

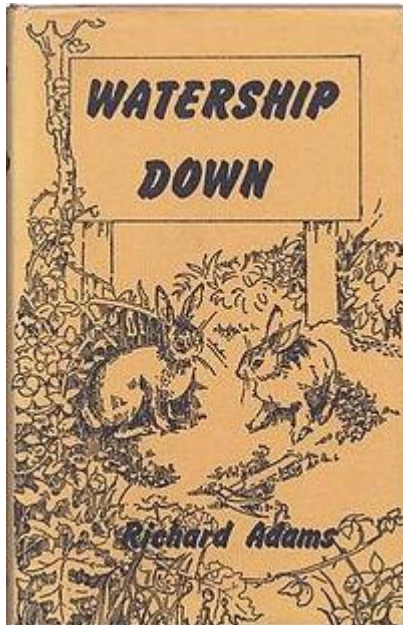
Watership Down

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Watership Down



First edition cover

Author(s)	Richard Adams
Country	United Kingdom
Language	English
Genre(s)	Fantasy novel
Publisher	Rex Collings
Publication date	November 1972
Media type	Print (Hardback and paperback)
Pages	413 (First edition, hardback)
ISBN	ISBN 0-901720-31-3 (First edition, hardback)
OCLC Number	36359929
Dewey Decimal	823/.9/14
LC Classification	PZ10.3.A197 Wat PR6051.D345
Followed by	Tales from Watership Down

Watership Down is a classic [heroic fantasy](#) novel, written by [English](#) author [Richard Adams](#), about a small group of [rabbits](#). Although the animals in the story live in their natural environment, they are [anthropomorphised](#), possessing their own [culture](#), [language](#) ([Lapine](#)), [proverbs](#), [poetry](#), and [mythology](#). Evoking [epic](#) themes, the novel recounts the rabbits' odyssey as they escape the destruction of their [warren](#) to seek a place in which to establish a new home, encountering perils and temptations along the way.

The novel takes its name from the rabbits' destination, [Watership Down](#), a hill in the north of [Hampshire](#), England, near the area where Adams grew up. The story is based on a collection of tales that Adams told to his young children to pass the time on trips to the countryside.

Published in [1972](#), *Watership Down* was Richard Adams' first novel, and is by far his most successful to date. Although it was initially rejected by 13 publishers before eventually being accepted by Rex Collings Ltd, *Watership Down* has never been out of print, and was the recipient of several prestigious awards. Adapted into [an acclaimed classic film](#) and [a television series](#), it is [Penguin Books](#)' best-selling novel of all time.^{[\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)} In 1996, Adams published *Tales from Watership Down*, a follow-up collection of 19 [short stories](#) about [El-ahrairah](#) and the rabbits of the Watership Down warren.^{[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#)}

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[\[edit\]](#) Publication history

Watership Down began as a story Richard Adams told to his two daughters, Juliet and Rosamond, on a long car journey; in an interview, Adams said he "began telling the story of the rabbits ... improvised off the top of my head, as we were driving along."^{[\[2\]](#)[\[5\]](#)} He based the struggles of the animals in the story on the struggles he and his friends encountered during

the [Battle of Oosterbeek](#), [Arnhem](#), the [Netherlands](#) in 1944.^[1] His daughters insisted he write it down—"they were very, very persistent"—and though he initially delayed, he eventually began writing in the evenings, and completed it 18 months later.^[5] The book is dedicated to his daughters.^[6]

*"To Juliet and Rosamund,
remembering
the road to [Stratford-on-Avon](#)"*
—Dedication, *Watership Down*

However, Adams had difficulty finding a publisher. His novel was rejected 13 times in all, until it was finally accepted by Rex Collings, a small publishing house.^[2] The publisher had little capital and could not pay Adams an advance; but "he got a review copy onto every desk in London that mattered."^[5]

Adams's descriptions of wild rabbit behaviour were based on *The Private Life of the Rabbit* (1964), by British naturalist [Ronald Lockley](#).^{[7][8]} The two later became friends and went on an expedition to the [Antarctic](#), resulting in a joint writing venture, *Voyage Through the Antarctic*, published in 1982.^[7]

[\[edit\]](#) Plot summary




The real Watership Down, near the [Hampshire](#) village of [Kingsclere](#), in 1975.

