



In the updated 'Wind in the Willows', Mole is propelled from the rural idyll of almost a century ago (below) to today's less hospitable landscape DAVID SANDISON

Mole, Ratty and Mr Toad row back to the future in 'The Wind in the Pylons'

By James Morrison
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The Wind in the Willows, the children's classic that conjures up images of a timeless English rural idyll, has been reinvented with a dark new twist. Almost a century after Mole, Ratty, Badger and Mr Toad first enchanted readers, a sequel to Kenneth Grahame's novel will plunge them into a corporate, pollution-soaked world modelled on Tony Blair's Britain.

It is the latest children's book to be re-worked for a nostalgic adult audience. On the surface, *The Wind in the Pylons*, by the author and landscape photographer Gareth Lovett Jones, contains all the elements that made *The Wind in the Willows* so popular. The story, which opens with Mole being transported through a time tunnel to the present day, adopts a prose style in keeping with the original and reintroduces all the old characters.

But beneath its cosy exterior is a savage satire on the state of modern Britain.

Mr Toad, who in the original was portrayed as a



boastful but ultimately endearing country gent, is reincarnated as Wyvern Toad, the ruthless head of a multinational. Ratty, the avuncular water vole, re-appears as his henchman, Mr Rette, who runs the "de-girthing" unit responsible for sacking the company's surplus employees.

Meanwhile, the weasels, the scheming carnivores Grahame used to depict the less savoury elements of the working classes, here embody the excesses of post-Thatcher yuppieism.

However, Badger, the loveable curmudgeon, receives more sympathetic treatment. He takes the role of the leader of an underground revolutionary group called the Animale

Liberation Front. The word 'animale' means humane.

Alongside Grahame's original cast of characters, Mr Jones has introduced a host of new protagonists - many of them based on recognisable public figures. Chief among these is Probity Stoat, a slimy, smooth-talking politician inspired by Tony Blair in his days as Leader of the Opposition.

In one scene reminiscent of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* - in which the once revolutionary pigs are seen supping with their human "exploiters" - Stoat reassures Toad he will not stand in the way of the interests of big business if and when he comes to power.

Other characters include Gibbert, whom Mr Jones

describes as "an appalling Tory politician". He is modelled on one of the three "bastards" John Major blamed for undermining his policies on Europe - believed to be Peter Lilley, John Redwood and Michael Portillo - but the author declines to specify which.

Mr Jones, who took five years to write his novel, confesses that it would have had a mixed response at best from Grahame, a former secretary of the Bank of England with somewhat more conservative views than his own. However, his ability to publish the novel, which comes out in October, is assured: because Grahame died almost exactly 70 years ago, the copyright on his creations has just run out.

"It's a book of ideas, and it's grown very slowly," said Mr Jones, who lives near Pangbourne in Berkshire, not far from where Grahame once lived. "I started writing it sometime around the middle of 1995, when I was getting very angry about the way things were going in the country."

"The novel is set a short while before New Labour came to power. It's a cliché

now, but when I started, it was less appreciated that Blair had accepted the Thatcher project."

Despite its strongly allegorical nature, *The Wind in the Pylons*, which is split into two volumes, has taken great care to stay as faithful as possible to Grahame's original. The cover illustration, by Judy Hammond, is based closely on E H Shepherd's drawings for *The Wind in the Willows* and even the typeface is in keeping with that used in the original print runs.

The Wind in the Pylons is far from the first sequel to a classic children's novel to be written by someone other than the original author. Ten years ago, William Horwood wrote several new stories involving Grahame's characters with the agreement of the late novelist's estate.

In 1984, Gilbert Adair committed what many regarded as heresy by writing *Alice Through the Needle's Eye*, a follow-up to Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books. Spin-offs have also been written to Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* novels, as well as *Thomas the Tank Engine*.