

# The Miller's Tale

“That Nicholas must hatch some stratagem  
To fool the silly jealous husband; when,  
If everything went well and turned out right,  
She'd sleep in the arms of Nicholas all night”

## The tale

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A smooth-talking stranger arrives at a run-down karaoke pub in a Kent village claiming to be a talent scout looking for the next big thing. He soon convinces the landlord's beautiful young wife that she's got what it takes to be a star and before long the whole village find themselves seduced by his promises in this comic and bawdy romp.

## Credits

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Writer .....Peter Bowker  
Director .....John McKay  
Nick .....James Nesbitt  
John .....Dennis Waterman  
Alison .....Billie Piper  
Danny .....Kenny Doughty



“The appeal of taking on *The Miller’s Tale* is it is the ‘Carry On’ of Chaucer’s *Tales*. Big characters. Brassy humour. Lots of nudge nudge. And of course a red-hot poker up the bum...”

John McKay, director of *The Miller’s Tale*



## interview

### Peter Bowker is the writer of *The Miller’s Tale*

**Peter Bowker was more than happy to get to work on adapting Chaucer’s comical and saucy *The Miller’s Tale*, because it features a particularly famous and naughty scene involving several naked bottoms!**

“I think the ‘bum out of the window’ scene in *The Miller’s Tale* is one of those images, like Dickens’s ghost of Jacob Marley, that somehow permeates the culture, even though you may never have read the original books.

“So I grabbed this opportunity with both hands,” Bowker adds with gusto. “This is the bawdiest of Chaucer’s *Tales* – I hope that’s why I was lined up to write it!”

Bowker’s task was to modernise a tale of a carpenter, his 18-year-old wife and an astrology student lodger, reworking Chaucer’s timeless themes of lust, jealousy and greed.

He put a 21st-century spin on the 14th-century tale by incorporating the popular pub pastime of karaoke and introducing the notion of the desire to be famous – something that is increasingly apparent in today’s society with the advent of reality shows such as *Pop Idol* and *Fame Academy*.

But Bowker was also inspired by his very first memories of the *Tales* which starred an infamous Time Lord.

“It was a film version directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, years ago, that included this story,” he reveals. “The reason it left an impression was that Tom Baker was in one of them and I was struck by the fact that Doctor Who was involved.

Bowker – who won the Royal Television Society Best Writer award for *Flesh and Blood* – is full of praise for the cast of this modern-day tale of desire and opportunism, which he has centred on a sexy, young, wannabe pop star. Her karaoke skills wow the locals in her middle-aged husband’s pub – but she has dreams of bigger things.

“It was always going to be a bit of a dilemma. Do you cast a singer who can act, or an actor who can sing?” he explains. “I think people will be very surprised by

the quality of Billie Piper’s acting. Not only is she very good, she can stop a pub in the way that I describe it – as well as being like the girl next door. Her look would be dead right, even if she wasn’t Billie Piper.

“Dennis Waterman gives a wonderful performance too, there is a real kind of pain and sorrow in there as John, the cuckolded husband. Then, the real strength of having Jimmy Nesbitt playing con-man Nick is that he has to be likeable and have the power to make people like him, without seeming to try too hard. Jimmy captures that perfectly.”

Bowker admits that little research was needed for the backdrop. “I’m afraid I’m already familiar with karaoke pubs,” he confesses. “Not only have I given voice, I’ve also watched with wonder at other people. In my view *Pop Idol* was karaoke without the irony! Most people who get up in a pub and give it their all will have some sense of self-deprecation in there.”



## interview

# James Nesbitt plays Nick in *The Miller's Tale*

**In the opening episode of *Cold Feet* it was embellished with a rather uncomfortable-looking rose; in *The Miller's Tale* it is thrust through an open window and branded with a red-hot poker – so just what is it about Jimmy Nesbitt's naked rear?**

"It's a contractual obligation," jokes Nesbitt. "I say to my agent 'Do I get to show my arse?' and if she says 'No', I say 'OK, forget it, don't send me the script!' But in *The Miller's Tale* it is absolutely essential – such a seminal moment in English literature and now, hopefully, in television viewing."

