cases, a job as his studio assistant. His home and studio held a trove of works by the old masters, as well as casts of classical sculptures. Young artists could study his art at a time when no such public collection existed.

The artists who came to West had nei-

ther the skills nor the connections to succeed in an artistic career. West used his technical knowledge and experience to train and advise the artists who came to him for help. He taught them “complex multi-figure compositions and employed sophisticated glazing techniques,” according to West’s biography on the National Gallery of Art website. His tutoring and advice transformed the work of the young Americans who studied with him.

These students returned to the colonies to document America’s founding in portraits and history paintings. They included some of the greatest painters in American history: Charles Willson Peale, Gilbert Stuart, John Trumbull, Ralph Earl, Washington Allston, Thomas Sully, and Samuel F.B. Morse, among others.

3 Waves of Young Painters

Among the first wave of young artists to come across the Atlantic was Gilbert Stuart. West welcomed Stuart, who was destitute, into his home in 1775. Under a five-year apprenticeship with West, as well as his considerable influence, Stuart set up his own London studio.

Stuart’s portrait of George Washington shows a detailed shirt ruffle with a more painterly approach to the powdered hair. Stuart was known for a range of flesh tones—rosy pink for cheeks and lips, a slight five o’clock shadow around the mouth, and well-placed highlights at the nose and forehead. He showed an adept technique learned under his mentor’s tutelage.

In the 1780s, another wave of eager students approached West, including John Trumbull, a former mapmaker in the Continental Army. The War for Independence was in full swing, and Trumbull wanted to paint prominent people and battles of the war.

He studied the great neoclassical artists in France as well; there he visited an American scholar and patriot, Thomas Jefferson, who advised Trumbull in his now-famous painting of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Now widely known on both sides of the Atlantic, West accepted a third wave of artists to support around 1809. Among them was a British-born, American-born artist: Thomas Sully. Sully painted West’s portrait and brought West’s ideas and techniques back to the United States, “providing a foundation for the growth of the arts in America in the Federal period and creating a late eighteenth and early nineteenth century American style of considerable sophistication,” according to West’s biography on the National Gallery of Art website. When he returned to America, Sully applied what he had learned from West in another way: He did not charge students for painting lessons.

Ties of Friendship

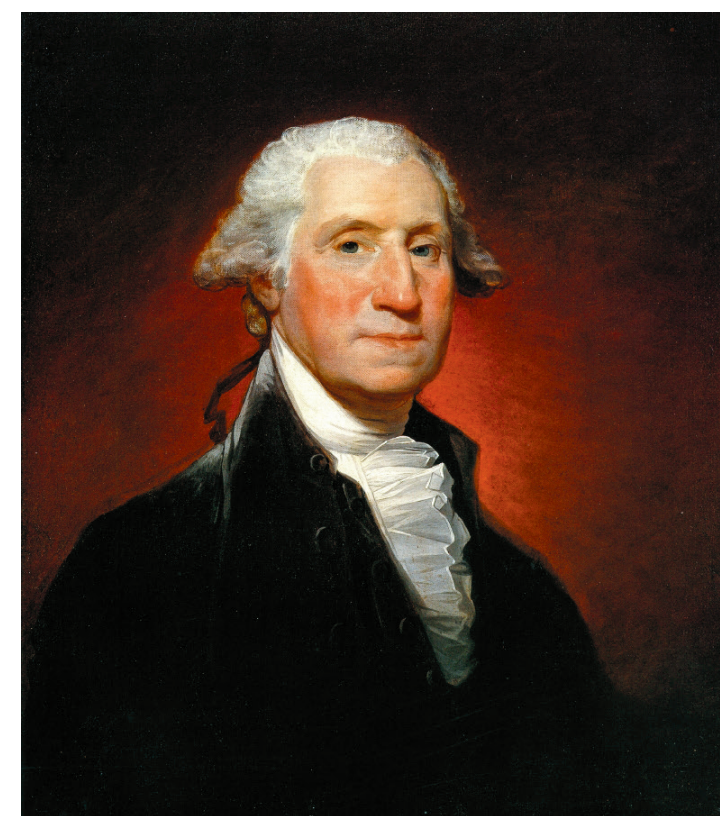
In 1783, West began a painting—never finished—of the participants negotiating peace between America and Great Britain after the war. The painting shows five Americans who were sent to negotiate peace terms with Great Britain: John Jay, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Laurens, and William Temple Franklin (Benjamin Franklin’s grandson). West painted all the figures from life. The British negotiators would not model for the artist, and so although he had begun the painting in 1783, West never finished the work, which he wished to present to Con-



