



Watership Down

Richard Adams

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Set in England's Downs, a once idyllic rural landscape, this stirring tale of adventure, courage and survival follows a band of very special creatures on their flight from the intrusion of man and the certain destruction of their home. Led by a stouthearted pair of friends, they journey forth from their native Sandleford Warren through the harrowing trials posed by predators and adversaries, to a mysterious promised land and a more perfect society.

Watership Down Details

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Author : Richard Adams

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From Reader Review Watership Down for online ebook

Jason Koivu says

REVISION:

DAMN YOU, 2016, STOP THE MADNESS!!!

<https://watership-down.com/2016/12/27...>

* * * * *

ORIGINAL:

DAMN YOU, *WATERSHIP DOWN*, STOP MAKING ME CRY!!!

When I was in school, the teachers played the movie version (the one with Art Garfunkel songs, Zero Mostel as the bird, and a bevy of well-respected English actors providing voice-overs) of this epic drama of courageous rabbits and us kids just bawled. The sadness, she was too much!

It's been 30, maybe 35 years on since then and I figured, despite the tears, I have fond memories of the story, so why not finally read the book? Well I did and I cried at the end again, god damn it.

It's not an overly sad ending to be honest, however, I cried because author Richard Adams ends his book with the passing of life. The relatively long life of one of the rabbits depicted here is shown coming to an end and that shit gets me every time (ie Bilbo as he passes on to the Grey Havens...friggin' hell, I've got something in my eye). It makes me think of living out a long, beautiful life with my wife and then eventually having to say goodbye to her for the final time as we pass away. Dang it, it's getting to me again...

...just talk amongst yourselves. I'll give you a topic: *Watership Down*, which is the more important theme, the friendship bond or the struggle for survival? Discuss!

...

Okay, I'm back.

Another lovely thing about this epic novel is that it started out as an oral tale Adams told to his daughters on car trips. The best stories are organically homegrown. Plant the seed, water it, let it grow, nurture it and in the end you'll have...well, you'll have a plant, but you get what I mean.

In the intro it was revealed to me that apparently Watership Down is a real and locatable place out west of London, I think in the Hampshire area. So, now I've got another reason to go back to England, to track down the Down!

Bionic Jean says

I remember when **Watership Down** was first published in 1972. It was a novel by an unknown English author, Richard Adams. All of a sudden the book **Watership Down** was absolutely everywhere and people were reading it on buses, trains, park benches — all over the place. It captured everybody's imagination. Six years later the animated film came out, and it all happened all over again! If, glancing at the cover, you asked any of those readers "*Is this a book about rabbits?*" the answer would be a hesitant yes. Yet if you then asked, "*So is it a children's book?*" the answer would be a firm "*No!*" It includes explicit details about warrens being gassed, rabbits snagged in barbed wire, about torture under a totalitarian regime, and descriptions of savage and bloody conflict.

From the first paragraph onwards, the style of writing indicates its focus group. The prose is too rich and complex for children; the concerns those of adults. There is breathtaking lyrical description in **Watership Down**. Richard Adams shows a detailed knowledge of the natural world in which the rabbits live, specifically the English countryside. "Watership Down" is an actual hill in Hampshire, near the village of Kingsclere, just a few miles away from the area in Berkshire where Richard Adams grew up. The locations are geographically accurate, even to the little maps which are included. Growing up in a rural area in the 1920's, Richard Adams had the sort of country childhood which no longer exists. Much of his time was spent alone, and this fired his imagination and his passion for make-believe, based on his direct experience of nature.

Facts about little-known wild plants and flowers and their growing seasons, the creatures of the countryside, their habits, behaviour and terrain, are all interwoven in the narrative so that the reader absorbs this alongside the story, and becomes immersed in the English landscape. It is a rich and satisfying experience; the language is to be savoured. As well as writing other fantasy novels, Richard Adams went on to write the factual book "*Nature Through the Seasons*" three years later, and much of that information is incorporated here. He credits another writer, R.M. Lockley (one of my favourite naturalist authors) for teaching him about the characteristic behaviour of rabbits through his book "*The Private Life of the Rabbit*".

Of course it is not merely the depth and wealth of description which sets this aside as an adult book. The broad story-line of **Watership Down** concerns a small, ever-changing group of rabbits, led by Hazel and his little brother Fiver, in an attempt to escape their warren. Rabbits are prey animals with "*a thousand enemies*". It is a serious business to leave a safe home and risk living in a vast world of unknown predators. There is no evident threat; Sandleford Warren is secure, stable and happy. Why should they leave? Thus we have conflict from the very start. We also have an other-worldly dimension, since Fiver has a strange premonition of doom coming to their warren. And Hazel, although the dominant one of the two, believes and respects Fiver for his inexplicable, almost psychic, abilities, since they are often right. Fiver is runtish, often very twitchy and full of foreboding. He cannot explain his feelings, and dark dread of a catastrophic event for the warren, even to himself. But his prophetic visions always mysteriously carry conviction. And his main vision, of a rabbit paradise, is a positive one which urges the rabbits to keep steadfast.

"I know what we ought to be looking for — a high lonely place with dry soil, where rabbits can see and hear all around and men hardly ever come. Wouldn't that be worth a journey?"

Fiver's vague premonitions come at key points during the book, and are essential to the plot, moving it along, often creating tension and arguments between the rabbits as they do so.

Hazel is less intelligent and ingenious than some rabbits, yet he is a born leader. Bigwig, the freedom-fighter,

is stronger and bigger than Hazel, but Hazel makes a much better leader because he can think for the whole group, and is able to see immediately how to work cooperatively and use each member of the group's special skills, in order to best benefit them all. For instance it is higher-achieving rabbits such as Blackberry, (view spoiler). We see that clever rabbits value ingenuity over intellectualism (even though none of them can actually count to five).

It is unnatural for rabbits to travel overland together away from their safe warren. Throughout the book the author refers to any unnatural behaviour for rabbits, through the characters' own self-knowledge. He keeps very close to their instinct-driven psychology, instead of heavily anthropomorphising. This is one of the great strengths of the book; its total believability in the scenario — the world — of the book. We humans too have a view of what is "natural" behaviour, and sometimes our innate natures are different from the norm, or we choose to behave differently. This depth of exploration into the characters' individual strengths and determination, and how they bond through a series of adventures, makes for an absorbing read.

