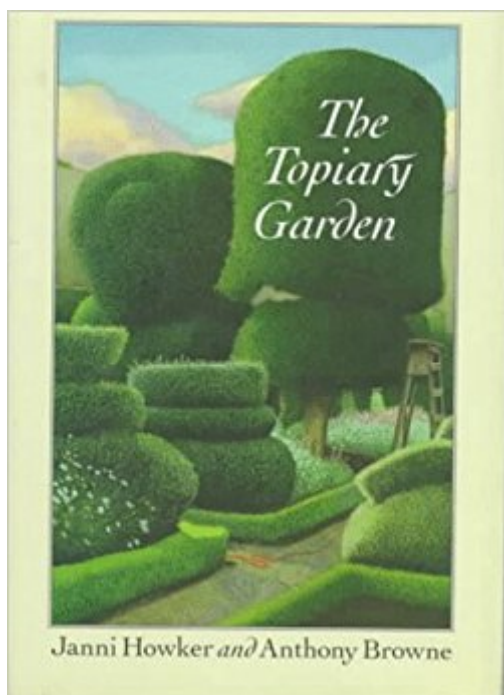


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# The Topiary Garden



## Synopsis

Aspiring artist Liz loves the topiary garden of Carlton Hall and learns the story of the estate's retired gardener, ninety-year-old Sally Beck, a story of pluck, courage, and persistent good humor. By the author of *Badger on the Barge*.

## Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

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## Customer Reviews

Initially published a decade ago in Howker's story collection *Badger on the Barge*, this elegantly crafted tale devolves in the shadow of a topiary garden on the grounds of Carlton Hall, an English country home. Liz and her older brother are camping with their father when Liz encounters 91-year-old Sally Beck, whose face resembles a "crumpled brown paper bag." Smarting from a fight with her brother, Liz grumbles that she sometimes wishes she were a boy. In the intriguing tale-within-a-tale that follows, the old woman explains that she ran away from home at the age of 12, dressed in her brother's clothes, and became an apprentice gardener at Carlton Hall, where she cared for the topiary garden. For years, Sally (known as Jack) kept her gender a secret-until accused of impregnating her employer's maid. Howker's writing is crisp and her imagery striking, but the book's themes (not to mention the text's tiny print) are too sophisticated for readers on the younger end of the suggested audience. Similarly, although Browne's detailed art is impeccably rendered-and contains some mysterious images-picture after picture of the topiary garden may become tiresome for children. Ages 7-up. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Gr. 7<sup>^</sup>-12. Furious at the sexist sneers of her older brother, 12-year-old Liz runs off to the Yorkshire

moors. She meets a very old lady who says that when she was 12, she ran away from home forever and was forced to disguise herself as a boy in order to be free. The old lady once worked in the topiary garden at the great country house nearby, a weird, shadowy place where trees and bushes are carved and twisted into unnatural shapes and a nude statue of a woman is protected and imprisoned. First published as part of Howker's acclaimed collection *Badger on the Barge and other Stories* (1984), this novella is now a small, self-contained volume with occasional framed illustrations by Browne. Their quiet combination of the eerie and the elegant captures the surrealistic theme of the story. Kids will be drawn into Liz's family fights, and they'll also get the metaphor of the garden and its distortions. The old woman's story helps Liz assert herself as an artist and as a woman, and, at the end, Liz draws a picture showing the statue standing free in the sunlight. Hazel Rochman

You can read this in a few minutes and it is well written, I was not particularly interested in the girl Liz, but when she started hearing the story of Jack/Sally Beck I was fascinated. I loved the story so much I read it aloud to my husband because it just seemed like the best little story I had ever read. For fans of *Downton Abbey*, it would be interesting as it takes place in that time period before WWI

This is an excellent book for people of my age, and tells the story of the relationship between a teenage girl and old Lady. The book is beautifully illustrated by Anthony Browne and a pleasure to read, it intrigued me from start to finish. I would definitely recommend it and hope to read more of Janni Howker's books in the future. -Miss Jamie Lake, 13.

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