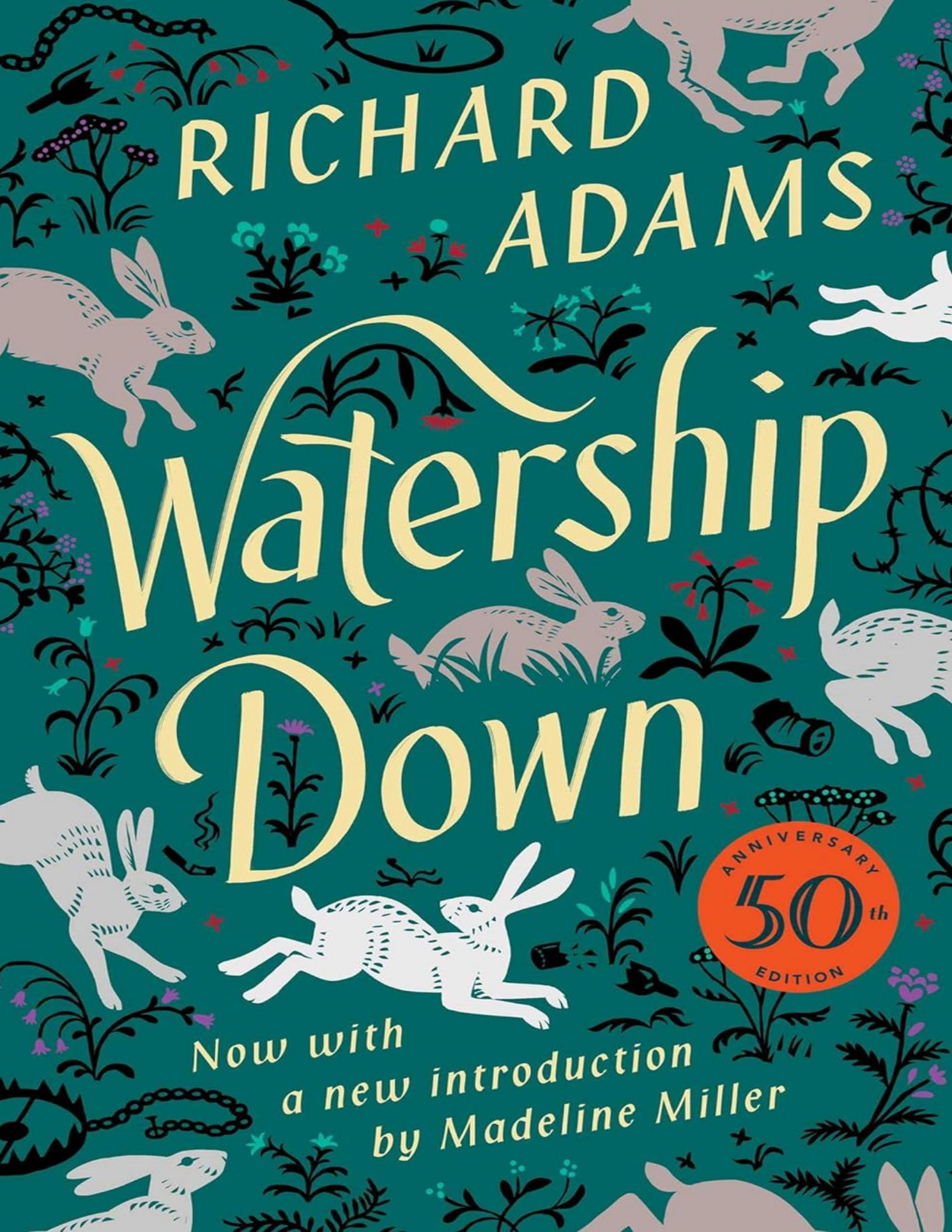

RICHARD ADAMS
Watership Down
ANNIVERSARY
50th
EDITION
Now with
a new introduction
by Madeline Miller