Also inserted into the story are a series of little stories about a rabbit folk-hero, "*El-Ahrairah*". Here you may recognise heroes from many ancient cultures, stories told down the millennia; and there's even a smattering of "*Brer Rabbit*"'s cunning and ingenuity in there too. Humans consider trickery to be deceitful and wrong, but for rabbits it is a matter of survival. (view spoiler) The stories remind all rabbits that trickery means using their wits to escape a situation which may otherwise be fatal. They always have to use their ingenuity and cunning, because using force is against their nature (except in rare cases such as Bigwig and General Woundwort). Bigwig, solid and true, is a model of stamina and determination, using his brawn rather than brain, but he has unswerving loyalty, is truly courageous and ready to fight to the death for his friends.(view spoiler).

The stories are all told by Dandelion, a rabbit with a particular talent for story-telling — just as there would be a chief story-teller and recorder of important events in any tribal group. The closest human religion to the rabbits' own is pantheism. They revere Nature, and celebrate Life. Man, with his "*little white sticks*" (cigarettes) and "*hrududu*" (motors) is the enemy. Yet they also believe in an afterlife. And many stories revolve around "*Frith*", the rabbits' God (our sun) and the "*Black Rabbit of Inlé*", who is an evil tempter, a demonic character. We recognise Noah's Ark in one tale, but mostly the stories seem to be inventions which carry a flavour of ancient myth, and religion. The rabbits' behaviour too is influenced by their beliefs, such as when they go "*tharn*" (frozen by shock) at a particularly frightening story. Some stories can be interpreted as allegory, some as a take on religion.

One of the novel's boldest themes is about making peace with death. (view spoiler). This was his vision, and is his paradise; a place of protection, food, family and pleasure.

The rabbits see several different types of warren on their journey. A political interpretation of the first warren they come to would be socialist, since all the rabbits there are equal and no one has anything more than anyone else. "*Cowslip*" speaks for them, but is not their leader since he does not offer them protection from the dangers they face. These rabbits have remarkably human-like qualities. Art is held uppermost, and their highly-developed poetry and sculpture is incomprehensible to Hazel's group. They also seem to have lost their faith in the rabbit religion of Frith, and the trickster-hero El-Ahrairah, meeting Dandelion's stories such as "*The Story of the King's Lettuce*" with amused tolerance. (We readers however, are entranced by the stories' inclusion in the novel.)

The rabbits there are large, and live in relative luxury, but Hazel's group are unsettled by the ominous, cultish atmosphere. There has to be a reason why the word "where" is never used, and why death is a taboo subject. (view spoiler)

Despite all the food, this warren feels very unhealthy and unnatural to Hazel and his group. They want to be free to roam and eat outside, and do the things that rabbits have always done, living their own lives naturally. The rabbits cannot understand how others can compromise this urge, or want to live any other way. They accept that there will always be predators, but believe that no protection from a predator is worth the loss of the chance to live a normal rabbit life. This theme continues throughout the book.(view spoiler)

This unnamed warren may seem progressive, but it is stultified, with rabbits who have lost their life-force just as much as if they were subject to a dictator. Their world view has become fatalistic, so their Art is mere appearance. The author clearly has a firm belief that true Art comes from deeper roots, older cultures, classical and traditional values and poetic tradition.

In **Watership Down** the rabbits have a religion of their own, a culture and customs of their own, and even a language of their own. There are many humorous moments in the book when the rabbit language "*Lapine*" is not understood by the other creatures, and a common language of the hedgerow is spoken. There is a mouse who seems to speak with an East European accent, and a seagull, "*Kehaar*" — a lovely onomatopoeic name — who also speaks in a heavily accented dialect or patois.

All these, plus the main events in the story, of course, could be adapted into a children's version of **Watership Down** just as classics have been retold for children for centuries. Another aspect might need considering. I remember being rather startled by a no-nonsense, straitlaced Aunt pronouncing that "*if a book doesn't have sex in it, then it's a children's book*". Actually this novel does... (view spoiler). Naturally these rabbit are concerned with procreation - they are rabbits after all!

In common with many great myths and traditional stories, **Watership Down** describes a journey to attain a safe place which can be made into a home. It is a quest in search of that basic urge common to all living creatures. Concerns of friendship, family, comradeship, an esprit de corps, loyalty, honour, respect are all uppermost, underpinned by courage, bravery and endurance. But these are still rabbits with essentially rabbitish concerns.

Forget Alison Uttley's modest, gentle "*Little Grey Rabbit*" character, or Dorothy Richard's "*Tasseltip*". Forget Margery Williams's "*Velveteen Rabbit*". Very definitely forget Beatrix Potter's "*Peter Rabbit*" and the "*Flopsy Bunnies*". These are decidedly not "*little people in furry coats*". There are no "bunnies" in sight here. Forget even Joel Chandler Harris's "*Brer Rabbit*" if you can, although aspects of El-Aharairah may well remind you of him. We recognise qualities we admire in humans, the wisdom and intermittent ability to be far-seeing, even though planning is beyond most rabbits' purview. But we also witness cunning and manipulative behaviour; behaviour which is brutish and savage.

Just as human can use their intelligence for good or evil, so can rabbits. Yet even the most evil character in the book, General Woundwort, (view spoiler) is not a cardboard cut-out or stereotype. He is a fully rounded character with whom we can empathise. We learn all about his past and what made him the rabbit he was. A charismatic personality, he developed his tough, ruthless character through strength and determination. We can understand all his actions, and see that, just as with many hated figures in history, although what transpires from his philosophy is evil, the personality behind it is not necessarily cruel or vindictive for the sake of it. He is merely an individual single-mindedly following his ethos, and performing whatever actions he deems necessary to achieve it.

(view spoiler)

In interviews Richard Adams has said how the novel started. 52 years old and working for the civil service,

he had never written anything before. He was driving his daughters to school when they began begging him to tell them a story.

"I had been put on the spot and I started off, 'Once there were two rabbits called Hazel and Fiver.' And I just took it on from there."