In the Sandleford [warren](#), Fiver, a young [runt](#) rabbit who is a [seer](#), receives a frightening vision of his warren's imminent destruction. When he and his brother Hazel fail to convince their chief rabbit of the need to evacuate, they set out on their own with a small band of rabbits to search for a new home, barely eluding the Owsla, the warren's military [caste](#).

The travelling group of rabbits find themselves following the leadership of Hazel, previously an unimportant member of the warren. They travel through dangerous territory, with Bigwig and Silver, both former Owsla, as the strongest rabbits among them.

Fiver's visions promise a safe place in which to settle, and the group eventually finds Watership Down, an ideal location to set up their new warren. They are soon reunited with Holly and Bluebell, also from the Sandleford Warren, who reveal that Fiver's vision was true and the entire warren was destroyed by humans.



 Nuthanger Farm, Hampshire, England, in 2004.

Although Watership Down is a peaceful habitat, Hazel realizes there are no does (female rabbits), thus making the future of their new home uncertain. With the help of a seagull named Kehaar, they locate a nearby warren, Efrafa, which is overcrowded and has many does. Hazel sends a small emissary to Efrafa to present their request for does. While waiting for the group to return, Hazel and Pipkin successfully raid the nearby Nuthanger Farm to rescue a group of hutch rabbits there, returning with two does. When the emissary returns, Hazel and his rabbits learn Efrafa is a [police state](#) led by the [despotic](#) General Woundwort; Hazel's rabbits barely return alive. However, the group does manage to identify an Efrafan doe named Hyzenthlay who wants to leave the warren and can recruit other does to join. Hazel and Bigwig devise a plan to rescue the group of rabbits from Efrafa to join them on Watership Down. The Efrafan escapees start their new life on Watership Down, but soon Woundwort's army arrives to attack the Watership Down warren. Through Bigwig's bravery and loyalty and Hazel's ingenuity, the Watership Down rabbits defeat Woundwort.

The story's epilogue tells the reader of how Hazel, dozing in his burrow one "chilly, blustery morning in March" many years later, is visited by the rabbit folk hero El-ahrairah, who invites Hazel to join his Owsla. Leaving his friends and no-longer-needed body behind, Hazel departs Watership Down with El-ahrairah, "running easily down through the wood, where the first primroses were beginning to bloom."^[6]

[\[edit\]](#) Characters

Main article: [List of Watership Down characters](#)

- Hazel:** The main [protagonist](#), Fiver's brother; he leads the rabbits from Sandleford and eventually becomes Chief Rabbit. Though Hazel is not particularly large or powerful, he is loyal, brave, and a quick thinker. He sees the good in each individual, and what they bring to the table; in so doing, he makes sure that no one gets left behind, thus earning the respect and loyalty of his warren. He often relies on Fiver's advice, and trusts in his brother's instincts absolutely.
- Fiver:** A small [runt](#) rabbit whose name literally means "Little-thousand" or "Little-many" (rabbits have a single word, "hraiir", for all numbers greater than four; Fiver's name in Lapine, *Hraiiroo*, indicates that he is the smallest of a litter of five or more rabbits). As a seer, he has visions and very strong instincts. Fiver is one of the most intelligent rabbits in the group. He is quiet and intuitive, and though he does not directly act as a leader, the others listen to and follow his advice. Vilthuril becomes his mate.