(Top) “The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776,” circa 1792, by John Trumbull. Oil on canvas; 20.9 inches by 31 inches. Trumbull Collection to 1832, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.

(Left) Self-portrait, circa 1776, by Benjamin West (after Benjamin West, 1770). The National Gallery of Art; currently at the Baltimore Museum of Fine Art.

(Right) “George Washington,” 1795, by Gilbert Stuart. Oil on canvas; 29.13 inches by 24.13 inches. Private collection.



gress. John Quincy Adams discussed this painting in his diary: “As I very strongly expressed my regret that this picture should be left unfinished.”

When Benjamin Franklin was in London, he and West met and became fast friends. To honor Franklin after his death in 1790, West painted a dramatic, but not actual, scene of Franklin showing how lightning generates electricity—a totally new area of study. Supposedly, this dangerous experiment occurred in 1752. “Franklin was aware of the dangers and did not perform this experiment, as pictured in popular literature. Instead, he used the kite to collect some electric charge from a storm cloud, just enough to show that lightning was electrical,” according to the Joy Of Museums website. The painting, in oil on slate, was a study for a larger work that never happened.

West depicted Franklin discovering electricity as given by the divine. Franklin is shown with an aura around his head, seated on clouds. Putti (little cherubs) assist him in drawing electricity from a

kite in the sky during a thunderstorm. Two celestial beings are working with scientific instruments on the left. The scene explodes with energy—Franklin’s hair blows, his red cape billows, the kite is whipped among dark clouds. Franklin’s face is a picture of calm confidence; he is unafraid of being electrocuted and calmly accepts the assistance of the heavenly beings.

West and Franklin maintained close ties throughout the rest of their lives, even after Franklin returned to America.

The Quaker community that originally nurtured West paid it forward to their country as well. Quakers are reputed to have introduced the Bill of Rights and Constitution to the new government.

What West, Franklin, and the Quakers practiced could be what today is known as a “gift economy.” Giving so the recipient passes on the good fortune has been found to benefit those who give and those who receive. Every community can benefit from the example of the Quaker artist who paid it forward threefold and more.

The Time That Is Given Us

Fandom, myth, and the narrative power of Tolkien’s ‘The Lord of the Rings’

DUSTIN FISHER

There is a beautiful moment in J.R.R. Tolkien’s “The Return of the King” that emphasizes a key, reoccurring motif throughout the “Lord of the Rings” trilogy: In the deepest, darkest depths of despair, hope can still be found.

After rescuing Frodo from the clutches of orcs in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, Samwise begins the slow trek up Mount Doom to help destroy the Ring of Power. Frodo, having lost his physical and mental fortitude to continue the trek, collapses.

In this moment, Sam looks skyward and witnesses the clouds parting to reveal one bright star: “The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken



The One Ring, a replica from “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy. YUDI ANGGRA KRISTANU/SHUTTERSTOCK

‘The Lord of the Rings’ has been the center of online debates after Amazon Studios released a brief trailer of its upcoming series.

land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.”

This gleaming metaphor seems to have vanished from the current discussions that surround Tolkien’s masterpiece. However, considering the contemporary state of much of the world, it is becoming ever more necessary to expound the universal positive virtues that the books emphasize through the narrative devices of the hero’s journey, myth, and folklore.

Fans Defend ‘The Rings’

Recently, “The Lord of the Rings” has been the center of online debates after Amazon Studios released a brief trailer of its upcoming series “The Rings of Power.” Almost instantly, social media was ablaze with angry fan reactions countered by “journalistic” defense of the studio.