Watership Down

RICHARD ADAMS

With an introduction by Madeline Miller

SCRIBNER

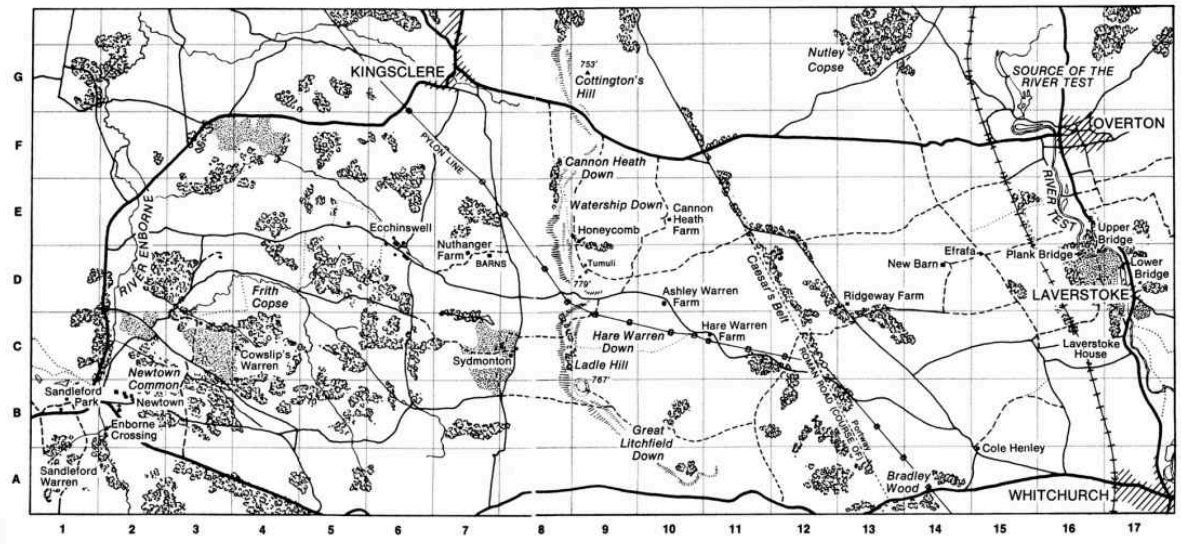
New York • London • Toronto • Sydney • New Delhi

To JULIET *and* ROSAMOND,
remembering
the road to Stratford-on-Avon

Note

Nuthanger Farm is a real place, like all the other places in the book. But Mr. and Mrs. Cane, their little girl Lucy, and their farmhands are fictitious and bear no intentional resemblance to any persons known to me, living or dead.

Contents



MILES
0 1 2

LEGEND

Main road
Minor road
Footpath
Bridle track
Railroad

MAP REFERENCES

PART I

The story opens **A 1**
The Enborne crossing **B 2**
The Heather SQUARE **C 3**
Cowslip's Warren **C 4**

PART II

The N.E. corner of the Beech Hanger on Watership Down **D 9**
Nuthanger Farm **D 7**

PART III

The combe where Bigwig met the fox **D 12**
Where they crossed the railway line **D 16**
The upper bridge on the Test **D 16**
Where the punt was lying **D 16**
Efrafa. The Crixa **D 15**
The roadless railway arch **D 15**

PART IV

The lower bridge and the weed pool **D 17**
The copse where the fox struck **C 13**

The map is adapted from one drawn by Marilyn Hemmett

Introduction

Madeline Miller

I first read *Watership Down* when I was twelve, on a family road trip. I had terrible motion sickness and usually didn't read in the car, but once I'd begun the book, I found I couldn't stop. For hundreds of miles I read on, nauseated but unwilling to turn away for even a moment from Hazel, Fiver, Bigwig and the rest. I was still reading when we got out of the car and walked into the hotel lobby. The clerk said, "Looks like a good book. What's it about?"

I looked up at her, woozy. It was about everything, that's what I wanted to say. About trauma and injustice and hope and courage, about friendship, leadership, community, what makes a good life. But I didn't have the words for all that. So I said, "It's about rabbits."

She blinked. "Huh," she said.

