



Robert Browning's the Pied Piper of Hamelin

Robert Browning, Bud Peen

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Awarded the Silver and Bronze plaques for books by the San Francisco Society of Illustrators.

The Pied Piper of Hamelin is a true story. On June 26, 1284, events occurred, so extraordinary, they have been talked about and wondered at from that day to this one. What really happened during that fateful summer (and why) is a fascinating mystery. It may never be solved, and yet, the famous case of The Pied Piper and his misadventures in Hamelin Town remains relevant and compelling nonetheless.

The origin of what has come to be known as "The Legend of the Pied Piper" can be traced back seven hundred years. Literary scholars and historians differ, debate, and speculate about the facts of the matter. The Children's Crusade and The Dance Epidemic, a disease that blazed in the Dark Ages, are popular theories to explain the circumstances surrounding the folk tale. Barbara Tuchman writes in her wonderful book, *Distant Mirror*, that the legend of The Pied Piper arose from an outbreak of the plague. The modern-day citizens of Hamelin attribute the mass exodus of their ancestors to the forced colonization of Eastern Europe.

The brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm heard the story on their philological trip across the German countryside at the turn of the eighteenth century. By then, the saga of The Pied Piper had been passed by word-of-mouth for many generations. The tale had been told and retold for more than five hundred years. The Grimm brothers wrote a comprehensive version of the oral history, but did not include it in their collection of *Children and Household Tales* (better known as *Grimm's Fairy Tales*) because they considered the narrative to be of social import, not a fable for children.

The legend was, by-in-large, a local one, until 1842, when Robert Browning's poetic account for young people was published. His rhyming retelling has so much appeal, it advanced a humble German river town from commonplace to world famous and immortalized a rat catcher from itinerant stranger to infamous antihero. Mr. Browning embellished the story to suit his fancy. (For rhyming reasons of his own, he changed the date to July 22, 1376.)

Word pictures dance off the pages in Browning's poem. His Pied Piper of Hamelin is so imaginative, it inspired the great illustrators of children's storybooks - Kate Greenaway, Arthur Rackham, Margaret Tarant, and Maxfield Parrish. (Parrish's mural of The Pied Piper, leading the children out of Hamelin and up Koppelberg Hill, hangs proudly over the bar at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco.)

Now, in the 1999 publication of the Robert Browning classic, the witty and wise Bud Peen adds his name to the golden roster of illustrators. Peen's thoroughly modern style is in cunning counterpoint to the medievalist discipline he adopted to suit the subject. In preparation for the project, he reacquainted himself with the paintings, illuminated manuscripts, tapestries, furnishings, architecture, clothing, and day-to-day comings and goings of life in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Combining state-of-the-art technologies with the spirit of medieval masterworks, Peen creates his vibrant electronic paintings - and a feast for the eyes they are.

The Pied Piper of Hamelin is a cautionary tale with words to the wise. There is an old-English proverb that goes: "He who pays the piper may call the tune." But the phrase simply stating the facts, painted on the stained glass window of Hamelins church, says it best of all [loosely translated] "In the year 1284, on John's and Paul's day, was the 26th of June - 130 children born in Hamelin were abducted by a piper dressed in a

many colored coat, and lost at the top of Koppelberg Hill forever."

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