

Tom's Midnight Garden

SECTION

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About the author

Born on 23 January 1920, Philippa Pearce grew up in the village of Great Shelford where her father was a flour miller. She did not start school until she was eight years old due to illness, but she went on to win a scholarship to Girton College in Cambridge, where she read English and history. After working as a civil servant, Pearce moved to the BBC where she wrote and produced radio programmes for schools. Later she moved to Oxford University Press as children's editor and then to Andre Deutsch. She was awarded an OBE in 1997 for services to children's literature and died on 21 December 2006 following a stroke.

About the book

Tom's Midnight Garden is a children's classic. It was awarded the prestigious Carnegie Medal in 1958 and included in the top ten for the 'Carnegie of Carnegies' in its 70-year celebrations. As John Rowe Townsend observed in his book *Written for Children*: 'I have no reservations about it. If I were asked to name a single masterpiece of English children's literature since [the Second World War] it would be this outstandingly beautiful and absorbing book.'

Philippa Pearce wrote the book when her father decided to sell the Mill House, the home where she had been brought up on the River Cam near the village of Great Shelford just outside Cambridge. The story was based on the Mill House's walled garden, where she had played happily as a child, fishing, canoeing, swimming and skating.

The plot follows a young boy, Tom, who is sent to stay with his aunt and uncle in their converted flat because his brother has measles. Having been looking forward to a summer of freedom playing in his own garden he is disappointed to find that the flat has no garden and there are no children to play with. However, late one night, when the clock strikes thirteen, Tom steals downstairs,

opens the back door and discovers a magical moonlit garden. And so his adventures begin. In the garden he meets a young girl, Hatty, and it soon emerges that in the garden both past and present can co-exist. These ideas about time were informed by J W Dunne's influential book *An Experiment With Time* (1927).

The story can be read on many levels. Themes include the nature of time, the relationship between youth and old age, growth and transformation. In spite of the rich and complex themes, the story is accessible and can be enjoyed

for its adventure, discovery, humour and the depth of feeling that develops between the two main characters, Hatty and Tom. Pearce's writing captures moments of great poignancy – Tom's meeting with old Mrs Bartholomew and his feelings of rejection when Hatty ignores his presence on the way home from Ely. There are light moments too – for example, when the geese break into the garden through the yew tree hedge. Descriptive passages

of the garden are like word paintings, acutely observed and free from cliché.

One of the indications of the book's status in children's literature is the number of adaptations that it has inspired. There have been three BBC television series. A video was released of the 1988 production and while this is no longer available, it may be worth obtaining a second-hand copy, as the adaptation is faithful to the spirit of the book. In 2001 David Wood adapted the book for the stage and the playscript is published by Samuel French. A BBC audio adaptation dramatised with full cast is also available.



Photo by Helen Craig

Facts and figures

Tom's Midnight Garden won the prestigious Carnegie Medal in 1958. It was adapted for the stage in 2001 by David Wood and has been dramatised by the BBC three times. In 1999, it was released as a full-length feature film.

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