I have returned to *Watership Down* often since then. All it takes is for me to open the book to any page—any page at all—and I'm plunged back into the same deep joy that I felt when I was twelve. In the intervening thirty years, my appreciation for Adams's masterpiece has only grown. At every turn, Adams threads a nearly impossible needle: creating a story with both great simplicity and great depth, full of thrilling plot twists, pounding action scenes, and genuine tragedy that somehow centers around the lives of, yes, rabbits. He pulls off the trick of never letting us forget that they *are* rabbits —who live only a few years, who speak pragmatically of breeding, who can't count higher than four—while also creating characters with a very human psychology. From the ground up, he imagines an entire culture, language and mythology, and the result remains one of the most entertaining and immersive fantasy worlds I've encountered.

Adams is well-versed in epic and classical literature, and *Watership Down* draws inspiration from Homer, Shakespeare, Vergil, Livy and others. Its plot springs from the tantalizing question: What if the prophet Cassandra foretold the fall of her home, but instead of ignoring her, a band of brave souls listened and fled in time? The story can be seen as a sort of lapine retelling of the *Aeneid*—refugees from a fallen city search for a new home —mixed with a few other famous mythological episodes, including the

kidnapping of the Sabine Women and the Land of the Lotus-Eaters. But you don't need to know any of that to enjoy the book. Adams's intent isn't Classical namedropping, but rather Classical innovation. Mythology is by definition larger than life, stuffed with gods and monsters and magic. Adams keeps the stakes from the great epics: war, loss, death, the powerful threads of community and personal courage, but instead of imagining them on a grand stage, he sets them, with utter seriousness, in the English countryside among ordinary bunnies. This could feel absurd, but it doesn't, because as Adams understands, courage is even more thrilling when you aren't half immortal, when you don't have ichor in your veins, when you're a prey animal who has a thousand enemies trying to eat you every hour of every day. True epic, Adams shows us, isn't what gods do, but what underdogs do, in a world where there are no gods to help them. It is a thrilling subversion, and from it, Adams creates one of the best epic heroes of all time: the doughty Bigwig.

Bigwig has no god-made weapons, no supernatural protection, no divine heritage, only his own bluff and stubborn heart. Reckless and hard-headed, he faces down cats and wins. He survives a snare that would have killed anyone else. In another world, with different companions, he might have become a bully. Instead, he becomes one of the most inspiring and endearing characters in the book. The climactic scene where he stands alone against the great tyrant Woundwort, knowing he is overmatched yet not yielding an inch, gives me chills every time I read it. He's the rabbit answer to Ajax and Hercules. Yet Bigwig is only the beginning of Adams's innovation. The most delightful part of *Watership Down* is that Bigwig, potent as he is, isn't the novel's hero.

Hazel is anything but traditionally heroic. He begins the novel a gangly outcast with little physical strength and ends it permanently disabled. His notable traits are his gentleness, his quiet conviction in doing what's right and his willingness to listen to things others would dismiss, including his strange, mystic friend Fiver. Yet still, the others trust him and choose him to lead. Why? He isn't the best fighter (Bigwig), the fastest (Dandelion), the best storyteller (Dandelion again), the cleverest (Blackberry), the farthest seeing (Fiver), or the most authoritative (Holly). But he has several tremendous gifts, first and foremost his humility. Like Socrates, he knows what he doesn't know. When Blackberry figures out how to float the rabbits across the river, Hazel scarcely understands what's happening, but he has

the ability to see that Blackberry understands—and gives the order to go forward. He is emotionally intelligent, handling both the fractious Bigwig and the traumatized rabbit Strawberry. He has integrity: when he makes mistakes, he apologizes for them. And, if the sign of a civilization's strength is how it cares for its most vulnerable members, Hazel is exemplary there too, always supporting the timid Pipkin. As a child who grew up on Greek myths, Bigwig was wonderful, but Hazel changed my understanding of what a hero could be. A hero's strength is, Adams tells us, their love and kindness and careful attention. Seeing the rabbits defeat Woundwort under Hazel's leadership is one of the most pleasurable and satisfying endings to a story I have ever read.

