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Opening extract from

William Shakespeare Scenes from the Life of the World's Greatest Writer

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For Do Shaw

The authors and the publishers would
like to thank the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust
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JANETTA OTTER-BARRY BOOKS

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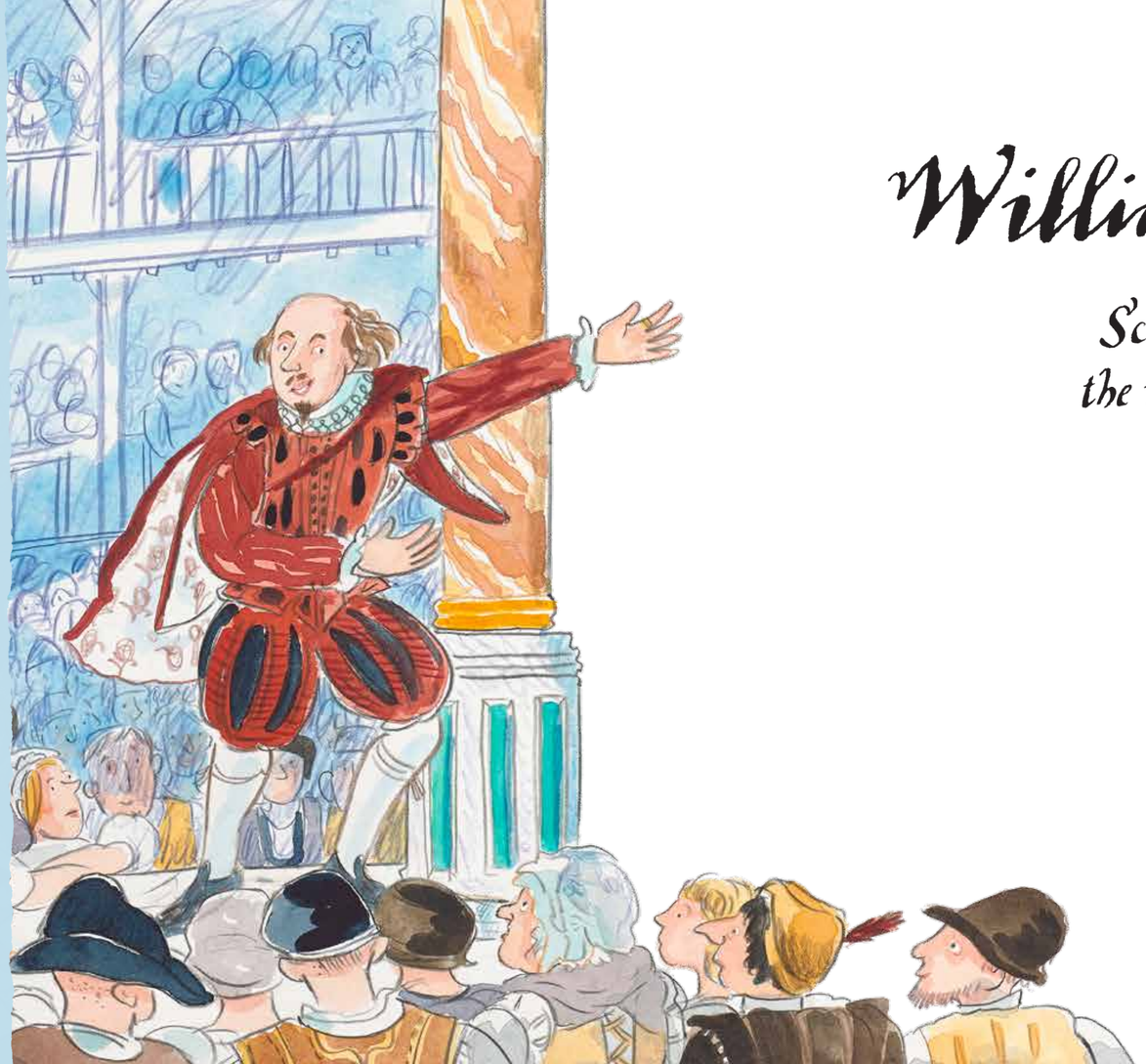
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William Shakespeare

Scenes from the life of the world's greatest writer



Mick Manning
&
Brita Granström

Frances Lincoln
Children's Books

In association with
The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Will is born 1564

At first the infant,
mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
As You Like It

Welcome to the English market town of Stratford upon Avon, over four hundred and fifty years ago. A baby boy has just been born to a glove-maker and his wife. In these days, not everything gets written down and most of what is written down won't survive, so we don't know everything about this little boy's childhood. But we do know his name – he is called William Shakespeare and this book is going to tell you about his remarkable life.