- **Bigwig:** An ex-Owsla officer, and the largest rabbit of the group. His name in Lapine is *Thlayli*, which literally means "Fur-head" and refers to the shock of fur on the back of his head. Though he is powerful and fierce, he is shown to also be cunning in his own way when he devises a plan to defeat the larger and stronger General Woundwort.
- **Blackberry:** A clever buck rabbit with black-tipped ears. He is often capable of understanding concepts that the other rabbits find incomprehensible. He realizes, for instance, that wood floats, and the rabbits use this tactic twice to traverse on water. He also works out how to dismantle the snare that almost kills Bigwig, saving him. He is one of Hazel's most trusted advisors, given the task to plan for a way to rescue does from Efrafra. In the television series, Blackberry is a female character and falls in love with Campion.
- **Dandelion:** A buck rabbit notable for his storytelling ability and speed. He is instrumental in luring the Nuthanger Farm dog into the Efracans during the siege of Watership Down. He is voice acted by [Richard O'Callaghan](#) in the film and [Phill Jupitus](#) in the television series, seasons 1 and 2. In the TV series, Dandelion is strangely one of the slowest of rabbits and, though still an accomplished storyteller, is more of a joker similar to Bluebell from the books. He is also a good friend of Hawkbit.
- **Pipkin:** A small and timid buck rabbit, who looks to Hazel for guidance and protection. Hazel encourages him, and Pipkin grows very loyal to Hazel. He proves to be a constant comforter, particularly for Holly after the destruction of Sandleford warren. In the TV series, Pipkin's characterization is notably different; here he is a very young and adventurous rabbit eager to prove himself in the eyes of the bigger companions—particularly Hazel and Bigwig. During the last season Pipkin grows up to be a responsible rabbit, even leading the "Junior Owsla". His name is Hlao - Roo in Lapine.
- **Hyzenthlay:** A female rabbit who lives in Efrafa and assists Bigwig in arranging for the liberation of its inhabitants. General Woundwort, who suspects her of fomenting dissension, orders his guards to keep a close eye on her. She escapes Efrafa with Bigwig and becomes Hazel's mate. Her name means literally 'shine-dew-fur,' or 'fur shining like dew.'
- **Blackavar:** A rabbit with very dark fur who tries to escape from Efrafa but is apprehended, mutilated, and put on display to discourage further escape attempts. When he is liberated by Bigwig, he quickly proves himself as an expert tracker and ranger.
- **Kehaar:** A [Black-headed Gull](#) who is forced, by an injured wing, to take refuge on Watership Down. He is characterised by his frequent impatience, guttural accent and unusual phrasing. After discovering the Efrafa warren and helping the rabbits, he rejoins his colony. According to Adams, Kehaar was based on a fighter from the [Norwegian Resistance](#) in [World War II](#).^[9]
- **General Woundwort:** The main antagonist: a vicious, cruel and brutally efficient rabbit who was orphaned at a young age, Woundwort founded the Efrafa warren and is its tyrannical chief. Though he is greater even than Bigwig in terms of his size and strength, he lacks the former's loyalty and kindness. He even leads an attack to capture the Watership warren as an act of revenge against Bigwig. After his apparent death, he lives on in rabbit legend as a [bogeypman](#).
- **Frith:** A god-figure who created the world and promised that rabbits would always be allowed to thrive. In Lapine, his name literally means "the sun".

- **El-ahrairah:** A rabbit [trickster](#) folk hero, who is the protagonist of nearly all of the rabbits' stories. He represents what every rabbit wants to be: smart, devious, tricky, and devoted to the well-being of his warren. In Lapine, his name is a contraction of the phrase *Elil-hrair-rah*, which means "prince with a thousand enemies". His stories of cleverness (and arrogance) are very similar to [Br'er Rabbit](#) and [Anansi](#).
- **Black Rabbit of Inlé:** A sinister [phantom](#) servant of the god Frith who appears in rabbit [folklore](#). He is the rabbit equivalent of a [grim reaper](#) in human folklore, and similarly ensures all rabbits die at their predestined time. "Inlé" is the Lapine term for the moon or darkness.

[\[edit\]](#) Themes

Watership Down has been described as an [allegory](#), with the labours of Hazel, Fiver, Bigwig, and Silver "mirror[ing] the timeless struggles between tyranny and freedom, reason and blind emotion, and the individual and the corporate state."^[10] Adams draws on [classical](#) heroic and [quest](#) themes from [Homer](#) and [Virgil](#), creating a story with [epic](#) motifs.^[11]

[\[edit\]](#) Religious symbolism

It has been suggested that *Watership Down* contains symbolism of several religions, or that the stories of El-ahrairah were meant to mimic some elements of real-world religion. When asked in a 2007 [BBC Radio](#) interview about the religious symbolism in the novel, Adams stated that the story was "nothing like that at all." Adams said that the rabbits in *Watership Down* did not worship, however, "they believed passionately in El-ahrairah". Adams explained that he meant the book to be, "only a made-up story... in no sense an allegory or parable or any kind of political myth. I simply wrote down a story I told to my little girls". Instead, he explained, the "let-in" religious stories of El-ahrairah were meant more as legendary tales, similar to a rabbit [Robin Hood](#), and that these stories were interspersed throughout the book as humorous interjections to the often "grim" tales of the "real story".^[12]