He would apparently think out the next bit of the story the evening before. When the story came to an end, his daughters said it was "*too good to waste, Daddy, you ought to write that down*". **Watership Down** was initially rejected by seven publishers and in the end accepted by a small publisher who could only afford a first print run of 2,500 copies. Now, of course, it has been sold in the millions and won many awards.

Two years later Richard Adams left the civil service to write full time. His further novels include "*Shardik*" (1974), "*The Plague Dogs*" (1977), and "*The Girl in a Swing*" (1980). All are excellent and highly original novels, yet none is as perfectly plotted, or as well crafted as **Watership Down**, in my opinion. The structure of this book is well nigh perfect; the balance between all the different elements and steady progression to its conclusion superbly balanced. In 1996 Richard Adams published a sequel entitled "*Tales From Watership Down*". Yet **Watership Down** has remained its author's most successful novel. None of his other books has ever come close to reaching the critical acclaim of his first novel.

There is a superb 1978 animated adaptation, which also is not a children's film. When those delicate watercolours of the film were revealed in the cinema, everyone was very moved and impressed. There had been nothing like it before. It was pre-digital imagery of course, and it looked so beautiful and painterly. But the amazing cinematic techniques were used to evoke the whole range of human feelings. Even now, when it was shown on British television this last Christmas, there was an uproar from parents who were shocked at the savagery and all the gory scenes; images of fighting rabbits foaming at the mouth and gashes dripping with garish red blood. Its opening scenes are deceptive, showing a stylized, cartoonish rabbit-origin myth, lulling parents into a false sense of security about this graphically bloody film.

Watership Down can be read as being about an individual having a vision, or an ideal, or not letting a dictator or a totalitarian regime take over and sap any creativity or life force. The rabbits' lives in the various warrens bring up many strong parallels to existing human societies. It is tempting to view the different rabbit warrens in the novel as different versions of human government. The Efrafan warren is clearly a totalitarian regime. Woundwort and a selected handful rule with an iron fist, while all the others are stamped on and abused. Hazel's warren represents a democracy, with a leader chosen by all the rabbits, and acting according to decisions based upon the will of the group. The author's message is that this is the best way to organise society.

There are many other implications for society to be found in the novel. The events and the descriptions send a clear warning that we need to stop our destruction of animals' homes before it is too late. **Watership Down** is also a statement about Nature, an environmentally conscious novel, and an attempt to give us a glimpse into the beautiful yet increasingly diminishing world of woods and grasslands.

We are constantly reminded, through the rabbits, that of all the creatures in the world, only humans break rules which the rest of nature follows. Humans kill at a whim, because they can, rather than out of necessity. They unthinkingly decimate entire populations. In building their own structures, they destroy the very living space that other animals need to survive. Many individual rabbits have their own journeys of personal growth through the novel. Holly is one such, (view spoiler) In his prescient words,

"Men will never rest until they've spoiled the earth and destroyed the animals."

There is often a tone which suggests humanity has lost something we used to have—the ability to live free, as the rabbits do. There is a strong undercurrent flowing through much of the work; a suggestion that we should live as a part of Nature rather than ignoring it. This theme of technological concern, and connection with the natural world, underpins the entire work.

So **Watership Down** can be read as a political, social, or environmental critique, or as a book about the search for a home and a safe life. Richard Adams himself, however, rejects all these interpretations.

“It was meant to be just a story, and it remains that. A story, a jolly good story I must admit, but it remains a story. It’s not meant to be a parable. That’s important, I think. Its power and strength come from being a story told in the car.”

My personal view is that **Watership Down** is a beautiful poetic myth, where the rabbits have their own language, history, religion, Art, story-telling and heroes. And it's a really good adventure story featuring rabbits, cleverly keeping their true rabbitish natures, and also imbuing them with characteristics we tend to assume (rightly or wrongly) are intrinsically human. Creation of mood is paramount in this book. It has gravity and melancholy; it has humour and joie de vivre. It was the first of its kind and never bettered.

Whatever you think in the end, one thing is certain. You will never look at rabbits in quite the same way again.

“All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you, they will kill you.”

Nataliya says

In memory of Richard Adams (1920 - 2016):

Some books have an amazingly unexplainable ability to transcend the purpose of their creation and take a leap into being an instant timeless classic.

“All the world will be your enemy, Prince of a Thousand enemies. And when they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you; digger, listener, runner, Prince with the swift warning. Be cunning, and full of tricks, and your people will never be destroyed.”

Watership Down began as an impromptu entertainment for Adams' two young daughters on long car trips - an adventure of a migrating bunch of somewhat anthropomorphic but yet very rabbit-like rabbits. It is a story full of palpable love for English countryside, full of 'rabbity' allegories of the variations of human societies and ideologies that nevertheless do not overshadow the simple but fascinating impact of the story of survival against all odds, rooted in friendship, bravery, loyalty, courage, quick thinking and learning, ability to see and embrace the new while relying on the ages-tested old, and perseverance despite the unfavorable odds.

“Rabbits live close to death and when death comes closer than usual, thinking about survival leaves little room for anything else.”

I first read the story of Hazel, Bigwig & co. when I was twelve, and read it again and again many times since, loving it more and more with each re-read, appreciating more and more each time how its seeming

simplicity is actually made of layers of complexity.

Survival is the big theme, naturally; but another one is the coexistence between the old ways and the new ways, the balance between the natural and the 'unnatural', innate and learned. (It's not just the rabbit society that is plagued by these choices, of course). On a superficial read, it would appear that Adams favors the former: our rabbits are looking for a way to lead the 'normal' natural rabbit life that sharply contrasts with the decadent Cowslip's warren and militaristic Efrafa. But on the other hand, it's precisely the openness to the new things and experiences that allows Hazel's bunch to survive: the raft and the boat, the digging of burrows, the interspecies alliances; but they still hold on firmly to their essential rabbitness. It's the harmony that Adams is looking for, and I love it.

Adams succeeded in creating such vivid and distinct personalities for all of the rabbits in the story, making them so human-like and yet unmistakably animal at the same time. Cute fluffy bunnies they are not, however; they are tenacious survivalists full of life force and determination to survive despite their status as prey for the 'Thousand', the many carnivorous predators from cats to hawks to foxes to humans. They are driven by the need to live and multiply and thrive (and when allowed to do so, they are fearsome indeed - just think of how rabbits took over Australia, for example). In Adams' rendition, they are and aren't like us, and it's both their similarities and differences from what we think as 'human' that makes the story unforgettable.