But Nesbitt insists that it is all done in the best possible taste. "It was fine. No special make-up needed because it's not a crude, obvious shot. Our director, John McKay, was very good about all those scenes, including Nick's sex scenes with Alison."

"He wanted them to be quite erotic and quite charged as opposed to just crude and rude."

County Antrim-born Nesbitt was familiar with Chaucer's original, but groans at the memory of doing the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* for A-level. "It may be

the cradle of the English language but when you're 17 or 18 it's quite a slog. So I made a decision not to refer to the original – I was led by the writer Pete Bowker, not by Chaucer.

"What Peter Bowker's writing has managed to expose so brilliantly is the shallowness of this world of instant fame and 'reality' television, the desperation people have to escape from something, and Nick plays that card rather beautifully."

"I think Peter's adaptation mirrors Chaucer's ability to see the inadequacies, the selfishness and the desperation of people to escape from their humdrum existence."

As Nick, the on-the-make newcomer to a rural backwater, Nesbitt has to portray a plausibly likeable rogue. "I think Nick is a marriage of many different things. However much destruction he brings to the people in that small village, he does at least have

the ability to bring colour into Alison's life and give her a taste of something rather amazing and optimistic," he argues.

"They had the feeling that they were being loved for a while, but of course he then destroyed them by conning them all. Here is a man who is extremely charming but who makes choices to con people."

"He drives into this picturesque little village in a stolen car that runs out of petrol and is immediately confronted by John who is arrogant and aggressive and small-minded. That's exactly the sort of thing that riles Nick," Nesbitt adds.

"I think he just can't resist being a devil – it's just in him. Yet his natural instinct is to be funny and bright and he makes a difference. Playing him was fantastic because he's a total, great bastard who just moves from one thing to the next."

But Nesbitt had to believe that there was an explanation somewhere deep inside. "Maybe he came from a damaged home, a home where he wasn't loved," he muses. "That helps to define the character. He is a loveable but very dangerous person, a real loner, a shark who lives on his wits – and even though he may really have enjoyed being with Alison, he'll always say goodbye."

Nesbitt has now finally said goodbye to the long-running character of Adam in

*Cold Feet*, a role which endeared him to the nation. Since then he has proved he can do far more on screen than be funny and charming.

He played four different personas in *Murphy's Law* and made a huge impact as civil rights campaigner Ivan Cooper in *Bloody Sunday*. He has just completed *Wall of Silence* about the so-called 'estate of fear' in south London where Stuart Robe's son Jamie was beaten to death by a gang of thugs.

"It has meant working back-to-back and *Wall of Silence* was a grim, hard shoot, but very worthwhile," he says. "When you play real people you are handling something precious and fragile and you have to not only serve the story but serve the people involved."

Now Nesbitt is working with *Trainspotting* director Danny Boyle on a new film, *Millions*. "It is totally different again," he says happily, "a kind of comedy, moral fairytale. But that's what I like – it's as though every project is a new start."

With his reputation growing with every new role, Nesbitt has already had interest from across the Atlantic. "*Bloody Sunday* certainly had a big impact in the States," he agrees. "But I've no interest in uprooting the family to move there. I couldn't sit beside a pool for six months, waiting to get

a part in a film with an accent I can't do and a subject I'm not interested in – and I don't want to play a baddie for the sake of it.

"Having said that," he adds hastily, "if someone called me and said 'Come over and do a film in America', I'd love to – but there's so much to be done here and I'm very happy here."





## interview

# Billie Piper plays Alison in *The Miller's Tale*

**Wannabe singers in some of London's mushrooming karaoke pubs did a double-take when they spotted former pop sensation Billie Piper in their midst.**

The chart-topper was not bent on a singing session, she was researching for her role in *The Miller's Tale* as Alison, the talented young wife of a pub landlord whose twin obsessions are karaoke – and her.

