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INTRODUCTION

“
He was not of an age but for all time!”

A poet, Ben Jonson, wrote these words about a fellow poet who had recently died. What do the words mean? They mean that the poet will be remembered forever. They mean that he wrote of matters that will be meaningful and beautifully expressed for all people, in every time and place in the future.

Who is this timeless writer? He is William Shakespeare, the greatest poet and playwright who ever lived. He wrote his plays in England four centuries ago—that’s four hundred years—and yet today in the United States, more theaters put on plays by Shakespeare than by any other playwright.

Although Shakespeare wrote in English—some of the most beautiful and powerful English words you will ever hear or speak—his plays are loved around the world, even in translation. The stories that Shakespeare tells, the characters he created, and his magnificent way with words capture the imaginations of people whose language
is not English. His plays have been translated into many other languages—Spanish, Japanese, Russian, and many more. Even in those other languages his way with words shines through.

Shakespeare wrote at least thirty-seven plays. He sometimes acted in them himself. In his lifetime, Shakespeare’s plays were enjoyed by people from all walks of life—by butchers and blacksmiths and shopkeepers, as well as by scholars and dukes and even Queen Elizabeth herself.

Keep in mind that Shakespeare wrote plays in handwriting, not in printed books. Indeed, if it weren’t for the efforts of his friends and fellow actors, who collected the handwritten scripts of Shakespeare’s plays after his death, we might not have them now.

Shakespeare didn’t picture people sitting around and reading his plays in a book. He wrote them to be seen and heard. They come to life when you see and hear them (or perform them), or when they are acted out in a theater, or on a movie screen, or in a school classroom or auditorium.

This book will introduce you to one of
Shakespeare’s best-loved and funniest comedies, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. You may find that some of Shakespeare’s language seems strange at first. This is not surprising: after all, the English language has changed a lot over the past four hundred years. This book provides notes to help you understand some words that may be unfamiliar or no longer in use. But it doesn’t take long to get comfortable hearing or speaking Shakespeare’s words. When the actor on the stage asks, “What hast thou done?” it is clear that he means, “What have you done?” On the stage, when spoken and acted, the language may sometimes sound old-fashioned, but its power and poetry will pull you into the story coming to life before your eyes.

There is a long tradition of introducing young people to Shakespeare by retelling his plays as stories. In the early 1800s, Charles and Mary Lamb wrote a popular book called *Tales from Shakespeare*, which told many of the best-loved plays as stories for children. In this tradition, the book you are now reading begins by presenting *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in the form of a short story.
We then follow the story with a script of the play, a shortened version that can be performed in about an hour. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* will come to life when you gather with classmates, friends, or family members to read the script aloud, or, even better, to act it out. It doesn’t have to be fancy. You don’t need gorgeous costumes or high-tech special effects. Just heed the advice of Hamlet, one of Shakespeare’s greatest characters, who says that you only need to “speak the speech” naturally, letting the words help you express the emotions. Whether you are watching *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or performing in it, it will be fun!

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