"Animals don't behave like men," he said. "If they have to fight, they fight; and if they have to kill they kill. But they don't sit down and set their wits to work to devise ways of spoiling other creatures' lives and hurting them. They have dignity and animality."

Each rabbit has a distinct voice and personality - **without being *people* they are nevertheless *persons*** - but it's the three that stand out to me: Hazel, Bigwig and Woundwort.

Hazel, the mastermind of the rabbit adventures, is a natural leader. He is not the fastest, the smartest or the strongest - but he has the understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the ragtag bunch he leads. He genuinely cares, and his charisma and leading by example are quick to win the loyalty of others. The parallels between Hazel and the legendary rabbit folklore hero, El-ahrairah, the Prince of a Thousand enemies, are not surprising, and the final scene of the book, lovely but quietly gut-wrenching, comes as no surprise.

"You needn't worry about them," said his companion. "They'll be all right -- and thousands like them. If you'll come along, I'll show you what I mean."
He reached the top of the bank in a single, powerful leap. Hazel followed; and together they slipped away, running easily down through the wood, where the first primroses were beginning to bloom."

His opposite is the eventual villain of the book, General Woundwort, the tyrant leader of an isolated militaristic rabbit warren, a ruler with an iron fist, whose forceful personality is supplemented by ferociously merciless teeth and claws. Unlike Hazel, he leads by force and coercion - but props to Adams for not making him neatly fit into a black-and-white good-vs-bad model as his amazing ability to at least temporarily make rabbits, perpetual prey, into predators was a source of almost legendary fame. And yet Woundwort's vision breaks down because, grand as it may be, it's still just tunnel vision.

"At that moment, in the sunset on Watership Down, there was offered to General Woundwort the opportunity to show whether he was really the leader of vision and genius which he believed himself to be, or whether he was no more than a tyrant with the courage and cunning of a pirate. For one beat of his pulse the lame rabbit's idea shone clearly before him. He grasped it and realized what it meant. The next, he had pushed it away from him."

And bridging the gap between Hazel and Woundwort is my hero, Bigwig. Big, strong and experienced and therefore bound to succeed almost anywhere in the rabbit 'society', he grows from a careless and a bit bullyish character to one strongly loyal and just, learning to rely on brains over brawn and yet with enough ferocity and determination to be an unstoppable force when combined with Hazel's leadership.

The warren of Watership Down would have been doomed without Bigwig's boundless daring loyal courage, without his resolute determination and willingness for self-sacrifice for the others - a trait he would, of course, have not developed if not for the friends he made on the night of the escape from the doomed old warren in the search of Watership Down promised by Fiver. Hazel learns to see the strengths and weaknesses in others; Bigwig learns to see them in himself.

My strong and loyal rabbit hero, your words at what you thought may have been your last minutes never cease to make me happily grin:

"My Chief Rabbit has told me to stay and defend this run, and until he says otherwise, I shall stay here."

This book is wonderful, fantastic, and has definitely earned itself a spot on the strategically placed bookshelf in my future hypothetical daughter's room where it will serve the purpose of helping to bring her into the wonderful world of stories and help her see the world for the amazing place it is.

And meanwhile, somewhere in the wild, rabbits would quietly go on with their rabbit lives.

"Underground, the story continued."

Jeffrey Keeten says

"El-ahrairah, your people cannot rule the world, for I will not have it so. All the world will be your enemy, Prince with a Thousand Enemies, and whenever they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you, digger, listener, runner, prince with the swift warning. Be cunning and full of tricks and your people shall never be destroyed."

When Fiver, a seer, is overcome with a vivid dream of mass destruction. He tries to convince the rabbits in charge of the validity of his vision. They are dismissive, but one rabbit named Hazel does believe him. They convince nine other bucks to leave the warren with them. Driven by fear and curiosity they begin an odyssey that if Homer had been fortunate enough to hear about, would have given him another epic story to tell for a few more copper coins in the town square.

Hazel finds out he is a natural leader and through courage, luck, and Macguveresque skills manages to bring his troop through the thickets of a new and dangerous world. They meet other warrens of rabbits with society aberrations that made them unpalatable for amalgamation. Given the way that Richard Adams portrayed these rigid social constructs I came away with the feeling that he was somewhat anti-government. He seemed to be advocating that a looser structure of co-existence will lead to happier rabbits/people.

Speaking of that, even though these rabbits did take on some human characteristics, I never really thought of them as people. I was convinced I was reading a book about rabbits not rabbits with human faces. That to me is a major achievement, and at the same time in the early pages made me feel like I was reading a book at a reading level below my comfort zone. Rabbits are relatively simple animals and Adams adhered to that principle for most of the book. Cleverness was a revered trait among warren colonies and is reflected in their stories of past accomplishments by legendary rabbits. These stories passed down orally from generation to generation provided a collective source of cunning skills that are applied to situations beyond the natural experiences of our erstwhile heroes.

It doesn't take long for the all male colony to realize that if they want kittens.

They must have **DOES**.

They were in such a hurry to escape the warren that they forgot to bring the mystical other half necessary for reproduction. They came to the same conclusion that tribal units have come to for thousands of years. If they don't have something they need than they need to liberate it from someone else. The Efrafa warren is governed by General Woundwart. He is a brutal, militaristic leader who rules his burrow with an iron fist. The Efrafa happen to have a plethora of DOES and Hazel and his band of intrepid bunnies believe they are clever enough, with the help of some unusual allies, to coax away enough DOES to insure the survival of their fledgling society.

This sets up one of the most pulse pounding showdowns I've read in a long time. Displaying the courage of the defenders of the Alamo and the steadfastness of the Spartans at the battle of Thermopylae I found myself glowing with the pride of a participant, white knuckles and all, as the Watership Down rabbits defend their home.

