

Alan Alexander Milne – Winnie The Pooh

1. Milne is undoubtedly best known for his children's books "Winnie-the-Pooh" and "The House at Pooh Corner". Remarkably, though, he also was a gifted author of mystery novels and plays.

Alan Alexander Milne (1882 – 1956) started his writing career with the satire magazine *Punch*, writing humorous essays on subjects as golf, cricket or parties. James M. Berrie, the author of *Peter Pan*, served as a mentor for Milne, persuading him to publish the essays in a volume. In 1905, his first novel was published.

His dramatic work had its origins during his service in World War 1, where he was stationed both in Britain and France. Working as a signal officer, he found a way to spend his spare time in writing plays. His first play, *Wurzel-Flummery*, could almost serve as some "template" for the things to come, containing a line about "whimsical comedies". The plays Milne wrote were mostly of that kind – quite humorous, light-hearted, but easily forgotten.

One of the few exceptions from this "rule" was his biggest stage success, *Mr. Pim Passes By*. Dealing with a story that would be categorised as a "screwball comedy" today, it became highly attractive to large audiences. All in all, the play ran for 246 performances in London. His following dramas, however, could not reach the same level, either on paper or on stage. The only play to secure a similar success was *The Fourth Wall*, a detective play which ran 225 times in New York.

Moreover, Milne wrote two mystery novels: in 1922, he published *The Red House Mystery*, a Sherlock Holmes-like story which captivated many readers and was highly acclaimed by critics. His other work, *Four Days' Wonder* (1933), although made into a film in 1936, did not get such a popular reception.

However, Milne became a worldwide known author of children's books. His first book of poetry for children was published in 1924, four years after his only child Christopher Robin had been born. (Milne himself was 42 at that time) Two years later, Winnie-the-Pooh came out and took the world by storm. The good-natured stories about a small boy and his talking stuffed animals do not pretend or claim to educate their listeners and readers but play rather a highly imaginative game with reality and fiction.

The following volume, *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928) describes a slightly different world than Winnie-the-Pooh, which depends on the rather simple reason that Christopher Robin has grown another two years and therefore sees the world in a different way.

Principally, the world depicted in the books is an utopian one even though it has a "real" representation in a 500-acre wood in Essex. The novels describe the world from the perspective of a child (i.e. Christopher Robin), but the "children" are represented by Pooh, Piglet, Tigger and Roo. These four different characters (as diverse as children themselves may be) meet the irrational, conflict-laden world of the grown-ups, represented by Owl, Rabbit and Eeyore. Yet the conflicts between these world are of only minor nature. In the end, a solution to these problems is provided (mostly by Pooh or Christopher Robin, but not neglecting the other characters) and the small world returns to its normal status.

2. The motivation to write "Winnie-the-Pooh" and its successors obviously originated from Milne's experiences during World War 1.

A. A. Milne was a pacifist, polemizing publicly against the horrors of war. During his time at the front, though, Milne experienced many of these horrors, leaving him a lifelong nostalgia for the idyllic fantasies of childhood and confirming his pacifist beliefs. In a letter to his brother, he wrote that if he survived all these terrifying incidents, he wanted to reinvent love. "Those who want to visit my wife and me have to give me the left hand because I'll be holding hands with the right." Therefore "Winnie-the-Pooh" can easily be recognized as a post-war book, just as Peter Pan is a pre-war book.

3. The stories starring Milne's only child, Christopher Robin, and his soft toy animals became the basis for many non-fictional books dealing with topics as diverse as philosophy, economics and mythology.

The "Pooh" books are rather ambivalent as they try to aim at both adults and children. Milne, though, succeeds very well in addressing both target groups, using irony and a somewhat biting tone. This gets especially visible in the Expedition to the North Pole, ending with a teddy bear sticking a twig in the ground – a clear parody on military expeditions.

Milne's books reflect his own happy childhood and life. Unlike Grahame (Wind in the Willows) or Barrie (Peter Pan), who were lonely and frustrated when writing their legendary novels, Milne was successful, satisfied, happily married. He did not need to reinvent himself in a child setting as he already had grown up as a happy boy.

The stories are primarily children's books; they offer adults only the nostalgia of a child's-eye view. The dramas in the books are entirely childish, e.g. eating up supper or washing hands before tea. Therefore Christopher Robin can be described as an omnipotent deus ex machina who makes all come right. There is no threat to his safe playground of stuffed toys and balloons, twigs and spoonfuls of medicine. The scenery is congenially illustrated by E. H. Shepherd, thus keeping up the friendly spirit of the stories. However, where Lewis Carroll (Alice in Wonderland) invented a wild wonderland, Milne painted a realistic picture of children as they are, and brings nonsense into their everyday lives.

Yet it seems that fond readers of the stories seem to see much more depth than it was intended by Milne.

John Tyerman Williams, Doctor of Philosophy, did in-depth research on Pooh and his friends and set the 100 Acre Wood into context with the great mysteries and philosophies of the world. In "Pooh and the Philosophers", he creates a myth about Pooh and his friends, claiming that the complete history of Western philosophy, from the ancient Greeks till Freud and his contemporaries, has only been a prelude to Winnie-the-Pooh. Quoting sources from both the ancient and the Milnean, Williams proves that the Pooh stories may inherit the collected wisdom of 2 millennia in philosophy, with Pooh being the greatest philosopher of them all. He even teaches his peers carefully the "art of philosophy" and finds in them some grateful "pupils".

In "Pooh and the Ancient Mysteries", Williams goes a step further, explaining that the Bear with Very Little Brain is indeed a Supreme Magus, a master of the world's mysteries. He draws a comprehensive picture, covering e.g. astrology, druidism and even Tarot.

Benjamin Hoff aims at a similar goal as Williams does, but has a different perspective – the Chinese Tao. Similar to Williams, he analyses the Pooh stories with the purpose of clarifying that Lao-tse had this bear in mind when he put up his philosophy.

Economy: hint to Allen's books about management and problem solving/Mordden's ironic book about "fitness"

4. "Winnie-the-Pooh" has not only become one of the world's most famous children's books but also an industry in itself – unfortunately not for the benefit of everybody.

After four volumes and about 70.000 words (as Milne put it, the number of words in the average-length novel), he decided that this was farewell to children's stories, but you could say that it already was too late, especially for his son. Christopher Robin became one of the most famous children in the world, but could not cope with the pressure of this fame. The result was the break-up of the relationship between father and son. In his own autobiography, Christopher Milne wrote that his father had left him with nothing but the empty fame of being his son. Among other incidents, this resulted in a hostile article just before Milne's death in 1956. Ironically, the stories about an utopian, completely peaceful world were capable of destroying the peace in the family it originated from. All in all, the "Pooh" books represent the central problem of children's literature, namely the conflict between the adult writer and the child as a reader.

In 1960 Disney acquired the a licence to sell Winnie-the-Pooh products and produce own stories. Since then six full-length movies, two TV-films and 17 (!) video films have been produced. Unfortunately, no figures are available, but in combination with merchandise sales, the Pooh turnover is a multi-million-dollar business.