One scathing article against the backlash comes courtesy of the Milwaukee Independent titled, “A Non-White Fantasy World: Why Tolkien’s ‘The Rings of Power’ Is No Less Authentic With a Cast of Black Characters.” The piece’s unending barrage of strawman fallacies is intended to delegitimize fan reactions, and it misdiagnoses the source of frustration that stems not specifically from

casting but from the mishandling and lack of respect for the source material.

Several insider interviews and recanted publicity videos from Amazon show a focus—but not on the heroic journey to disband tyranny and uphold a civilization’s lost values and culture. Instead, as the show’s producer Lindsey Weber told “Vanity Fair”: “It felt only natural to us that an adaptation of Tolkien’s work would reflect what the world actually looks like.”

The power of “The Lord of the Rings” lies more in the universal struggle against tyranny that threatens the harmony of a race has become consumed by greed and power. Within the narrative, the race’s myths, legends, and culture are threatened by an all-encompassing evil. The weight of this struggle is placed upon the unlikely shoulders of two small hobbits: Frodo and Sam.

Through this heroic journey, the audience experiences not only the universal struggle between good and evil but also the mixed cultural history of Middle-Earth. This history showcases a variety of failures, tragedies, and heroic success that exemplifies the unending renegotiation of good and evil as a cyclical wheel, worthy of retelling and reexamining.

In “The Fellowship of the Ring,” Frodo is handed Bilbo’s ring and he laments that such perilous times have befallen him. Gandalf re-

assures him and states: “So do I... and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for him to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.” This speech, one of many hopeful instances, stresses the re-occurring moments throughout all history that must be faced by the unwilling. Yet many rise to the occasion—such as Frodo and Sam—and muster the fortitude to thwart such tyranny.

Myth, Culture, and Narrative World Building

Countless academic articles and books have been published on Tolkien’s influences for “The Lord of the Rings.” His endeavor to inscribe a mythology for England and its people borrowed from Norse, European, Greek, and Roman legends. These tales, woven into the expansive narrative world, establish a highly rewarding reading experience. Middle-Earth’s history and struggles are intermittently encountered by the audience through poems and songs regaled at various moments. They not only help structure and ground Tolkien’s world but also generate deep characterization and tone.

Throughout the course of the three books, there is an overwhelming tenor of struggle, loss, and decline. The elves—who have been in Middle-Earth for thousands of years—are departing en masse; the dwarves’ once great Mines of Moria are abandoned and desolate;



“The Lord of the Rings” trilogy on a shelf in a bookstore in Bucharest, Romania.

and the ancient Ents are saddened by the loss of their Entwives.

This motif of cultural regression is felt in the landscape of Middle-Earth and is also experienced through the oral traditions of song, poetry, and myth-telling. Tales of tragedy, of once great kings and kingdoms, are all woven into the very foundation of the narrative, which gives the main struggle profound weight and power.

The decadence and failure of eras predating most of the protagonists is the burden they all now bear. It is a painful lesson for every generation that reads the series, and a reminder to celebrate in the shared heritage that bind cultures and societies together or potentially face darkness that thrives on cultural decay and rot.

This painful reminder strikes the hearts of Tolkien’s fans who are criticizing Amazon’s

series. For them, “The Lord of the Ring” is more than a corporate money-grab to cash in on the success of the fantasy genre and extol contemporary social issues.

Instead, it is a mythic retelling of history, culture, and lore that should resonate with all humanity. The hero’s journey that forces one from the comfort of the status quo to face adversity and return changed is a tale that transcends race and skin color. It is universal to the human spirit.

Frodo and Sam’s perilous trek through Middle-Earth to Mount Doom forces them to leave comfortable lives in the Shire and encounter true struggle and tyranny to defend all they hold dear.

It is a story of legend, culture, myth, friendship, moral obligation, and triumph of good over evil. Focusing solely on the surface-level “fantasy” element and suturing it to contemporary culture wars was Amazon’s grave misstep, and the fan community is holding them accountable.