The thing about this book is that you have to hang in there. I have started and stopped this book a handful of times, but several reviews on goodreads convinced me I was giving up on the book too soon. At about page 70 I could feel my eyes looking over with longing at the stack of books waiting in the wings. As the pages stacked up I started to care about this band of brothers. I wish that I had read it in time to have shared it with my kids. There is much to be discussed especially in regards to how societies are structured, about courage, about friendship, about thinking outside the box, and about the importance of how we conduct ourselves within our own warren/township. If you have kids young enough, read it to them. It will heighten the experience for you and them. I've already got this logged as a book to read to my grandchildren...some day...in the distant future...after my kids graduate college...get great jobs...meet their soulmates...and have kids that love to curl up in their grandfather's lap for a tale that may help shape the people they become.

RIP Richard Adams May 9th, 1920- December 24th, 2016

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at:<https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Apatt says

Most reviews I write just for the hell of it, for my own records and if some people like them I am just happy as a lark. For *Watership Down* however, I am just a little bit more ambitious. I would like to convince people who feel averse to reading a novel for children about rabbits to drop their preconception and give this book a chance. This is not a book about cute little bunnies running around eating carrots and being adorable 24/7. This is one of the most badass books I have ever read, and I have read books by Joe Abercrombie and George R.R. Martin. More importantly this is simply one of the all time great reads (in my humble estimation of course) that will stay with the readers for the rest of their days. Why, I have a memory like a sieve and I still remember it after all these years (OK, I have just reread it so that helps!)

Badass rabbits (Credit: LadyFiszi at Deviant Art.)

It all starts with a psychic bunny (stop laughing back there!) called Fiver who has a vague premonition of impending death and destruction coming to his warren. He convinces his best friend Hazel and a few other rabbits to leave the warren for a safer place to live (their attempt to start a total evacuation is quickly nixed by the Chief Rabbit). The first half of the book tells the story of the rabbit motley crew's (or mötley crüe if you prefer) difficult journey from their warren to find a safe location to start a new warren. The second half is about their defence of their new warren against an older bigger warren ruled by a despotic dictator called Woundwort who is something of a monstrous mutant mega rabbit. Interspersed between the chapters are charming and wonderful folk tales about the adventures of a legendary hero called El-ahrairah.

Plot, world building and characterisation are brilliantly balanced in this book. Even at almost 500 pages there is never a dull moment. Those looking for action adventures should really check out this book. There are hair raising chase scenes, espionage scenes, interspecies alliances, and a bloody fight scene that should be read with Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger" playing in the background.

Again credit LadyFiszi

On the characterisation side it is worth noting that the rabbits in this book are not anthropomorphized animals, they do not wear clothes, drive cars, watch TV etc. Yet there is also much humanity in their rabbitry, they can be compassionate, loving, kind, cruel, egotistical, melancholy etc. These human traits are believably portrayed as rabbit traits through the incredible talent of Richard Adams. The prose is absolutely beautiful with wonderful metaphors like “an indestructible flood of rabbitry”. I can pick a great passage out of almost every page. Here is one awe-inspiring example:

Many human beings say that they enjoy the winter, but what they really enjoy is feeling proof against it. For them there is no winter food problem. They have fires and warm clothes. The winter cannot hurt them and therefore increases their sense of cleverness and security. For birds and animals, as for poor men, winter is another matter.

To further distinguish rabbits from other species a little neologism is employed throughout the book, most of the words can be understood from the context they are used, if you want some extra help with these you can check out this Lapine_Glossary. You can even gloss over them without missing a beat of the book.

Reading this book is a little like taking a magic potion and transforming into a wee rabbit. I am not normally all that interested in cute animals but after reading this book I really developed a huge respect for these little guys, the odds are really stacked against them yet they manage to survive and even thrive. Even though the book was written primarily for children, it is certainly sophisticated enough to be enjoyed by adults. I certainly prefer it to all the YA books I have read.

Definitely worth more stars than the Goodreads system can accommodate.

Briiight eeeyes buuurning like fire...

Notes:

- I don't remember much about the 1978 animated film, I could not have liked it very much otherwise I would at least remember liking it (terrible sentence I know). I thought the artwork and animation were a bit crude, though. Whether the film captures the spirit of the book I could not tell you, but when Channel 5 (in the UK) screened the film on Easter Sunday 2016, some viewers were so outraged at the violence they tweeted their complaints and demanded the responsible programmers to be fired. Sounds like a recommendation to me!

(click to embiggen)

• **Update Apr, 28, 2016:** BBC and Netflix have teamed up to make a new animated series of *Watership Down*.

• **Update Dec 30, 2016:** Richard Adams died just a few days ago, and I am so grateful to him for this book which is one of my all-time favorites. R.I.P. Richard Adams.

Bookdragon Sean says

I don't give a shit what Richard Adams says about his book because it simply isn't true. According to him, in the preface of my edition, this is just a story about rabbits. Its intended purpose was to entertain his children in the car, that's fair enough, but he also says there is no intentional allegorical meaning whatsoever. I find this hard to believe. The allegories in here are rich and meaningful. They don't just allude to simple problems. They're complex and purposeful. So if he didn't intend them, then his unconscious certainly did! I can't believe the literary merit of this work is entirely accidental.

"Animals don't behave like men," he said. 'If they have to fight, they fight; and if they have to kill they kill. But they don't sit down and set their wits to work to devise ways of spoiling other creatures' lives and hurting them. They have dignity and animality."

This has a surprising amount of depth. The story is a comment on the brutal nature of man, and his careless attitude towards nature; it is a suggestion that he kills for the sake of killing, rather than out of a need for survival; it is a statement that man is not in touch with nature like other animals, but in spite of this he is redeemable and capable of the opposite as much as the apparent. Indeed, this can be seen with the little girl who saves Hazel, the Rabbit's chief, at the end of the novel. So it's a bit more than a basic children's fable.

This is one of those rare, rare, books that can be read by anyone regardless of age and taste in novels; it really is a wonderful story that has the potential to be enjoyed by all. Indeed, there is a reason why very few people have not heard of *Watership Down*, and it's not because this is just a tale of rabbits attempting to find a new home and survive. That is the crux of the plot, but not the limits of the scope of the novel. It has the appearance of a children's novel in that it is an exciting adventure about rabbits, but for an adult it has greater depth.

