

Introduced by Christine Ballenger/Reviewed by Marjie Van Gunten

The Tale of Peter Rabbit

Written and Illustrated by Beatrix Potter
New York, NY: Frederick Warne & Co., Inc., N.D.

“Once upon a time there were four little rabbits,
and their names were—

Flopsy,
Mopsy,
Cotton-tail,
and Peter.”

So begins the classic 1902 tale by Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. When the four little rabbits are allowed to wander outside, their mother Mrs. Rabbit warns them not to enter Mr. McGregor’s garden: “...your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor.” As Mrs. Rabbit leaves to run errands, she tells the children to stay out of mischief. The naughty Peter, however, runs straight to Mr. McGregor’s garden, squeezes under the gate, and eats every vegetable he can find, until he starts feeling sick. While seeking parsley, Peter stumbles upon Mr. McGregor, who chases the scared rabbit. With the help of friendly sparrows, he narrowly avoids capture by once again squeezing under the gate and running home.

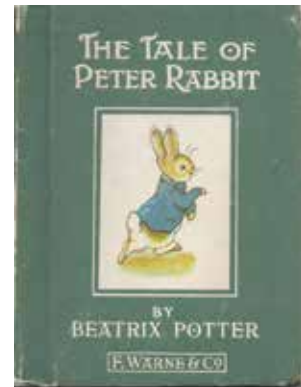
This story is immediately relatable to children, who can all identify with the child that follows directions or the one that chooses to misbehave.

Although misbehavior is often portrayed in a humorous way in many of today’s stories, in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Peter’s misbehavior leads to a very real, frightening situation. Children are nervous for him as he tries to get away and gets caught by a wire or hides in a water pot, then sneezes and is found again. He trembles in fear, and when he finally makes it back home (missing his shoes and nice new jacket—real consequences of his naughty choice), he is sick and tired and misses out on the bread, milk, and blackberries the rest of his family enjoys, another demonstration of the negative effects our choices can have.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit immediately lends itself to a dramatic retelling, with students acting out Mr. McGregor chasing the frantic Peter through different areas of the garden and around various obstacles. Students can explore Peter’s movements—how to jump quickly, wander cautiously, twist and writhe their way out of a jacket caught on a gooseberry net, and sneak over and under different imagined barriers. Others can explore how to garden various plants like Mr. McGregor, while keeping an eye out for pests, and how to lay chase when they discover one!

Additionally, because the garden is a central element to this tale, teachers may consider adding a rhythmically spoken interlude to the dramatic retelling such as naming vegetables that fit the rhythm building bricks. Another option is to use melodic exploration and improvisation to find appropriate accompaniment for the story’s different moods, such as nervous, scared, angry, and tired.

Next, Marjie Van Gunten reviews how *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* fits her criteria for choosing children’s literature for the music classroom



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Schott publishes *Exploring Orff: A Teacher's Guide* by Arvida Steen.



and shares elements of music and movement to explore after students experience this classic story.

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When choosing picture books to use in the music classroom with young children, look for artful language, beautiful illustrations, and books with multiple avenues for exploration. *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, by Beatrix Potter, embodies all of this in an exquisite format that generations of children have adored. I still have my childhood copy—well-loved and tattered—to share with grandchildren.

Who can resist the image of Peter, tear falling from his eye, as he stands by the locked door in the wall, or be unmoved by the sparrows who “implored him to exert himself”? The text throughout this book, and all of the tiny tomes by Potter, employs rich, beautifully constructed vocabulary—a wonderful model for young word-sponges. The small format of the original, with slightly glossy paper and charming end pages, contributes to the experience of reading this timeless story.

As an aesthetic encounter by itself, this book offers an introduction to music and movement exploration that has allowed multiple generations of children to begin their work with an artistic sensibility. Here are just a few ideas inspired by Peter’s adventures and Potter’s artistry:

- Movement pathways (What were Peter’s routes through the garden?)
- Locomotions (How many ways does Peter move? Mr. McGregor? The other animals in the story?)

- Non-locomotor movement (What body parts can you “twitch,” or “wiggle,” or “tremble”?)
- Tempo (What does “lippydy, lippydy” look like compared to Peter’s attempts to escape?)
- Timbre (What instruments might accompany any of the movements listed here?)

Several new and used iterations of this timeless children’s story are readily available at a reasonable cost. It can also be found online, accompanied by the original and delightful illustrations, at no charge through Project Gutenberg. No matter how you use the book in your classroom, Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, and her whimsical illustrations, will resonate with children as it has for over 100 years. ■

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1994

AOSA establishes ad hoc Multicultural Committee.

