

AMERICANA UNLIMITED

Beatrix Potter

Art Form: Storytelling/Historical Character

Style: Contemporary

Culture: Western European

MEET THE ARTIST:

Actress **Judith Helton** literally steps into the past when she goes to work. Since 1976, she has brought history to life with her intriguing portrayals of women of accomplishment and artistic talent. Her versatile repertoire of one-woman shows consists of three from American history -- First Lady *Abigail Adams*, Gold Rush entertainer *Lotta Crabtree*, pioneer author *Laura Ingalls Wilder* -- and England's author/illustrator, *Beatrix Potter*. Each portrayal is meticulously researched from an historical perspective. Ms. Helton's professional theatre credits include work in resident acting companies in Baltimore, Milwaukee, Houston and San Diego. Internationally she has performed at the Edinburgh, Scotland "World Theatre Festival," and in Dublin and Cork, Ireland. Ms. Helton's commitment to authenticity in her performances has led her to master such specialized skills as spinning, weaving, banjo playing and antique costume construction. She so truly 'becomes' the women she plays, that it is little wonder when leaving her home she is asked by neighbors, "Who are you today?"

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Ms. Helton's portrayal of Beatrix Potter illuminates the life of the author/illustrator who gave us such beloved stories as *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and those of some of his friends, Benjamin Bunny, Mrs. Tiggy Winkle, Jemima Puddle-Duck and Mr. Jeremy Fisher. The context for the performance is a visit with the famous literary figure. Ms. Potter shares some biographical information and tells a selection of her stories. The audience also learns "the tales behind the tales"-- the real animals, people and incidents which inspired the characters and plots. Ms. Helton's costume is a copy of Beatrix Potter's wedding garb, representing her as she looked on her wedding day in 1913 at age 47. That event marked both an end to Beatrix's life with her parents and her creative writing career. She embarked on a new life with her lawyer husband, Mr. William Heelis, devoting herself to him and their country property, "Hill Top Farm."



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The Tale Behind The Tale of Peter Rabbit:

The Tale of Peter Rabbit began as an illustrated letter to a little boy, Noel Moore. When Noel's mother, Annie, was twenty, she had been a governess to Beatrix Potter who was 17. Two years later, Annie married and moved away, but the two women kept in close touch. When five-year-old Noel became ill, Beatrix Potter sent him a picture letter all about Peter Rabbit and his adventures in Mr. McGregor's garden. The character of Peter was based on Beatrix's pet rabbit, Peter Piper. The now famous letter was written on September 4, 1893. A few years after the Peter Rabbit letter had been sent to Noel, it occurred to Beatrix Potter that she might make a little book of the story. She wrote to ask if Noel had kept that letter, and, if so, could she borrow it? Noel had in fact kept the letter and was happy to lend it to her.

Beatrix Potter rewrote the story in a stiff-covered exercise book and prepared 42 pen-and-ink drawings to illustrate it. It was called *The Tale of Peter Rabbit and Mr. McGregor's Garden*, by H.B. Potter. In addition to the black-and-white drawings there was a colored frontispiece, showing Peter in bed, and his mother, Mrs. Rabbit, giving him a cup of chamomile tea.

Canon Rawnsley, a friend of the family and a founding member of The National Trust, became interested in Beatrix Potter's idea to make a book out of this story letter. He offered to help her find a publisher and to submit the manuscript on her behalf. In 1900 the story was sent to at least six publishers, all of whom rejected it. The following year the undaunted Beatrix withdrew eleven pounds from her savings and published 250 copies herself. The little tale became immensely popular among her family and friends. When she resubmitted the tale to publishers Frederick Warne & Co., they accepted it and still publish her works today.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What kind of childhood did Beatrix Potter have?
- How did Beatrix Potter's life influence her art?
- If you look at the illustrations in her books, what do the characters' clothing tell you about their personalities? Cite examples.
- What are your favorite Beatrix Potter stories? Why?
- Do you have a pet or favorite animal that you could use as a character around which to create a story?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SCIENCE:

Beatrix Potter was dedicated to preserving animal habitats and the land's natural beauty. She willed her home and farm to a nature conservancy organization called the National Trust. Southern California is home to many different species of animals and plants. Brainstorm a list of all the animals, birds, fish, reptiles, flowers, trees, etc. that are found in this area. Are their habitats threatened? Are any on the list of endangered species? Discuss ways that your class can support environmental causes to save our parks, beaches and wilderness areas from over-development and pollution. Contact the Sierra Club, the World Wildlife Fund, the American Forestry Association or the groups listed below for additional information.

The Nature Conservancy has acquired and preserved 92 million acres around the world. Their mission is to preserve plants, animals and natural communities by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

<http://nature.org>

Heal the Bay is dedicated to cleaning up the waters and beaches of the Santa Monica Bay. Through their work, sewage dumping has decreased, drainage has been cleaned up, and endangered species have returned to our coastal waters.

<http://healthebay.org>

- Legend:
- ☉ Artistic perception
 - ❖ Creative expression
 - ▶ Historical & cultural context
 - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
 - * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ☉ Complete a detailed life-study drawing of a plant or animal. Beatrix Potter observed and drew her pets, farm animals, and various wildflowers and plants in country gardens. Ask students to pay particular attention to proportion and color so that they draw a realistic picture of their subject, rather than one that is impressionistic or stylized.
- ❖ The Tale of Peter Rabbit began as a 'picture letter.' Write an illustrated letter to someone, telling them about a family pet or favorite animal. Refer to Beatrix Potter's original letter to Noel Moore which is attached.
- ▶ Research an author of your choice and perform a two-minute characterization as your literary figure. Create a costume, adding a wig, mustache, eyeglasses or jewelry to complete the portrait. Read brief excerpts of your character's published works as part of your presentation.
- ❖ Create an original story based on first-hand observation of an animal subject. Students should endow or give human traits to their animal characters as Beatrix Potter did. Create characters with distinct personalities, noting their habits, friendships, joys, fears, secrets, etc.

⇒ Choose two or three Beatrix Potter tales and discuss morals or lessons taught by the stories. Describe how Beatrix Potter's animal characters relate truths which pertain to humankind.

* Divide the class into cooperative groups to dramatize a Beatrix Potter tale. Cast one student in each group as the narrator who will thread the story along, and set up the scenes to be acted out. Improvise dialogue and action. Select simple props or costume pieces to visually bring the stories to life.



BIBLIOGRAPHY:

The Art of Beatrix Potter with an appreciation by Anne Carroll Moore and notes to each section by Enid and Leslie Linder. Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd., London, England: 1972.

Lane, Margaret. *The Tale of Beatrix Potter*. Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd., London, England: 1985.