[\[edit\]](#) The hero, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid*

The book explores the themes of exile, survival, heroism, political responsibility, and the "making of a hero and a community".^[13] Joan Bridgman's analysis of Adams's works in *The Contemporary Review* identifies the community and hero motifs: "[T]he hero's journey into a realm of terrors to bring back some boon to save himself and his people" is a powerful element in Adams's tale. This theme derives from the author's exposure to the works of [mythologist Joseph Campbell](#), especially his study of [comparative mythology](#), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), and in particular, Campbell's "[monomyth](#)" theory, also based on [Carl Jung](#)'s view of the unconscious mind, that "all the stories in the world are really one story".^[11]

The concept of the hero has invited comparisons between *Watership Down*'s characters and those in [Homer](#)'s *Odyssey* and [Virgil](#)'s *Aeneid*.^[10] Hazel's courage, Bigwig's strength, Blackberry's ingenuity and craftiness, and Dandelion's and Bluebell's poetry and storytelling all have parallels in the [epic poem](#) *Odyssey*.^[14] Kenneth Kitchell declared, "Hazel stands in the tradition of [Odysseus](#), [Aeneas](#), and others".^[15] [Tolkien](#) scholar John Rateliff calls Adams's novel an *Aeneid* "what-if" book: what if the [seer Cassandra](#) (Fiver) had been believed and she and a company had fled [Troy](#) (Sandleford Warren) before its destruction? What if Hazel and

his companions, like Aeneas, encounter a seductive home at Cowslip's Warren (Land of the [Lotus Eaters](#))? Rateliff goes on to compare the rabbits' battle with Woundwart's Efracans to Aeneas's fight with [Turnus's Latins](#). "By basing his story on one of the most popular books of the [Middle Ages](#) and [Renaissance](#), Adams taps into a very old myth: the flight from disaster, the heroic refugee in search of a new home, a story that was already over a thousand years old when Virgil told it in 19 BC."^[11]

[\[edit\]](#) Reception

The Economist heralded the book's publication, saying "If there is no place for *Watership Down* in children's bookshops, then children's literature is dead."^[16] [Peter Prescott](#), senior book reviewer at *Newsweek*, gave the novel a glowing review: "Adams handles his suspenseful narrative more dextrously than most authors who claim to write adventure novels, but his true achievement lies in the consistent, comprehensible and altogether enchanting civilisation that he has created."^[13] Kathleen J. Rothen and Beverly Langston identified the work as one that "subtly speaks to a child", with "engaging characters and fast-paced action [that] make it readable."^[14] This echoed [Nicholas Tucker](#)'s praise for the story's suspense in the *New Statesman*: "Adams... has bravely and successfully resurrected the big picaresque adventure story, with moments of such tension that the helplessly involved reader finds himself checking whether things are going to work out all right on the next page before daring to finish the preceding one."^[17]

The "enchanting" world Prescott admired was not as well received upon its [1974](#) American publication. Although again the object of general approval, reception in the United States was more mixed, unlike the predominantly positive reviews of 1972. D. Keith Mano, a science fiction writer and conservative social commentator writing in the *National Review*, declared that the novel was "pleasant enough, but it has about the same intellectual firepower as Dumbo." He pilloried it further: "*Watership Down* is an adventure story, no more than that: rather a swashbuckling crude one to boot. There are virtuous rabbits and bad rabbits: if that's allegory, [Bonanza](#) is an allegory."^[18]

Despite the criticism, *Watership Down* was a hit with the reading public. The novel found a spot on the [Publishers Weekly](#) best-seller list in March 1974; it attained the number one ranking on 15 April 1974, and remained there for another three months. The book did not drop off the list until February 1975.^[citation needed]

John Rowe Townsend notes that the book quickly achieved such a high popularity despite the fact that it, "came out at a high price and in an unattractive jacket from a publisher who had hardly been heard of".^[19] Fred Inglis, in his book *The Promise of Happiness: Value and meaning in children's fiction*, praises the author's use of prose to express the strangeness of ordinary human inventions from the rabbits' perspective.^[20]