Moreover, the novel questions the artificial life that captive animals must endure and demonstrates that they should be at one with their true nature like the rabbits of this novel. This, for me, is a rather deep observation. Humans are a species that superimpose their ways on all other forms of life. If the animals don't adapt, then they die. I'm not going to go into the murky realms of morality, but whatever you think about the treatment of animals, this is a truism. Humans destroy nature as they destroy most things. I'm sounding like a little bit of a misanthrope but, again, it's true.

"Men will never rest till they've spoiled the earth and destroyed the animals."

Regardless of what Richard Adams thinks; his book is an allegory for many things. He may not have intended this, but the finished product clearly transcends his motives; it has become a real work of literature. One need only look at half the works in the literary cannon to see that the interpretations of these works rarely correspond with the author's intent, and sometimes even directly oppose them. Many critics even say the author isn't important and is just a mere vessel for the work. If this is true, then one needn't look any further than the wonderful tale of *Watership Down* for conformation.

This is a great book.

Postscript- I found this gorgeous illustrated edition in Waterstones that I just had to buy.....

I mean, just look at it.

Terry says

I think there are generally two classes of people when it comes to this book: those who see beyond the surface and love it, and those who just don't get it and wonder how anyone can praise a silly book about talking rabbits.

Given my rating of it, I obviously fall into the former group. On the surface this is an engaging tale about a group of outcast rabbits who leave their warren at the promptings of one of their fellows who is able to foresee a great catastrophe on the horizon. Their adventures are varied and engaging, both while they trek to the place they will eventually call home (the eponymous *Watership Down*), and as they attempt to search for does to help re-populate their new warren from the militaristic Efrafa.

Adams does a neat trick in dealing with his rabbit characters. They are not quite humans and the way they try to puzzle out the world around them in a very animal-like way makes them more than just people in bunny-suits, though at the same time they are human-like, and varied, enough to engage the reader. They have their own language (with words and concepts derived from their understanding of the world), and perhaps most engagingly, they tell stories and myths based on their beloved folk-hero El-ahrairah. These stories, peppered throughout the book as chapters, are some of the most enjoyable parts of the tale and add a depth and interest to the rabbits and their 'culture' that is very endearing.

The rabbits themselves fill certain archetypal roles (the leader, the warrior, the seer, the scientist, the villain) while at the same time retaining individual characters and even developing as the story progresses. This is definitely not a children's story of 'fluffy wabbits' even if only taken at surface level; and when looked at below the surface it is a satisfying and fulfilling tale well worthy of the title "classic".

Re-read, September, 2012: Yup, this is still a fantastic read. Man, that ending always gets me *sniff*. I think what really makes this story sing are the layers. Everything builds on all that came before it, whether it's plot, character, or theme. We grow to love a group of characters that may at first have seemed rather silly and what had started out as a simple here-to-there quest turns into, for me at least, something much more. Oh and one other thing: Bigwig is the man, his last stand against Woundwort is an amazing moment, but there's a reason why Hazel was Chief Rabbit.

Melissa ♥ Dog/Wolf Lover ♥ Martin says

Re-read on audio is great. Still truly wonderful & sad.

OMG! I can't believe it has taken me all of these years to read this book! It was such a wonderful book. There were some sad things, but I was able to get through it.

I loved getting lost in this world of rabbits, where they talked of their fears, of things they needed to get done, the great camaraderie between each and every one of them. They were all so brave. I loved them all. I had a soft spot mostly for Hazel, Fiver, and Bigwig. I even loved Kehaar! They were all so wonderful and such little hero's!

Even though the rabbits were going through all of these hardships I felt like I was taken back in time... to a time of childhood and great things. I guess it's hard to explain, but I'm sure some of you know what I'm talking about. You didn't have to read this as a child to get that feeling.

I would recommend this book to anyone that hasn't read it yet. It will take you away to another world for a little bit of your life and it's worth it.

PS-The movie is free to watch on Youtube. I'm not sure if I would let small children read or watch this movie since it's rather gory and sad things. Although, it's all real life. It's up to you as a parent with small children. FYI: I was allowed to watch anything at a very young age so it's hard for me to say.

That ending is so bittersweet. ❤

Happy Reading!

Mel ❤

MY BLOG: Melissa Martin's Reading List

John says

Ok, so it's a book about a bunch of rabbits traveling through a small stretch of English countryside. As such, it doesn't seem like something that would appeal to anyone but a preteen. But the fact of the matter is this is a great story, full of rich characters, a deep (if occasionally erroneous) understanding of things lapine, and it can reach moments of depth and profundity that the movie of the same title does not even begin to hint at. I was actually introduced to this book in one of the best ways I can imagine: a friend recorded the entire book on tape, and for a couple months I played the tapes of her reading a chapter or two just before I fell asleep each night. My slow exposure to the book under ideal circumstances may have influenced my perceptions, but I can say on each subsequent rereading of the book I've come to appreciate it more. You can read the book just for the story: apparently, the author wrote the book from stories he would tell his children, and it still can easily serve that purpose. But the richness of his characters lead to many interesting analogies to human life. For instance, from Hazel you can learn profound things about leadership. Throughout the book you feel that Hazel is the natural-born leader of his group of rabbits, but Richard Adams was very careful to develop this impression through character features rather than power-relations. The contrast is clearly intentional since the other leaders of the book achieve leadership status through very different means. Many people think the book takes a strong stance against a particular kind of authoritarian rule, but it is important to recognize the book gives this impression not through structured diatribe or through argument, but rather it evolves out of character considerations, and out of the story itself. This means that the result is far more complex than a simple argument. For instance, although General Woundwort may be seen as the main enemy that Hazel has to deal with, and the authoritarian rabbit is portrayed rather negatively at times, Adams quite intentionally adds some details that make him admirable to the other rabbits, even to the very end. A diatribe would not be so complex. Fiver is another great character. He adds an element of magic to the story, and it allows Adams to link the rabbits he describes to a mythical world that enters into the story quite frequently. One can almost see Fiver as a manifestation of imagination in this world. Big-wig is another likable character, and the story of this rabbits experience in Efrafa is one of the highlights of the story. Besides the characters, the descriptions of England are also quite acute. You can actually track the course of the rabbits on maps, since Adams was careful to describe real places and things. That attention to detail is often missed in reviews of this book. Finally, the thing that brings all these features together and makes the book more than a mere story, or an account of human characters, or a diatribe against fascism, is the fact that Adams is quite conscious of the fact that he is telling the story from the perspective of rabbits. The challenges they face are rabbit-sized, the ideas about the external world are rabbitlike, the philosophical insights seem rabbitized, and Adams brings many of our anthropomorphized ideas of rabbits together with the reality of rabbits in a surprisingly coherent fashion. I suppose the book can be seen as a cultural study of an imaginatively rich but realistic rabbit world. I realize as I write this review that many other readers may not feel the same way about the book as I do. It does have some shortcomings. For instance, female characters only make a few appearances in the book, although I think Adams does show some sensitivity in their depictions. But, even with the limitations, I would recommend the book to anyone who likes a good story and who is willing to think deeply about a children's story.

