The Wind in the Willows

Kenneth Grahame

About the author
Kenneth Grahame (1859–1932) first wrote about children and then for them, becoming one of the best-loved authors of children’s literature in English, and providing the world with one of the classic children’s stories of all time, The Wind in the Willows.

How did Grahame acquire his gift? Perhaps it came from his own difficult childhood, which saw him orphaned at an early age. Perhaps it came from his own experiences as a father, telling stories to his son, Alistair. The Wind in the Willows is, apparently, a reconstruction of the actual bedtime stories he shared with his son.

He certainly loved children, calling them ‘the only really living people’. In other respects, too, he wrote about what he loved. Although he was born in Scotland, he moved to Berkshire to live with his grandmother after the death of his parents, and came to love the countryside, especially the River Thames. He retired there after ill-health forced him to retire from his full time job, as Secretary at the Bank of England in 1907. He became increasingly reclusive after the tragic death of his son, Alistair, at the age of just 20. Kenneth Grahame died in Pangbourne on the Thames on 6th July 1932.

Summary
The story begins with Mole taking a break from spring-cleaning, and wandering into the new world of the riverbank. He meets Ratty, the water rat, who spends all his time on or by the river. Rat takes Mole for a trip in his rowing boat. The two animals have a picnic and Rat tells Mole about his friend, Badger, who lives in the Wild Wood. He says that Badger is his good friend but he warns Mole not to go into the wood because weasels and other bad animals also live there. It is the first time Mole has ever been in a boat and he is very excited. But when he tries to row, the boat turns over and he and Rat end up in the water. Rat pushes him onto the bank and asks Mole to come and stay with him so he can learn about the river.

Some time later, Rat takes Mole in his boat to meet Toad at Toad Hall. Toad is a rich and very boastful character, and he tends to develop obsessive fascination for things. He says boats are boring and together the three animals go off in Toad’s latest passion – a gipsy caravan. But when they are travelling slowly along the open road, the caravan is suddenly driven off the road by a speeding car. Toad has never seen a car before and he loses all interest in his caravan. The very next day, he goes to London to buy a very big and expensive car.

Winter comes and Rat and Mole spend many days together, dozing in Rat’s riverbank hole. But one afternoon, while Ratty was asleep, and despite his earlier warning, Mole decides to go and visit Badger in the Wild Wood. But everything looks different now it is the middle of winter and he becomes lost, tired and afraid. When Rat wakes up he realises Mole has gone to the Wild Wood and so he sets off to look for him. Fortunately, more by luck than good judgement, Rat finds him and together they stumble over the snow-covered entrance to Badger’s home. Badger is a rather gruff animal, and he doesn’t like visitors. At first he is annoyed at being woken up, but when he realises it is his dear friend, Rat, and Mole, he takes them into his cosy home and makes them a nice hot meal. Badger wants to know all the news about what is happening on the river and Rat tells him about Toad’s new obsession with cars. The next morning, Badger’s friend, Otter, comes to visit, and after breakfast Badger shows the three animals another way to leave the Wild Wood, through underground tunnels.

Meanwhile, Toad has been terrorising the neighbourhood in a succession of sports cars. Badger visits Rat and Mole because he has decided it is time to take Toad in hand. Badger, Rat and Mole go to Toad Hall and Badger tells him to stop driving the cars. But Toad loves driving cars too much! Badger tells Rat and Mole to lock Toad in his bedroom. But Toad manages to get away from them by pretending to be ill. He runs away and steals a car, but the police catch him and he is sent to prison for 20 years.

The daughter of one of the prison officers helps Toad escape from prison dressed as a washerwoman. He has many adventures and eventually makes it back to the river.
The Wind in the Willows

after riding on a train, a barge, a horse and then the very same car that got him sent to prison in the first place!

Toad is finally rescued from the river by Rat and learns the dreadful news that weasels have taken over Toad Hall and are guarding it, armed with guns. However, with the help of Badger, Rat and Mole, he regains possession of his ancestral home after a spectacular fight.

Badger tells Toad that he must have a party to thank all his friends for their help. At first, Toad is too lazy to write the invitations, but when he sees how angry Badger is he goes straight to his desk to begin writing. He wants to use the party as an opportunity to be the centre of attention and to boast to everybody about his adventures. His friends persuade him to be more modest. Toad vows to be a different, less boastful toad from now on.

Background and themes

_The Wind in the Willows_ has everything to please children. It is a thrilling adventure, with moments of terror, such as when Mole is lost in the Wild Wood, or when Toad is sentenced to 20 years in prison. But at the same time, the story is also very reassuring. Perhaps this is because the home seems to form a permanent backdrop to all the adventures. The story begins with Mole spring-cleaning, and proceeds through many scenes in front of raging fires in snug burrows, and ends with the regaining of Toad’s ancestral pile. Also reassuring is the feeling which runs through the book that friends will always be there to help you, to put you right and to get you out of trouble.

The animal characters – all male – have clear human traits. Mole is timorous and unworldly, yet he is brave enough to be determined to face up to his fears and not let them get the better of him. Rat is a strong and self-confident character, and the perfect friend for a shy, retiring Mole – or child. He is also very loyal and concerned for his friend, Mr Toad. Badger is an even stronger character than Rat, but he also has the aloofness of an adult. All children need adults to guide them at some point, and Badger fulfils this role perfectly – he gives the others food and shelter, he shows them the safest way through the Wild Wood, he knows how to deal with Toad, and he is able to make a plan to get Toad Hall back from the weasels.