Watership Down's universal motifs of liberation and self-determination have led to the tendency of minority groups to read their own narrative into the novel, despite the author's assurance that it "was never intended to become some sort of allegory or parable." [Rachel Kadish](#), reflecting on her own superimposition of the founding of [Israel](#) onto *Watership Down*, has remarked "Turns out plenty of other people have seen their histories in that book...some people see it as an allegory for struggles against the Cold War, fascism, extremism...a protest against materialism, against the corporate state. *Watership Down* can be

Ireland after the famine, Rwanda after the massacres." Kadish has praised both the fantasy genre and *Watership Down* for its "motifs [that] hit home in every culture...all passersby are welcome to bring their own subplots and plug into the archetype." ^[21]

[\[edit\]](#) Awards

Watership Down won the [Carnegie Medal](#) in 1972,^[22] the [Guardian Children's Fiction Prize](#) in 1973,^[23] and the [California Young Reader Medal](#) in 1977.^[24] In [The Big Read](#), a 2003 survey of the British public, it was voted the forty-second greatest book of all time.^[25]

[\[edit\]](#) Adaptations

[\[edit\]](#) Film

Main article: [Watership Down \(film\)](#)

In 1978 [Martin Rosen](#) wrote and directed [an animated film](#) adaptation of *Watership Down*. The voice cast included [John Hurt](#), [Richard Briers](#), [Harry Andrews](#), [Simon Cadell](#), [Nigel Hawthorne](#), and [Roy Kinnear](#). The film featured the song "[Bright Eyes](#)", sung by [Art Garfunkel](#). Released as a single, the song became a UK number one hit.^[26]

Although the essentials of the plot remained relatively unchanged, the film omits several side plots. Though the *Watership Down* warren eventually grew to seventeen rabbits, with the additions of Strawberry, Holly, Bluebell, and three hutch rabbits liberated from the farm, the movie only includes a band of eight.^[citation needed] Rosen's adaptation was praised for "cutting through Adams' book ... to get to the beating heart".^[27]

The film has also seen some positive critical attention. In 1979 the film received a nomination for the [Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation](#).^[28] Additionally, British television station [Channel 4](#)'s 2006 documentary *[100 Greatest Cartoons](#)* named it the 86th greatest cartoon of all time.^[29]

A screenplay is currently in development for a re-adaptation of the book.

[\[edit\]](#) Television

Main article: [Watership Down \(TV series\)](#)

From 1999 to 2001, the book was also adapted as an animated television series, broadcast on [CITV](#) in the UK and on [YTV](#) in Canada.^[30] It starred several well-known British actors, including [Stephen Fry](#), [Rik Mayall](#), [Dawn French](#), [John Hurt](#), and [Richard Briers](#), and ran for a total of 39 episodes over three seasons. Although the story was broadly based on that of the novel, with most characters and many incidents retained, in later episodes especially some story lines and characters were entirely new. In 2003, the second season was nominated for a [Gemini Award](#) for Best Original Music Score for a Dramatic Series.^[31]

[\[edit\]](#) Theater

In 2006, *Watership Down* was adapted into a [theatrical production](#) by [Rona Munro](#) for the [Lyric Hammersmith](#) in [London](#). Directed by Melly Still, the cast included Matthew Burgess, Joseph Traynor, and Richard Simons, and ran from November 2006 through January 2007.^[32] The tone of the production was inspired by the tension of war: in an interview with [The Guardian](#), Still commented, "The closest humans come to feeling like rabbits is under war conditions ... We've tried to capture that anxiety."^[33] A reviewer at [The Times](#) called the play "an exciting, often brutal tale of survival" and said that "even when it's a muddle, it's a glorious one."^[34]

[[edit](#)] Role-playing game

Main article: [Bunnies & Burrows](#)

Watership Down inspired the creation of *Bunnies & Burrows*, a [role-playing game](#) centred around talking rabbits, published in [1976](#) by Fantasy Games Unlimited.^[35] It introduced several innovations to role-playing game design, being the first game to allow players to have non-[humanoid](#) roles, as well as the first with detailed [martial arts](#) and skill systems. Fantasy Games Unlimited published a second edition of the game in 1982, and the game was modified and republished by [Steve Jackson Games](#) as an official [GURPS supplement](#) in 1992.