Delee says

All the world will be your enemy, Prince of a Thousand enemies. And when they catch you, they will kill you. But first they must catch you; digger, listener, runner, Prince with the swift warning. Be cunning, and full of tricks, and your people will never be destroyed.

This is my all time favorite book...although some of my love for this book may be an emotional attachment to the time in my life when it was read for the first time. Before this book, my parents used to read to me at bedtime on my own...Eloise, Paddington Bear, and eventually Harriet the Spy..but then one magical day, my dad picked a book that he thought would suit the whole family...

WATERSHIP DOWN. Now I was allowed at the big people's table. I was six years old. My brother Les-ten. and my sister Bonnie-fourteen. Every night after supper we all gathered around -after my mom, and us children cleared the dishes- my dad read a chapter or two each night. It was a time when life was PERFECT. It was before any stresses hit our world.

WATERSHIP DOWN is about a young bunny named Fiver who is a seer. One day he receives a frightening vision of his warren's imminent destruction. When he and his brother Hazel fail to convince their chief rabbit of the need to evacuate, they set out on their own with a small band of rabbits to search for a new home.

I will just say that many of my childhood pets have been named after characters in this book (two dogs and two cats, named after Pipkin and Fiver).

Probably most people that read this book will not have the same experience that I did, but to me it was a welcoming into the adult world of reading.

Manny says

It's got nothing much to do with this book, but I want to tell my rabbit story. Feel free to disbelieve me if you must, but it's actually true. I know the person it happened to quite well, though I have changed names and other particulars in order to protect the innocent and not-so-innocent.

So, many years ago, my friend (let's call her Mary) used to have a dog (let's call him Rover). She lived next door to a family whose five year old girl (let's call her Anna) had a rabbit (let's call him Fluffy). Anna was extremely fond of Fluffy, and spent a lot time playing with him, feeding him lettuce, and doing other stuff five year old girls do with their pet rabbits.

One weekend, Anna's family were going off for a day to visit relatives. They had only been gone an hour or two when Mary's little sister bursts into her bedroom, close to hysterical. OMG, OMG, Rover has killed Fluffy! Mary comes downstairs, and it's true. There's Rover, looking very pleased with himself, and there's

Fluffy. He's not just stone-cold dead, but Rover has for some reason dragged him home through the dirt, rather than carrying him carefully in his jaws the way dogs usually do. He's a total mess.

So for a moment both girls are indeed pretty hysterical, but then Mary calms down. She can see a way out of this. They take Fluffy's corpse back to Mary's room, and get out a bowl of warm water, shampoo and a blow-drier. They do a pretty good job of cleaning him up, so he looks more or less presentable. Late at night, they sneak out with a flashlight and put him back in his hutch. They figure that with a little luck they've got away with it.

The next day, the neighbors come back. Shortly afterwards, the doorbell rings. It's Anna's father, who looks like he's near to losing it altogether. At first he can hardly speak, he's so angry, and then he explains what's happened. They were just going to leave, he says, and Anna had gone out for a last check on Fluffy. She'd found him dead, and was, predictably, heart-broken. Despite everything, she'd insisted that they go and bury him properly at once, which they'd done. And then... while they were away... some *bastard*, some *sick fuck* had gone and *dug up* poor Fluffy! and *put him back in his hutch!!* How could anyone do such a thing!!!

My friend told me she'd looked him in the eye and said she couldn't understand that either, and it was the hardest thing she'd ever done.

I just got mail from Eric_W, who pointed out that a variant of this story is described as an urban legend at <http://www.snopes.com/horrors/gruesom...>

I heard this story from my friend, who is very reliable, early in 1987, which predates any of the references quoted... the Snopes article claims it started circulating the following year. I believe my friend's account, and I think she actually is the original source!

Mark Lawrence says

I read this book an age ago. Maybe 40 years ago the first time.

Lots of authors have written animal stories but they tend to be cute little tales where the level of anthropomorphism is such that the rabbits or whatever are practically, or literally, wearing waistcoats and top hats. We only need to look to Wind in the Willows or Beatrix Potter for examples.

Obviously *some* level of making the animals human is required. I suspect a rabbit's true inner monologue would be rather dull even if it could be put into words. But what Richard Adams achieved was something that kept his rabbits much closer to the real creatures, from the details of their living quarters to the unvarnished truth that rabbits eat their own crap.

When Adams' rabbits come into contact with humans we get a true sense of incomprehension, of struggling to make sense of their activities (and technology) within the framework of a very different world view.

Watership Down is a fat book containing a lot of story. The warren has a history. The rabbits as a species have a history, stored in an oral tradition of stories about their gods and heroes.

Disaster visits our hero, the rabbit Hazel, who is neither the quickest, strongest, bravest or cleverest of his fellows, and with a mixed band he sets out across Watership Down on a quest.

Adams gives each of the rabbits a unique and interesting character from which much of the strength of this novel springs. The dynamics in the group, the strengthening friendships, the teamwork used in overcoming challenges ... is all fascinating and even though the rabbits keep doing deeply rabbity things, it is hard not to think of them as people that you like and care about. There are themes of duty, fate, friendship and love. All human life is here. On four furry feet.

There is high drama, combat, even war. This book will make chills run down your spine as one rabbit defends a run from another. Rabbits! Seriously, think Gandalf stepping out into the balrog's path and declaring "You shall not pass!" or Boromir standing alone against an orc horde. There is in one fight scene a line that has its place high on the list of the best quotes of this sort from any book or film I know. Delivered by a rabbit called Bigwig. It sounds silly now, but when you read it you won't think so.