The child-like character of Toad provides the comic relief in the story. He is by turns pompous and boastful, then contrite and ashamed. He seems never to realise what the consequences of his actions will be until it is too late. Despite all his faults he is very endearing and he never loses his friends, and it is his friends who come to his rescue in the end. The weasels are, of course, pure evil, and have no saving graces. But they get what they deserve at the end of the story when good triumphs – as it does in all the best children’s stories. The ending provides a very positive conclusion and serves as a lesson to us all when the naughty, boastful, selfish and child-like Toad realises the error of his ways and promises his friends that he is now a changed animal.

Discussion activities

**Before reading**

1. **Discuss:** Ask students to look at the pictures of the animals opposite page 1. Put the students in small groups and according to the size of the class, allocate one or two of the animals to each group. Ask them to discuss the following question: Imagine this animal (or these animals) was a person. What sort of character and personality would they have? You may need to pre-teach some vocabulary items for describing people’s character, such as: boastful, brave, clever, generous, gregarious, kind, mean, modest, naughty, selfish, shy. After five or ten minutes, ask each group to present their animal to the rest of the class.

2. **Pair work:** Ask the whole group of students to think of activities that people can do when they live by a river. Put their suggestions up on the board. Then put the students in pairs and have them ask and answer questions about their likes and dislikes concerning the activities. Ask them to note down each other’s replies. After a few minutes, conduct a whole group feedback session to find out how many people like or don’t like each of the activities.

3. **Guess:** Ask students to look at the picture on page 3. Working in pairs, ask them to answer the following questions: Which animals are in the picture? What are they doing? What is going to happen next?

**After reading**

4. **Role play:** Put student in pairs and have them write out the dialogue between Ratty and Mole on pages 1–2 in the form of a stage play. The dialogue begins with ‘Hello Mole!’ and ends with ‘Oh Rat! This is the best day of my life!’ Get the students to practice the dialogue until they know it by heart and are able to perform it in front of the whole class. Make sure they work on their pronunciation and intonation.

5. **Write:** Working individually, students write a short letter from Mole to his mother, telling her about his day on the river.
The Wind in the Willows

Chapters 2–3, pages 6–12
Before reading
6 Discuss: Ask the students to look at the pictures on pages 7, 9, and 11. Write the words ‘boat’, ‘caravan’ and ‘car’ on the board. Then put the students in small groups and ask them to think of advantages and disadvantages for each of the three means of transport. After five minutes, conduct a feedback session with the whole class. Write important vocabulary on the board.

After reading
7 Guess: Put students in small groups and ask them to think of what bad things are going to happen when Toad buys his new car. Write their suggestions on the board.

Draw: Ask students to draw the sort of car they think Toad is going to buy. As a follow-up activity, get students to present their picture to another student, explaining why they think Toad will like it.

Role play: Put students in pairs and ask them to role play a conversation between Toad and Rat. Toad is excited about his new car, but Rat sees all the dangers of this new interest. Each character tries to convince the other that he is right.

Chapters 4–5, pages 12–18
Before reading
10 Discuss: Ask students to think of the differences between the countryside in summer and the countryside in winter. Write the key vocabulary on the board. Then put them in pairs and ask them to discuss the following questions – Do you prefer winter or summer? Why?

After reading
11 Read carefully: Mole was very stupid when he went walking in the Wild Wood in Chapter 4. Put students in pairs and ask them to find as many things as they can that Mole did wrong in this chapter. Then do a feedback session to compare each pair’s findings with the rest of the class and see who found the most things wrong.

Write: Students write another letter from Mole to his mother. This time he describes his adventure in the Wild Wood.

Guess: On page 17, Badger says that in the summer he will do something to stop Toad driving. Ask students to guess what Badger might do.

Chapter 6, pages 18–24
After reading
14 Check: Students check if their predictions about what Badger will do to stop Toad driving are correct.

Role play: Badger and Mole are angry with Rat when Toad escapes on page 22. Put students in groups of three to write and then to act out the conversation which takes place between the three animals. Badger and Mole ask the questions. Rat feels very stupid and is very sorry.

16 Write: At the end of the chapter Toad is sent to prison for twenty years. Ask students to imagine how Toad feels at this point. Then, working individually, students write a letter from Toad to Badger in which he explains what has happened and asks Badger to forgive him.

Chapters 7–8, pages 24–30
After reading
17 Discuss: Working in small groups, students discuss the following questions: Why wasn’t life in prison very bad for Toad? Why did the girl decide to help him? Do you think the judge was right to send Toad to prison for 20 years?

18 Write: Working individually, students write a short summary of Chapter 7 from the point of view of the train driver in the form of an entry in his diary in which he tells of his encounter with Toad.

Read carefully: Ask students to read Chapter 8 carefully and to decide which of the following statements more accurately sums up what happens to Toad: a Toad is very lucky, b Toad is very clever. Then put the students in pairs and ask them to compare answers. They should justify their choices with examples from the text.

Chapters 9–11, pages 31–39
After reading
20 Role play: Ask students to look at the invitation on page 37. Working individually, students imagine they are Toad and prepare one of the speeches that he wants to make about his adventures. Tell them to make the speech as boastful as possible! Then put them in small groups and have them practice their speeches. Finally, ask some student to perform their speech in front of the whole class.

21 Discuss: On the board, write the names of the main characters in the story: Badger, Mole, Rat, and Toad. Then write the following two incomplete sentences: I like X because … . I don’t like Y because … . Ask a student to complete one of the sentences with the character of his/her choice. The student then asks one of their classmates to give their opinion by saying ‘What about you … ?’ Continue round the class for as long as the activity remains interesting. As a variation, you can turn this activity into a memory game with each successive student repeating the previous student’s opinions before giving their own, e.g. ‘Pierre likes Toad because he is funny, but I like Rat because he is kind’, etc.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.