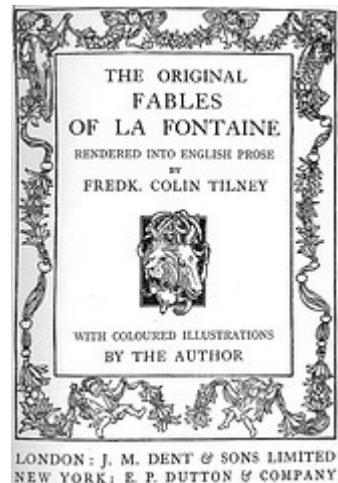


## Fables

In 1484, William Caxton, the first printer of books in English, printed his translation of Aesop's Fables. Aesop's fables are, of course, much older than five hundred years, having been in the oral tradition for perhaps twenty centuries before Caxton printed them. Caxton's version was a translation into English of a French translation of a German collection put together by Heinrich Steinhöwel.

We know little about Aesop the man. It is said that he was a crippled slave in Greece in the sixth century B.C. He is mentioned by several ancient writers, including Herodotus, Aristophanes, and Aristotle. He is not likely to have written down any fables, and it is unclear whether he penned those attributed to him or simply collected those already known. The Roman writer Phaedrus, of the first century A.D. wrote at least five books of fables in Latin, which he called *Fabulae Aesopiae* and which were popular through the middle ages. Phaedrus may have composed many of these himself. Likewise, in the seventeenth century Jean de la Fontaine wrote fables in French verse, some taken from earlier Aesop collections and some his own compositions. Therefore, more important than speculation about Aesop is that the Western body of fables from the oral and early written traditions has been put together and known by his name. These fables probably come from a number of sources, and their true origins are very difficult to discover now.



From Roman times through the nineteenth century fables played an important role in the education of privileged young males. Phaedrus's and La Fontaine's versions were memorized, recited and paraphrased as part of the school curriculum. Pupils did linguistic and interpretive exercises with them. However, fables were not originally intended for children. In fact, the early collections were totally inappropriate for them. Little by little, subsequent collections eliminated the vulgar and obscene elements of certain fables, or left others out for these reasons. Another wrong idea about fables is that they always deal with speaking animals, but the truth is that an important proportion of them feature human beings instead, or animals not normally associated with fables such as insects or reptiles.

Fables have traditionally been considered didactic stories. However, it is believed that the early collections were written down without explicit morals, which were introduced later on by editors like Caxton. Caxton only printed books he believed to be of ethical value to the public, since he was worried about the degradation of morality around him.

The on-going popularity of fables is probably not just because of their moral value, but because of their sharp view of the world. Fables deal with human flaws and weaknesses in an ironic and humorous way, and encourage us to laugh at them.

In the course of time, fables have been the subject of many retellings and continue to be so. Different writers adapt them to different times, and their morals mirror the values of each society or each writer. For instance, modern versions of “The Grasshopper and the Ant” celebrate the carefree spirit of the grasshopper instead of the industriousness of the ant, as traditional versions used to do –see, for instance, Toni Morrison’s “Whose got Game? The Ant or the Grasshopper?” (2003). Some versions emphasize the lesson in the fable, others emphasize the humorous side of human foibles, and others highlight political or social issues. In the worksheet for this unit you will be asked to compare Aesop’s traditional fable “The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse” with Beatrix Potter’s retelling of it.

It is important to remember that, when compared to general literature, the literature produced for children contains a much larger proportion of retellings. In part this is because retellings, especially fables and fairy tales, have traditionally been considered more appropriate (accessible) to children than to adults. (Stephens 1998).

Most editions of Aesop’s fables have been illustrated, to the extent that the history of book illustration can be studied through them. Randolph Caldecott published his own collection of Aesop, *The Caldecott Aesop: Twenty Fables Illustrated by Randolph Caldecott* in 1883. He included 20 fables, retelling them to suit his own time and illustrating them by himself. There are also picture book versions of fables.

**Sources:**

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**Photograph:** “Frontispiece: The Original Fables of La Fontaine”. (c) Carla 216, 2006. In flickr with cc licence.