Dustin Fisher is a writer and educator. He has penned multiple articles on film and popular culture as well as given lectures and presentations at universities in both the U.S. and UK. Currently, he is teaching at Edison State College while completing his doctorate in film studies and American literature at the University of Cincinnati.

POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

‘Being There’: Peter Sellers’s Savant Is a Revelation

MICHAEL CLARK

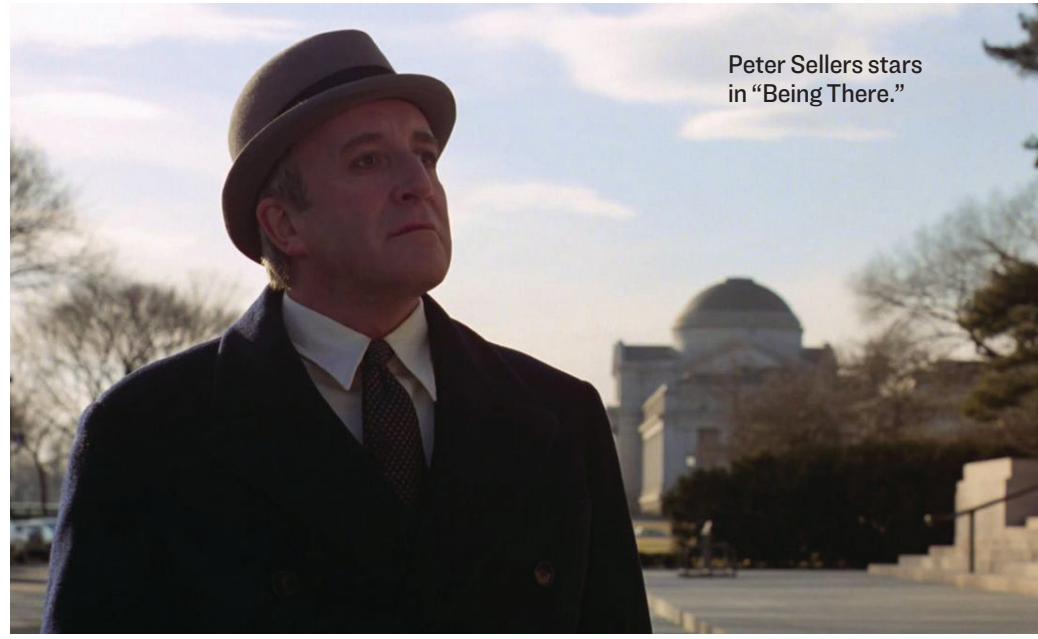
One of the last few films of the American “New Wave” era, director Hal Ashby’s “Being There” also includes the second-to-last screen performance of the chameleon actor Peter Sellers. Worshiped by his peers, Sellers was largely ignored by various awards groups and known to most audiences as Inspector Jacques Clouseau, the aloof, bumbling detective in the original “Pink Panther” franchise.

Containing elements of “Charly” (and later) “Rain Man,” “Forrest Gump,” and “Lars and the Real Girl,” “Being There” is a story about Chance (Sellers), a man who has reached middle age with no knowledge of the outside world beyond what he sees on television. He can’t read or write, has never consumed alcohol, never spoken on a telephone, ridden in a car, traveled in an elevator, or been with a woman. He has spent his entire life in a small cottage working as the gardener on a vast estate owned by an unnamed benefactor who dies in the movie’s opening scene.

After being questioned by an attorney for the estate, Chance is told that he must move out the next day. Taking it all in stride, he walks the streets of Washington, D.C., not knowing where to go and almost gets mugged by a gang of teens. While looking at himself on an electronics store TV, Chance is struck by a car carrying Eve Rand (Shirley MacLaine), the beautiful, much younger wife of the uberwealthy and politically connected Ben Rand (Melvyn Douglas, who won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his performance).

Chance or Chauncey?