[[edit](#)] Music

[Fall of Efrafa](#), a British post-metal/hardcore band, based an entire trilogy of concept albums upon an interpretation of the mythology in the novel.

[American folk rock](#) trio [America](#) performed a song titled "Watership Down", released by [Warner Bros. Records](#) in April 1976 on their [Hideaway](#) album. Composed by singer/songwriter [Gerry Beckley](#), the song's lyrics refer obliquely to the story elements, including the phrase "you might hear them in the distance, if your ear's to the ground." Although the song did not chart, it did receive airplay on [FM album rock](#) stations during the year.

Swedish [progressive rock](#) musician [Bo Hansson](#) recorded a [suite](#) named "Rabbit Music" which was based on the book, as part of his 1975 album [Attic Thoughts](#). Two years later, Hansson released an entire album devoted to the novel, titled [Music Inspired by Watership Down](#).

The British [electro](#) group [Ladytron](#) shot a music video for their single "[Ghosts](#)", off their 2008 album [Velocifero](#), which featured many references to *Watership Down*.

American art-rock band [...And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead](#) has one song on their [self-titled album](#), released in 1998, called "Prince With A Thousand Enemies".

American hip-hop group [Common Market](#) recorded a song called "Watership Down" on their 2008 EP [Black Patch War](#).

American punk band [AFI](#) used imagery from the movie on the cover of their [Decemberunderground](#) album.

The Paul McCartney and Wings album [*Band On The Run*](#) (1973) has the song "Band On The Run" referencing this work in the line "And the bell was ringing in the village square for the rabbits on the run".

New Jersey based hardcore punk band [Bigwig](#) takes their name from the character in the novel. The cover art of their first album, *Unmerry Melodies*, features a rabbit resembling the character of Bigwig, and the song "Best of Me" features a sample from the film *Watership Down*.^[36]

American Rapper [Sole](#), on his album *Selling Live Water*, references the story of Hazel in the tunnel in the chorus of his song "Tokyo", ending with "Run Rabbit: When They Catch You They'll Kill You".

American singer-songwriter [Vanessa Carlton](#)'s 2011 album [*Rabbits on the Run*](#) was inspired by *Watership Down* and [*A Brief History of Time*](#).^[37]

American music producer [Sonny Moore](#) (aka [Skrillex](#)) named his music label after OWSLA. (2011)

[Bright Eyes](#) is a song written by Mike Batt, and performed by Art Garfunkel. It was used in the soundtrack of the 1978 film *Watership Down*.

[\[edit\]](#) Parodies

In an episode of the British comedy show [The Goodies](#), entitled Animals, nature presenters from the BBC are forced to escape in rabbit suits from the fury of animals now granted equal rights with humans. It features the music and animation in the style of the movies.

In the American TV show [Robot Chicken](#), a parody of the book is done with the Fraggles, the main characters of the show [Fraggle Rock](#), in place of the rabbits.

[\[edit\]](#) Other references

Watership Down has been referenced in other media.

- In Stephen King's novel [The Stand](#), protagonist Stu Redman reads *Watership Down* non-stop for two days.
- In ABC TV's show [Lost](#), one of the main characters, Sawyer, is shown several times reading the book.
- In the film [Donnie Darko](#), the book and its film adaptation are viewed and discussed.
- In the [Gundam](#) metaseries, especially the manga *Advance of Zeta: The Flag of Titans*, the Titans test team use a rabbit in their logo and name their units after characters from the book.^[38]
- In [The Vicar of Dibley](#) BBC television series, "The Easter Bunny" episode.
- In the book [The Cat Who Knew a Cardinal](#), Qwilleran tries several times to read *Watership Down*, but never gets past the first sentence.
- In the comic book series *Shanda the Panda*, several references are made to *Watership Down*.

- In the popular sitcom [Lead Balloon](#), references are made to *Watership Down* when they describe the book without rabbits but people.
- In the [Doug Worgul](#) novel "Thin Blue Smoke", a mentally ill character named Warren regards Richard Adams as a prophet, and often speaks or writes in Lapine.
- In the [Hillary Jordan](#) novel "When She Woke", the main characters reference the secret of Cowslip's warren in regards to their situation.^[39]
- The name of electronic artist [Skrillex](#)'s record label, [OWSLA](#), is a reference to a term from the books.

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