John Shakespeare's fine Tudor house can still be seen today in Stratford upon Avon. It is now open to the public and managed by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.





Welcome to the Elizabethan age – a time of struggle between the Protestant and Catholic faiths of Britain. Before Elizabeth I became queen, her half-sister Queen Mary had outlawed the Church of England and prosecuted many Protestants. But by Will's time Elizabeth was queen and the country was Protestant again. Now Elizabeth prosecuted Catholics, and many executions took place. It was a time of war with Spain, but also a time of new ideas and discoveries in art, science and literature: the age of the Renaissance.



William's mother was called Mary Arden and she came from a well-to-do landowning family. Will's father, John Shakespeare, was a maker of fashionable gloves, and over the years he also held various important positions on the town council: ale-taster, town chamberlain, alderman and eventually bailiff.

Will's schooldays 1571

Then, the whining school-boy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail
Unwillingly to school.
As You Like It

From the age of seven Will goes to the Grammar School to study alongside other Stratford boys. He learns Maths, English, French, Latin and some Greek – they even do a bit of drama too, acting out the Greek myths and putting on a nativity play at Christmas. Does Will mess about, or does he work hard? (Perhaps a bit of both, because a school desk with 'WS' carved into it can be seen to this day in Will's schoolroom above Stratford Guildhall.) On holidays he helps his father in his workshop or visits his grandparents on their farm near the forest of



Will is the third child, although his two older sisters died when they were babies. He will eventually have five younger brothers and sisters: Gilbert, Joan, Anne, Richard and Mary.



Breakfast was usually pottage, a sort of savoury porridge containing oats, barley, vegetables and sometimes meat.

The pupils were from well-off families who could afford an education for their sons. (Girls didn't go to school in those days at all!) The boys studied hard until 5pm, with a 2-hour lunch break. In winter they had to bring their own firewood and candles.





Will, like other boys in those times, would probably have enjoyed sports such as an early version of football, played with a real pig's bladder blown up to make a ball...



Elizabethan teachers believed in beating their pupils. We don't know if it ever happened to Will...

Will learned Latin and some Greek, discovering the fables of Aesop, the Greek myths and worlds of dangerous adventures, magic and love in the voyages of Odysseus and Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe.





One of Will's teachers, John Cottam, believed in a system of teaching through drama. We can guess his class probably acted out Greek myths or put on seasonal nativity plays at Christmas. Records survive from other towns that show schools doing exactly that.



Street fairs

Since once i sat upon a promontory.
And heard a Mermaid on a Dolphin's back.
A Midsummer Night's Dream

Every year Will looks forward to helping with the 'Mystery' and 'Miracle' plays. He's even been on stage a few times himself. He likes to watch the travelling acrobats and dancing bears but, best of all, he loves the visiting troupes of actors. When they visit any town they must first get a licence to perform from the local bailiff. In Stratford that's Will's dad, so Will sometimes gets to meet his heroes: actors such as the flamboyant Lord Strange's Men. He's can't wait to watch their knock-about, slapstick performances on a makeshift stage of planks and beer barrels.



Mystery and Miracle plays were religious pantomimes acted by local trades' guilds. For example the Carpenters' Guild might act out *Noah's Ark*. Will and his father may have taken part in organising and even acting in local shows. When Queen Elizabeth eventually stopped these plays as part of new religous laws they were sorely missed by everyday people; touring troupes of actors filled the gap.



Actors had a 'bad-boy' reputation as the wild 'rock stars' of their day. To avoid being whipped out of town as travelling beggars, they needed a noble sponsor such as Lord Strange or the Lord Chamberlain. As a boy Will may have cheered Queen Elizabeth on her way to banquets at Kenilworth Castle. One famous Royal performance there included a 'mermaid' riding a 'dolphin'. Will must have heard about it because later, when he became a playwright, he made several references to the story.