Pleasurable and *satisfying*: those two words sum up the whole book really. If I had to list my favorite moments it would take as many pages as the book itself. I love raucous Kehaar. I love the playful Bluebell, who serves as the group's Shakespearean fool. I love Strawberry's redemption, and Blackavar's resilience. I particularly appreciate the female characters Hyzenthlay and Thethuthinnang. Though originally inspired by the Sabine Women who were stolen by the Romans to be wives, the does are not a cardboard sexist plot point. Adams makes them leaders of a rebellion against Woundwort and are already planning their escape before our heroes even arrive. Their agency, cleverness and courage stand out, particularly at a time when female characters were not often granted so much by male writers. In *Tales from Watership Down*, a follow-up to the original novel, Hyzenthlay becomes a coruler of the warren. Decades later, many countries of the world, my own included, still haven't managed that basic equality.

Not many children's books can start with a quote from Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and manage to deliver on it. For half a century, *Watership Down* has been winning over children and adults alike. The book's message is simple but powerful: the world can be a dangerous place, and there is no one coming to save you. Yet in kindness, courage, integrity, and community we find our hope. Most of us can't be Bigwig, but Hazel, the true hero, is within reach of anyone willing to try to care for those around them, to make the world a better place. I am honored to celebrate this beautiful, timeless story turning half a century. I am certain it will keep finding readers for many more centuries to come.

Introduction

Richard Adams

Whenever our family had to make a long journey in the car, I used to tell stories to my two little girls. Some of these were stories that everybody knows, such as *Cinderella* and *Jack the Giant Killer;* but a lot of them were stories that I made up myself, and my daughters particularly liked these, because they felt that they were their own stories and no one else's, made up for their own enjoyment.

One day, when we had to make a journey of over one hundred miles, they asked for a long story "which we have never heard before."

Such a story could only be spontaneous. I began improvising, and started with the first thing that came into my head. "Once upon a time there were two rabbits, called Hazel and Fiver—" For some of the animals in the story, I took characteristics and features from real people I had met over the years, so that each rabbit had a distinct, individual personality. As for Kehaar the seagull, he was based on a Norwegian Resistance fighter whom I had met during the war. Fiver was derived from Cassandra, the Trojan prophetess who was cursed by the god Apollo always to tell the truth and never to be believed. To Hazel I gave the qualities of an officer under whom I had served. He had the natural power of leadership. He was not only brave but modest and retiring, yet with excellent judgment.

Bigwig was based upon another officer I knew, a tremendous fighter, who was at his best when he had been told exactly what he had to do.

In making up this anthropomorphic story, I followed the idea of Rudyard Kipling, in his two *Jungle Books.* That is to say, although my rabbits could think and talk, I never made them do anything physical that real rabbits could not do.

The story was not finished on that car journey, and I continued it during morning car runs to school. When at last it was finished, Juliet said, "That story's too good to waste, Daddy. You ought to write it down." At first I demurred, but one evening, when I was reading aloud to them at bedtime from a not-very-good book, I finally threw it across the room and said, "Good Lord, I could write better than that myself." Rosamond said, "Well, I

only wish you would, Daddy, instead of keeping on talking about it." Thus taken to task, I finally agreed.

I used to write in the evenings, after supper, and I read to the girls each bit as I finished it. They were free to criticize and often suggested alterations and additions, which I adopted. (The comic rabbit Bluebell, for instance, was introduced at their suggestion.)

To make the rabbits as convincing as possible, I had recourse to *The Private Life of the Rabbit* by R. M. Lockley, a well-known English naturalist and ornithologist. We first met when I asked him to read the final draft of the book, and he contributed several good suggestions. I remember, in particular, that he devised the passage in *Watership Down* in which the rabbits raid Nuthanger Farm.

We became great friends and used to go for walks together in the country. We also went together on a cruise ship through the Antarctic. (An account of this was published in our book *Voyage Through the Antarctic.*)

Watership Down is a real place, like all the places in the book. It lies in north Hampshire, about six miles southwest of Newbury and two miles west of Kingsclere. When I was a little boy I often walked on the Downs with my father, who used to point out the birds and wild flowers; and thus began my lifelong love of natural history. The Downs form a singular feature of southern England. Geologically, they are chalk and have several birds and wild flowers peculiar to the chalk country.

The Ordnance Survey Map for this area is Sheet 174, which includes Watership Down in square 4957. This and Sheet 185 cover the whole area of the story.