"I used to sing karaoke all the time, including *La Bamba* with my dad, which was always hysterical," she laughs. "But I'd not done it for ages, so I dragged my friends round all these pubs to get a feel of what it's like."

Fans of Piper's – who had hits including *Because We Want To* and *Day and Night* – may be in for a shock when they see her as Alison, giving her all at the karaoke machine. Thanks to special training from *Fame Academy's* Carrie Grant, her voice has changed.

"I didn't want to go on screen and do something that everybody already knew about," explains the 20 year old. "It would have been hard to get into character if I was singing with a voice that I'd sung with for ever.

"That's why I got in touch with Carrie. She is an amazing woman, so special, and working with her was a wonderful experience; she can sing with so many different voices. She helped me change my technique, showing me different ways of placing my voice in my throat or my stomach.

"I wanted Alison to have a voice that belonged to her and nobody else."

Making her acting debut is important for Piper. "What people don't really know is that I started out acting," she points out. "It's a really big deal to me.

"I left home in Swindon to come to Sylvia Young's theatre school when I was 12 because I'd applied for a scholarship – I needed to act 24/7, all week, just throw myself into it. At home, just one class a week wasn't really doing it for me.

"Then the pop career came along and although at the time I realised it would

take away from the acting, I felt it could also open a lot of doors for me, which I think it has."

But it is open windows, rather than doors, that most people know from Chaucer's original *Miller's Tale* and writer Peter Bowker reinvents the famous scene where Alison tricks a young suitor into kissing her bare behind.

"I was quite daunted by that scene," Piper admits. "But John McKay, the director, drew a storyboard of how the whole scene would be shot and how it would look. He really wanted to make me feel at ease. So you don't see my arse full on," she laughs. "It's poor Kenny Doughty who plays Danny who got the whole shebang – but that won't be seen!"

Piper also has to perform steamy sex scenes with *Bloody Sunday* star Jimmy Nesbitt. "As a viewer you always want to ask 'Was it weird, did they get turned on, did the crew get turned on, what does your boyfriend feel about it?'" she admits with a grin.

"But when you're doing it, you've got these pieces of tape round your breasts and the ugliest tanned thong on and all the lighting and sound. It's just not sexy – which makes it easy to play sexy, and just go for it in the mind-set of the character. I can imagine that in those situations, if you don't suspend reality, it can really mess with your head, because it's not real," Piper explains.

Which is why Piper is relieved that her husband is *au fait* with the entertainment business. "My husband understands that it's my job," she says simply. "That's the good thing about being married to somebody who understands the technicalities.

"Having been married for two years I'm more domesticated now and I love it," Piper insists. "I know it sounds a bit of a cliché, but when you come home and just do some jobs around the house it does just bring you back to earth because after filming you're so hyper.

"You have to come back down, otherwise you don't sleep, you grind your teeth and just burn yourself out!"

Piper douses speculation that she is about to return to her pop career, insisting that the whirl of early-morning plane journeys and endless interviews is one she is glad to have turned her back on.

"It was just too fast-paced," she says. "That's one of the reasons I decided to have a break. If I'd carried on I would have missed out on so much real life and I'm so happy with acting. It gives me the time and freedom I need in life. When I finish a day's work I can still get some time at home to make some dinner, watch a bit of TV, have a cup of tea in bed.

"I love cooking – I hated it before I met my husband, he taught me all I know about

the kitchen. I love making pasta sauces, stews and baking – although I'm still working on that!

"I love hanging out with our dogs, just being part of proper things and it's these things that help me to act because, if you can't observe real-life situations, then how can you go out there and try and become somebody else?"





## interview

# Dennis Waterman plays John in *The Miller's Tale*

**It's a tough life being an actor – ask Dennis Waterman. The poor man suffered for his art while taking on the role of John, the cuckolded landlord in *The Miller's Tale*.**

"Filming was round the corner from me, which was very handy. I don't have it written into my contract – but I'd like to!" he laughs. "That's very unusual, more often it's hours away.

