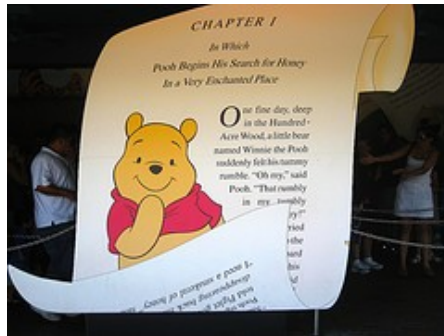


## A.A. Milne



The period of the “turn of the century”, the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>- was a period of considerable development in children’s literature.

Alan Alexander Milne is one of the most famous turn-of-the century names. Although he was a prolific writer in different genres –humorous essays in *Punch*, plays, and one detective novel– he is remembered mostly for his children’s stories and poems, of which he wrote four: two linked sets of stories, his best-selling *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926) and *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928), and two collections of poetry, *When We Were Very Young* (1924) and *Now We are Six* (1927). After his books for children were published, his work for adults was ignored, which distressed him greatly. *The House at Pooh Corner* was Milne’s last children’s book, although he adapted Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* as a play for children, *Toad of Toad Hall* in 1929.

Milne’s books for children developed from his role as a father of his son Christopher Robin, born in 1920, and from Christopher’s devotion to his teddy bear. The characters of Pooh and his companions (except for Owl and Rabbit, which were of Milne’s own invention) developed from Christopher’s stuffed nursery toys and he wrote the Pooh stories for him. The narrator in each story is Milne himself, and the story is not directed at the reader but at Christopher Robin, with whom the young reader has to identify. The story “In which Eeyore has a birthday and gets two presents” from *Winnie-the-Pooh* is about Eeyore the donkey. Winnie is the main character and Christopher Robin appears at the end. It is not accidental, therefore, that he should stop writing children’s literature when his son grew up.

Christopher Robin is a small boy playing in an imaginary world with his stuffed animals. The stories make this world real and preserve his child’s freedom to play but, at the same time, they transform him into a parent-figure who functions as the Forest’s benevolent and supreme authority. He is always at hand in a crisis –“ ‘It’s Christopher Robin!’ ” said Piglet. ‘He’ll know what to do’ ” and boosts Pooh’s self-esteem.

The uniqueness and appeal of the Pooh books is due to Milne’s skilful characterization. Each animal is a distinct individual with his own personality, speech patterns and appearance. Each is also an easily recognizable human type. The animals are distinguished by their personalities rather than their animal characteristics.

Even though the animals have human characteristics, their life in the Forest is free from duties such as working, schooling or money. Most of their activities are inseparable from play, the all-absorbing play of the young child. The stories are not didactic in an obvious way, but they do convey a moral perspective. For Christopher Robin, who must inevitably enter the outside world, the Forest is a refuge and escape from school. One of the stories of *The House of Pooh Corner* includes a list of what Christopher is learning in school, which gives a satirical view of education. The Pooh books ended when Christopher Robin became a full-time schoolboy, leaving the Forest behind, although as Milne says in the introduction to his last book, “the Forest will always be there .... and anybody who is Friendly with Bears can find it”.

The written word holds a special fascination in the Forest. Owl and Rabbit, who can write, consider themselves above the other animals. Pooh’s spelling is “wobbly”. Much of the humour in the Pooh books arises from Milne’s ingenious play with language, the stories are filled with puns, word play and misunderstandings.

The Pooh stories were illustrated by E.H. Shephard. The pictures are simple in technique, but they capture the essence of each character. They are inseparable from the text, but not as essential as in a picture book.

After Milne's death, the rights to the Pooh characters were sold by his widow, Daphne, to the Walt Disney Company, which has made a number of Pooh cartoon movies, as well as a large amount of Pooh-related merchandise. It is possible to buy several Pooh books, with different titles, but they are only tangentially related to Milne’s compositions. Milne was the product of a much more witty, subtle, elegant and graceful time and culture. He was also much less didactic than Disney.

### **Bibliography and works consulted**

Wilson, Anita. “Milne’s Pooh Books: the Benevolent Forest”. *Touschstones* vol. 1. 163-172.

Photograph: “Entrance to the Winnie the Pooh Ride in Fantasy Land”. (c) Still Burning, 2007. In flicker with cc licence.