The rabbit language, "Lapine," was invented word by word in the course of writing. This took place wherever a rabbit word was needed rather than words used by human beings. For example, "going above ground to feed" is a phrase hardly needed by human beings. But rabbits would need a single word—a word they quite often needed to use, for example, *silflay.* Again, *tharn* was a rabbit word meaning *stupefied* or *paralyzed with fear.*

The Lapine plural suffix *il,* rather than the English suffix *s,* was used to help to emphasize that Lapine was a different language.

There is a certain amount of Arabic influence, for example, *hraka* and Kehaar. (*Behaar* is one of the Arabic words for *sea.*) Again, some of the invented words were given a kind of wuffy, fluffy sound (for example, *Efrafa*)—the sort of noises that rabbits *might* make if they did talk. There is

no grammar or construction in the language. It is simply a motley collection of substantives, adjectives, and verbs. Here and there, a word is onomatopoeic (for example, *hrududu,* the sound of a tractor going along).

With regard to the epigraphs at the head of each chapter, Juliet said, "I like them because when you read one for the first time, you can't imagine how it is going to have anything to do with the story; and then, as you read on, you see how it does."

I never thought of the book becoming a bestseller, but I did think in terms of a modest hardback, which I could give to my daughters, saying, "There you are. This is the book you wanted me to write."

I submitted it to one publisher after another as well as to several literary agents. It was rejected again and again (seven times in all), always on the same grounds. "Older children wouldn't like it because it is about rabbits, which they consider babyish; and younger children wouldn't like it because it is written in an adult style." I refused to alter the draft in any way, and went on knocking on doors.

One day I read in *The Spectator* a review of a book called *Wood Magic* by the Victorian author Richard Jefferies, first published in 1881 and never reprinted until now. It occurred to me that the publisher who had reprinted *Wood Magic* might possibly react favorably to my book. His name, I saw from the review, was Rex Collings. I guessed that this was a fairly small firm, without much capital, but it was worth a try. I got in touch with him, and submitted the fair typescript.

My judgment was right; Rex Collings accepted the book at once. It was he who gave it the title *Watership Down.*

The first edition consisted of no more than twenty-five hundred copies, as much as Rex Collings could afford. He might not have much money, but one thing he could do: he could get a review copy onto every London desk that mattered. That was in November 1972.

I was staggered by the number of favorable reviews. But the first edition was quickly sold out, and quite a lot of people complained to me that, much as they wanted to buy a copy, apparently there was none to be had.

That winter, Macmillan's, New York, accepted the book for publication. What followed was a rather amusing paradox. The American edition—a much larger one—attracted attention in the United Kingdom, so that in effect, the book came from America to England. (The Penguin edition appeared in 1974.)

A deluxe edition, beautifully illustrated by John Lawrence, appeared in 1976. Since that time the book has never been out of print and has been published in many translations throughout the world.

Year by year, I receive a great deal of fan mail, and not only from young people, but people of all ages. Following the example of the Duke of Wellington, who replied personally to every letter he received, I do my best to answer.

Naturally, I am glad that the book has been enjoyed by so large a public, and that it plainly has a wide appeal (although the reason has never been altogether clear to me).

I want to emphasize that *Watership Down* was never intended to be some sort of allegory or parable. It is simply the story about rabbits made up and told in the car.

PART I

The Journey

1

The Ntice Bard

CHORUS: Why do you cry out thus, unless at some vision of horror?

CASSANDRA: The house reeks of death and dripping blood.

CHORUS: How so? 'Tis but the odor of the altar sacrifice.

CASSANDRA: The stench is like a breath from the tomb.

Aeschylus, *Agmemnon*

The primroses were over. Toward the edge of the wood, where the ground became open and sloped down to an old fence and a brambly ditch beyond, only a few fading patches of pale yellow still showed among the dog's mercury and oak-tree roots. On the other side of the fence, the upper part of the field was full of rabbit holes. In places the grass was gone altogether and everywhere there were clusters of dry droppings, through which nothing but the ragwort would grow. A hundred yards away, at the bottom of the slope, ran the brook, no more than three feet wide, half choked with kingcups, watercress and blue brooklime. The cart track crossed by a brick culvert and climbed the opposite slope to a five-barred gate in the thorn hedge. The gate led into the lane.

