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# review



# Loved and loathed: the hard life of an otter

**Man has harmed these mammals but they are brutal to each other, Clive Davis learns**



**The Otter's Tale**  
by Simon Cooper

William Collins  
288pp; £16.99

**W**e tend to go weak-kneed at the thought of spotting that elusive creature, the otter. Yet one of the virtues of Simon Cooper's amiable if meandering story of a family that take up residence by his Hampshire water mill is just how unpopular these denizens of the riverbank used to be.

Even at the time that Kenneth Grahame added Otter to the cast of *The Wind in the Willows*, otter-hunting was a respectable country pastime. In the 17th century Izaak Walton, the patron saint of anglers, proclaimed himself a diehard foe of his furry rivals. "I hate them perfectly," he wrote, "because they love fish so well."

A century earlier, Cooper informs us, parliament had categorised otters as vermin and allowed parish councils to pay bounties for them. Going back even further, Henry II inaugurated the office of king's otterer, a post that came with a manor house and land. For much of their history, in short, otters were about as popular as foxes.

Henry Williamson's classic novel *Tarka the Otter* — published 90 years ago — may

have helped to begin to change public attitudes, but the fact remains that otter-hunting was not banned in England and Wales until 1978. Attitudes were much the same elsewhere. The mild-mannered Swiss were so hostile to the species that not a single otter remained in the wild by 1960; they even contrived to kill three kept in Zurich's zoo.

In the end, though, indiscriminate use of pesticides in the postwar era inflicted much greater damage than all the hunting packs combined. During the 1950s and 1960s otters came close to extinction in Britain. And even though there has been a resurgence in their numbers, Cooper emphasises just how precarious their lives remain. Every day that they are foraging for nourishment in the countryside, they are competing in a Darwinian struggle for existence.

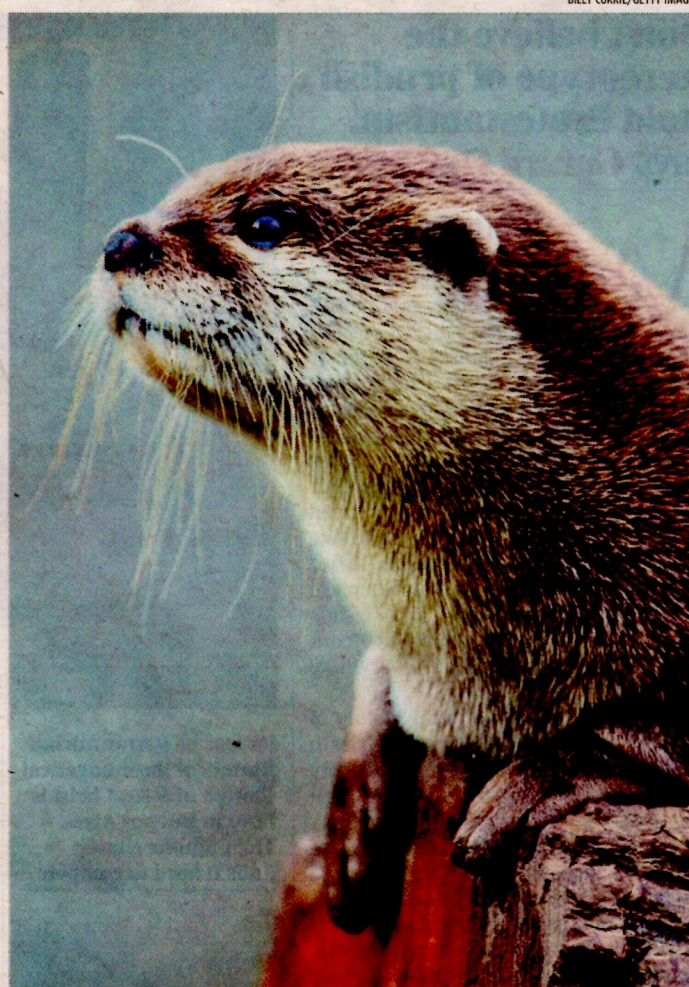
Fond of roaming after dark, they are particularly vulnerable to cars. They are fiercely territorial as well; a young otter

**Otters can live to about ten but only one in three reaches its second birthday**

looking for somewhere to set up home knows better than to linger in a location where an older, fiercer animal has marked its territory with its faeces. It still comes as a shock, however, to discover that, although they can live to about ten in the wild, only one in three reaches its second birthday. One third of the population dies each year.

A chalkstream conservationist, Cooper embarks on a crash course in otter lore and physiology when a female that he christens Kuschta settles near his home and begins raising a family.

Little by little Cooper learns their habits



**TOUGH LOVE** Humans like to romanticise otters, when not killing them

and quirks, although, otters being otters, he is seldom able to get too close. His way of taking us into the centre of his neighbours' lives is to switch back and forth into a fictional narrative that focuses on Kuschta, her mostly absent mate, Mion, and one of their male offspring, Lutran.

It's not an entirely satisfactory device,

partly because the anthropomorphic language seems contrived, while at the same time Cooper shies away from constructing a compelling storyline. A bigger problem is that the prose is never more than workmanlike. Williamson spun poetry from Tarka's adventures; Cooper is much more stolidly journalistic and all too ready to reach for the nearest cliché.

Still, if the two halves of the book — the fictional and the reportage — don't quite gel, there are some arresting moments. Cooper leaves us in no doubt, for instance, about how brutal otters can be when it comes to raising their young.

Offspring are dependent on their mother until early adulthood, and there comes a point when Kuschta decides that one of her four pups has to be abandoned to ensure the survival of the others. A male pup, chosen at random, or so it seems, is the unlucky loser.

"One of the pups had been ostracised, keeping a distance from the others, while all the time emitting that three-second pulse of wailing that sometimes pitched to a scream... The family had turned its collective back on him and almost the saddest thing was how total it was. It was as if he didn't exist. However wild or extreme his cries became, his siblings paid him absolutely no heed. He was just a shadow."

After a few days without food, the poor thing simply lies down and dies. (If that sounds brutal, Cooper's description of how the humble coot — a regular part of the otters' menu — regularly attacks its own young as a way of keeping down numbers is even more unsettling.) Loneliness becomes one of the book's central motifs. Otters may be happy to live in a "romp" in captivity, but in nature an adult "will spend less than one half of 1 per cent of its entire life in the company of another adult".

They are, if you like, loners adrift in a Hobbesian world. No wonder we humans prefer to romanticise them.