Out of fear of being sued and/or wanting to do the right thing, Eve insists that Chance return home with her to be examined by family physician Robert Allenby (Richard Dysart). Before arriving, Eve asks Chance what



Peter Sellers stars in “Being There.”

his name is, to which he replies “Chance the Gardener.” She mistakenly hears this as “Chauncey Gardiner” and this is how he is addressed from this point forward.

Upon arriving at the sprawling Rand mansion (the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina), Chance charms the socks off of everyone by delivering the most simple of utterances in an almost whispering monotone. Practically everything he says has some connection to gardening, which is interpreted as understated, sagely wisdom. His vagueness and unflappable air has an almost intoxicating level of unintended charm, which gob-smacks each person he meets and, in particular, Ben’s friend the President (Jack Warden).

Never referred to by name, the President quotes Chance during a speech and, in an instant, he becomes a Big Deal. He’s wanted for interviews, offered six-figure book deals, and is the source of endless frustration to the press and multiple intelligence agencies that can find zero background information on him.

It’s So Easy

Based on the 1970 novel by Polish novelist Jerzy Kosinski (who co-wrote the screenplay with an uncredited Robert C. Jones), it is one of the most nuanced satires ever produced. Devoid of finger-wagging, bellicose tirades, overreaching histrionics, or emotional manipulation, “Being There” is nonetheless a scathing commentary on politics and the media, pointing out how patently easy it is

to fool people, often with their own willful, enthusiastic participation.

The rub here is that Chance isn’t remotely trying to be mysterious, devious, manipulative, untrustworthy, or dishonest; he is thoroughly incapable of lying or misdirection. He is always in the company of those who, more or less, to one degree or another, are practitioners of spin, misinformation, and self-deceit.

Peter Sellers did indeed receive an Oscar nomination for ‘Being There.’

It becomes clear early on that Eve is strongly attracted to Chance, and it turns her inside out with desire. With the blessing of the ailing Ben, Eve throws herself at Chance. He doesn’t exactly rebuff her but does display a level of blank-slate disinterest that is far more devastating than being outright rejected or denied. As a result, Eve wants him all the more. Go figure.

Less Is Always More

Cliff Robertson won an Oscar for “Charly,” as did Dustin Hoffman for “Rain Man,” and Tom Hanks for “Forrest Gump,” all while playing mentally challenged men. It is never made clear and only mildly insinuated that

Chance has some type of diminished capacity. He likely has some form of autism or OCD, yet Sellers doesn’t resort to the level of heightened affectation displayed by the above-mentioned actors. He never goes broad or leans into the performance; it’s all low-key and played close to the vest, and it’s perhaps his greatest career achievement.

Sellers did indeed receive an Oscar nomination for “Being There” but lost to Hoffman for the latter’s arguably easier, less-impressive performance in “Kramer vs. Kramer.” Sellers (and most critics) cited the inclusion of what has since become known as a “blooper” during the closing credits for his loss. In it, Sellers is attempting to do a hospital scene (which took place halfway through and was eventually cut) where he laughs at his own continuing line flubs. Had this been included as supplemental material on a home video release, it would be understandable, but to place it in the final theatrical cut was a catastrophic misstep on Ashby’s part. It’s dumbfounding as to why the producers didn’t excise it prior to release.

This unforced error robs “Being There” from achieving perfection and detracts from the overall sly, effortless, genuine tenor of the film. It’s the sole major flaw in an otherwise brilliant motion picture.

Originally from Washington, D.C., Michael Clark has provided film content to over 30 print and online media outlets. He co-founded the Atlanta Film Critics Circle in 2017 and is a weekly contributor to the Shannon Burke Show on FloridaManRadio.com. Since 1995, Mr. Clark has written over 4,000 movie reviews and film-related articles. He favors dark comedy, thrillers, and documentaries.

‘Being There’

Director: Hal Ashby
Starring: Peter Sellers, Shirley MacLaine, Jack Warden, Melvyn Douglas, Richard Dysart
Running Time: 2 hours, 10 minutes
MPPAA Rating: PG
Release Date: Dec. 19, 1979

★★★★★

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