The May sunset was red in clouds, and there was still half an hour to twilight. The dry slope was dotted with rabbits—some nibbling at the thin grass near their holes, others pushing further down to look for dandelions or perhaps a cowslip that the rest had missed. Here and there one sat upright on an ant heap and looked about, with ears erect and nose in the wind. But a blackbird, singing undisturbed on the outskirts of the wood, showed that there was nothing alarming there, and in the other direction, along the brook, all was plain to be seen, empty and quiet. The warren was at peace.

At the top of the bank, close to the wild cherry where the blackbird sang, was a little group of holes almost hidden by brambles. In the green half-light, at the mouth of one of these holes, two rabbits were sitting together side by side. At length, the larger of the two came out, slipped along the bank under cover of the brambles and so down into the ditch and up into the field. A few moments later the other followed.

The first rabbit stopped in a sunny patch and scratched his ear with rapid movements of his hind leg. Although he was a yearling and still below full weight, he had not the harassed look of most "outskirters"—that is, the rank and file of ordinary rabbits in their first year who, lacking either aristocratic parentage or unusual size and strength, get sat on by their elders and live as best they can—often in the open—on the edge of their warren. He looked as though he knew how to take care of himself. There was a shrewd, buoyant air about him as he sat up, looked round and rubbed both front paws over his nose. As soon as he was satisfied that all was well, he laid back his ears and set to work on the grass.

His companion seemed less at ease. He was small, with wide, staring eyes and a way of raising and turning his head which suggested not so much caution as a kind of ceaseless, nervous tension. His nose moved continually, and when a bumblebee flew humming to a thistle bloom behind him, he jumped and spun round with a start that sent two nearby rabbits scurrying for holes before the nearest, a buck with black-tipped ears, recognized him and returned to feeding.

"Oh, it's only Fiver," said the black-tipped rabbit, "jumping at bluebottles again. Come on, Buckthorn, what were you telling me?"

"Fiver?" said the other rabbit. "Why's he called that?"

"Five in the litter, you know: he was the last—and the smallest. You'd wonder nothing had got him by now. I always say a man couldn't see him and a fox wouldn't want him. Still, I admit he seems to be able to keep out of harm's way."*

The small rabbit came closer to his companion, lolloping on long hind legs.

"Let's go a bit further, Hazel," he said. "You know, there's something queer about the warren this evening, although I can't tell exactly what it is. Shall we go down to the brook?"

"All right," answered Hazel, "and you can find me a cowslip. If you can't find one, no one can."

He led the way down the slope, his shadow stretching behind him on the grass. They reached the brook and began nibbling and searching close beside the wheel ruts of the track.

It was not long before Fiver found what they were looking for. Cowslips are a delicacy among rabbits, and as a rule there are very few left by late May in the neighborhood of even a small warren. This one had not bloomed and its flat spread of leaves was almost hidden under the long grass. They were just starting on it when two larger rabbits came running across from the other side of the nearby cattle wade.

"Cowslip?" said one. "All right—just leave it to us. Come on, hurry up," he added, as Fiver hesitated. "You heard me, didn't you?"

"Fiver found it, Toadflax," said Hazel.

"And we'll eat it," replied Toadflax. "Cowslips are for Owsla[†]—don't you know that? If you don't, we can easily teach you."

Fiver had already turned away. Hazel caught him up by the culvert.

"I'm sick and tired of it," he said. "It's the same all the time. 'These are my claws, so this is my cowslip.' 'These are my teeth, so this is my burrow.' I'll tell you, if ever I get into the Owsla, I'll treat outskirters with a bit of decency."

"Well, you can at least expect to be in the Owsla one day," answered Fiver. "You've got some weight coming and that's more than I shall ever have."

"You don't suppose I'll leave you to look after yourself, do you?" said Hazel. "But to tell you the truth, I sometimes feel like clearing out of this warren altogether. Still, let's forget it now and try to enjoy the evening. I tell you what—shall we go across the brook? There'll be fewer rabbits and we can have a bit of peace. Unless you feel it isn't safe?" he added.