It would take a colder man than me not to cry at the end of this novel, and possibly several places in between.

I chose to review this book today despite it being so long since I last read it because Richard Adams died today aged 96 and it was best way I could think to commemorate him.

This book is about rabbits but it is stuffed with beauty, fear, passion, and excitement, and it taught me a lot about life. I commend it to your attention.

Join my 3-emails-a-year newsletter #prizes

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Michelle says

The premise of "Watership Down" may sound ridiculous. To put it simply: it's the story of a bunch of rabbits who leave their comfortable (but doomed) home, and try to make a new and better one, a couple of square miles away. It should be ridiculous. Come on -- bunnies?!

Oh, but it's not ridiculous at all! It is epic! Distance, as we measure it, is irrelevant. What a human (arrogant lord of the earth) traverses without a thought in just a few strides, is a vast and terror-filled expanse to a ten-inch-tall animal at the bottom of the food chain. This tension was beautifully captured, and thrummed throughout the book.

It can be difficult to explain how a book about rabbits can feel so touchingly human. What the characters have to go through is totally relatable. In "Watership Down", Hazel and the other rabbits have to figure out who they want leading them, whom they trust, what they want their home to be like, and what they're willing to sacrifice in order to make their world the way they want it to be. "What sort of world do I want to live in?", is the question that Hazel and his rabbits ask themselves when they go out to start a new home. This is the same question that each of us have to ask and act on as we go out and try to make a life for ourselves, especially when we're young and questing out into the world to find (or make) a place for us.

This life-or-death question gets asked whenever Hazel's rabbits meet a group of rabbits who are living according to certain choices. (view spoiler) We may not face the exact dangers that Hazel's rabbits face -- no farmer is going to kill and cook us (we hope). But we do have to ask ourselves these questions about our values and which values we value more.

Many contemporary authors could learn from Richard Adams on how to create characters that a reader can believe in and commit to. Few human characters that I have read in recent books can compare in depth and dimension to the rabbits of Watership Down. Trying to choose a favorite is impossible -- Hazel is of course the hero; but my heart also belongs to Big Wig, Fiver and Pipkin for their courage; and to Blackberry and Dandelion for their lightness of spirit.

The creation of a culture and language for the rabbits, and other creatures, rivals Tolkien's masterpieces. I loved the rabbit constructions to try to label human concepts. I loved the fables reminiscent of the Brer Rabbit tales that offered deeper insight into the culture, and the life lessons gently taught through the various adventures in creating the new warren. It was only halfway through the book (maybe further) that it struck me that these tales, which were supposed to be timeless and ancient, all featured men who smoked cigarettes, and drove cars and trucks. And then, by the end of the book, it all made sense. For one thing, twenty or ten years ago is ancient history to a rabbit who packs all of his own adventures into, perhaps, three quick years. Another more important thing is that the tales of El-ahrairah are not concrete and set in stone, but an oral history which grows with the generations. That moment towards the end of the book that proves this also brought home to me, with a greater clarity, how utterly beautiful Richard Adams's portrait of lapine culture is. How extraordinarily wonderful the whole picture of rabbit-kind is.

I used to think that rabbits were just cute, floppy-eared carrot-eaters with a penchant for hopping. After this read, I will never be able to look at them the same way ever again!

Rico Suave says

oh man, this book totally tricked me! I got a bad haircut one day so I needed to lay low for a few weeks ("Supercuts", my ass! Liars!). I called two of my hardest, most straight-up thug homies (Zachary and Dustin) to bring me some of their books and this was one of them. I had just watched a show on A&E about WWII naval battles so I couldn't WAIT to read Watership Down! I love sea stories, "man overboard!" and "off the port bow!" and "aye aye cap'n!" all that stuff so I pulled my hat down and started reading. This book totally tricked me! There weren't any torpedoes, no "anchors aweigh!", no old salts telling tales of sea serpents and sexy narwhals, no peg legs, no giant squid, nothing. It had rabbits! This book totally tricked me!

Crazy thing is, it was awesome! Bigwig is the man! The rabbit man. Before I was even done I took down one of my Rick Springfield posters, flipped it over, and drew Bigwig protecting the rest of the warren (my favorite part). It came out wrong, I can't draw, so I kind of have a fat dog standing in a hole hanging on my wall but I don't care and I still I give this book FIVE STARS! You should read it.

This book totally tricked me.

Love, Rico.

***** SPOILER ALERT!!!*****

This book has no ships, sinking or otherwise.

Lyndz says

I started this book about 2 months ago, got through the first 10 pages or so and I was not interested in continuing. I put it down. In all honesty, it seemed like it was going to be too babyish for me. I mean come on, bunnies though? Seriously?

About a week ago I got to a point where I didn't have anything else to read so there I was, staring pensively at my obese bookshelf, thinking about reading Lord of the Rings for the 12th time, when I noticed Watership Down poking its cute little bunny face out at me. I figured, hey, it's almost Easter, so what the heck, I might as well try it again. So I picked Watership Down back up with the intent of giving it just a few more pages. Much to my surprise, I was hooked.

[image error]

Alright, so these bunnies are not your cutsie Japanese anime bunnies. These bunnies are like the Johnny Depp of bunnies. Picture the Rabbit of Caerbannog from Monty Python: that would probably be closer to the mark than Thumper from Bambi.

[image error]

Joking and random pictures aside, I thought this was excellent. I was not expecting to like it and that is why I am so shocked that I did. There was a lot more depth to this book than I ever expected.

“Many human beings say that they enjoy the winter, but what they really enjoy is feeling proof against it.”

The characters were great, I loved every single one of them. Bigwig was my favorite. I don't know how anyone could read this book and NOT fall in love with Bigwig aka Thlayli.

“My Chief Rabbit has told me to stay and defend this run, and until he says otherwise, I shall stay here.”

And, lastly, **how is this a children's book?** I am still trying to figure that one out. Aside from the fact that the story is about a group of animals, there was really nothing that screamed “children's book” to me. If you are a fan of fantasy you should definitely check it out. I promise you won't regret it. It is amazingly well written – it is not categorized as a classic for nothing!

5 stars, all day long.

[image error]