"But the upsetting thing was we had to film in a pub," he adds ruefully. "Not only that, but the Manchester United European Cup Final happened to be on which annoyed Jimmy Nesbitt no end – 'cos they lost! So it all added up to a good shoot."

That sweet revenge may have made up for the humiliations karaoke king John suffers at the hands of Nesbitt's naughty Nick. With a beautiful young bride, Alison – played by Billie Piper – the hapless landlord is consumed with jealousy and fearful of rivals for his wife's charms.

But when silver-tongued Nick arrives on the scene, John's jealousy is tamed by greed. Posing as a pop guru, Nick insists that Alison's singing could be the key to

fame and fortune – meanwhile the canny conman is busy seducing the naively ambitious chanteuse!

"I knew *The Canterbury Tales* by reputation, but like most people in Britain I hadn't read them," Waterman admits. "But strangely enough, Nicholas Le Prevost, who I was working with on *My Fair Lady*, is a big fan.

"One evening we had a long conversation about them and he nearly talked me into going out and buying the book there and then. When this came up, I did know that *The Miller's Tale* was the most bawdy one! But even if this had been under another name I would still have done it because I just loved the script."

Waterman had no problem taking on the role of a middle-aged dupe. "It's kind of fun now and then to play an absolute idiot," he grins. "To show how stupid he is, his whole life has been dedicated to karaoke

because, as a kid, he'd once heard his father sing the perfect Shirley Bassey!

"But then, maybe he's not a total idiot – the man's a fool, but he is to be pitied rather than laughed at. Of course they all do laugh at him though – it's unfair the way he's treated."

One regret he has is that John is never given the chance to perform. "I'm a wonderful karaokeist," insists Waterman, who is still proud of having had a Top Ten hit with *I Could Be So Good For You*.

"I'm the only one who doesn't bleed! sing in it – I should have had a go."

Waterman is sanguine about taking on older roles after achieving fame as a child actor in the original television series of *Just William* and going on to star in the huge hits *The Sweeney*, *Minder* and *Circles of Deceit*.

"I just sailed through the early part of my career, it was very easy," says the 55 year old candidly. "But there is a big transition from being the young *Minder* on the television – well, comparatively young – a Jack the Lad, to being able to progress to the fathers and the older characters.

"You don't ever think that's going to come and then suddenly it's 'Bloody hell – I'm 50, I can't keep chasing round bashing people up and pulling birds.' But you just

have to trust that people realise you have grown into that age and then cast you as a slightly different character."

Waterman has also had a hugely successful stage career, receiving plaudits for his role as work-shy Alfred Doolittle in the National Theatre production of *My Fair Lady*. But it's not a description that could ever apply to this in-demand actor.

"I'm not a workaholic but I only turn stuff down if I don't want to do it, not because I feel I need time off. If a job looks like it's going to be good and exciting I want to do it."

He was recently seen playing ex-detective Gerry Standing in BBC One's *New Tricks* during the day and going on stage at night. "You're allowed holidays in the theatre now, which is nothing to do with kindly producers, it's an EU law, otherwise they'd never let you out of the building!" he explains with a wry grin.

"So, for the last week of filming, I arranged to have a week off from *My Fair Lady* in case we got behind in shooting. Until then I hadn't had a great problem while I was doing both shows, but when I had the week off I was absolutely knackered!"

This summer, though, Waterman is taking some time out – and pursuing his greatest passion. "I'm playing golf every day," he says contentedly. "The trouble is, despite playing

it an awful lot I have proved one thing – it doesn't necessarily make you any better!"

Waterman's acting talents run in the family: daughter Hannah plays Laura in *EastEnders* and Julia is a drama student. "She's doing a postgraduate course, a Master of Arts in Classical Theatre which she'll finish at the end of this year, but she'll become an actress," he says proudly.

"Hannah showed no great interest until she was about 15. There was a very good drama teacher at her school, then she suddenly got interested.

"But they were both intelligent enough not to think that just because their dad has been successful that they would just slip into success themselves – it is much harder for ladies!"