The way in which he asked suggested that he did in fact think that Fiver was likely to know better than himself, and it was clear from Fiver's reply that this was accepted between them.

"No, it's safe enough," he answered. "If I start feeling there's anything dangerous I'll tell you. But it's not exactly danger that I seem to feel about the place. It's—oh, I don't know—something oppressive, like thunder: I can't tell what; but it worries me. All the same, I'll come across with you."

They ran over the culvert. The grass was wet and thick near the stream and they made their way up the opposite slope, looking for drier ground. Part of the slope was in shadow, for the sun was sinking ahead of them, and

Hazel, who wanted a warm, sunny spot, went on until they were quite near the lane. As they approached the gate he stopped, staring.

"Fiver, what's that? Look!"

A little way in front of them, the ground had been freshly disturbed. Two piles of earth lay on the grass. Heavy posts, reeking of creosote and paint, towered up as high as the holly trees in the hedge, and the board they carried threw a long shadow across the top of the field. Near one of the posts, a hammer and a few nails had been left behind.

The two rabbits went up to the board at a hopping run and crouched in a patch of nettles on the far side, wrinkling their noses at the smell of a dead cigarette end somewhere in the grass. Suddenly Fiver shivered and cowered down.

"Oh, Hazel! This is where it comes from! I know now—something very bad! Some terrible thing—coming closer and closer."

He began to whimper with fear.

"What sort of thing—what do you mean? I thought you said there was no danger?"

"I don't know what it is," answered Fiver wretchedly. "There isn't any danger here, at this moment. But it's coming—it's coming. Oh, Hazel, look! The field! It's covered with blood!"

"Don't be silly, it's only the light of the sunset. Fiver, come on, don't talk like this, you're frightening me!"

Fiver sat trembling and crying among the nettles as Hazel tried to reassure him and to find out what it could be that had suddenly driven him beside himself. If he was terrified, why did he not run for safety, as any sensible rabbit would? But Fiver could not explain and only grew more and more distressed. At last Hazel said,

"Fiver, you can't sit crying here. Anyway, it's getting dark. We'd better go back to the burrow."

"Back to the burrow?" whimpered Fiver. "It'll come there—don't think it won't! I tell you, the field's full of blood—"

"Now stop it," said Hazel firmly. "Just let me look after you for a bit. Whatever the trouble is, it's time we got back."

He ran down the field and over the brook to the cattle wade. Here there was a delay, for Fiver—surrounded on all sides by the quiet summer evening—became helpless and almost paralyzed with fear. When at last

Hazel had got him back to the ditch, he refused at first to go underground and Hazel had almost to push him down the hole.

The sun set behind the opposite slope. The wind turned colder, with a scatter of rain, and in less than an hour it was dark. All color had faded from the sky: and although the big board by the gate creaked slightly in the night wind (as though to insist that it had not disappeared in the darkness, but was still firmly where it had been put), there was no passer-by to read the sharp, hard letters that cut straight as black knives across its white surface. They said:

> THIS IDEALLY SITUATED ESTATE, COMPRISING SIX ACRES OF EXCELLENT BUILDING LAND, IS TO BE DEVELOPED WITH HIGH CLASS MODERN RESIDENCES BY SUTCH AND MARTIN, LIMITED, OF NEWBURY, BERKS.

---

* Rabbits can count up to four. Any number above four is *hair* —"a lot," or "a thousand." Thus they say *U Hrair* —"The Thousand"—to mean, collectively, all the enemies (or *elil,* as they call them) of rabbits—fox, stoat, weasel, cat, owl, man, etc. There were probably more than five rabbits in the litter when Fiver was born, but his name, *Hrairoo,* means "Little Thousand"—i.e., the little one of a lot or, as they say of pigs, "the runt."

† Nearly all warrens have an *Owsla,* or group of strong or clever rabbits—second-year or older —surrounding the Chief Rabbit and his doe and exercising authority. Owslas vary. In one warren, the Owsla may be the band of a warlord: in another, it may consist largely of clever patrollers or garden-raiders. Sometimes a good storyteller may find a place; or a seer, or intuitive rabbit. In the Sandleford warren at this time, the Owsla was rather military in character (though, as will be seen later, not so military as some).