

Look What They've Done to Your Bear, Milne



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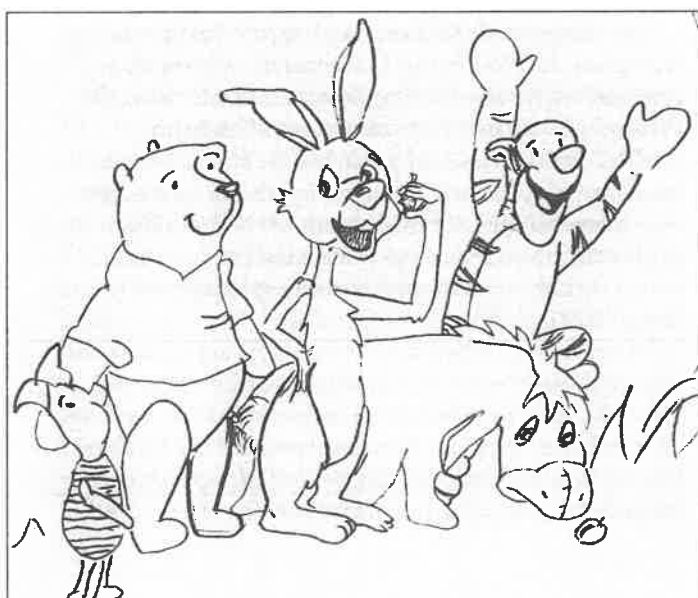
Introduction

In 1926, when A.A. Milne first published a whimsical volume of stories about a bear named Winnie the Pooh and his friends Christopher Robin, Owl, Rabbit, Kanga, Roo, Eeyore, Tigger and Piglet, he could not have foreseen the extent to which Winnie the Pooh would one day be transformed. The modern day Pooh bears (pardon the pun) little resemblance to the original 'silly old bear' (Milne 1926).

In this article I explore this transformation through the comparison of the original *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne 1926) and *The House at Pooh Corner* (Milne 1928) books written by A.A. Milne and illustrated by E.H. Shepard, with the animations released by The Walt Disney Company from 1966 to the present day, with a particular focus on the animations created before 1984.

The Winnie the Pooh books

Alan Alexander Milne (1882–1956), a political humorist and playwright, published four books based on his son Christopher Robin's childhood. The first, *When We Were Very Young*, was published in 1924, closely followed by *Winnie the Pooh* in 1926, *Now We Are Six* in 1927, and *The House at Pooh Corner* in 1928. These books brought Milne great fame and eventually overshadowed his other work. The stories of *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne 1926) were inspired by Christopher Robin and his stuffed toys.



Winnie the Pooh was reportedly named after a Canadian Black Bear named Winnie, from Winnipeg in Canada, who resided in the London Zoo. Christopher Robin had taken a shine to Winnie the bear on one of his visits.

It is interesting to note that, according to A.R. Melrose in his book *Beyond the World of Pooh* (1998), A.A. Milne spent most of the latter days of his life regretting that the majority of his novels, plays and essays had been forgotten. Whilst Winnie the Pooh had made him rich and famous, this did not bring him satisfaction. His illustrator, E.H. Shepard, who was a leading political cartoonist for *Punch Magazine* (1921–1953), felt the same. He often said that the biggest regret in his life was agreeing to illustrate Winnie the Pooh for Milne, as it resulted in the bulk of his work, even during his lifetime, being completely overshadowed.

In 1958, four years after Milne's death, his widow Dorothy (Daphne) approved the sale of motion picture and television rights to the National Broadcasting Corporation who, after a less than satisfactory pilot, abandoned the project. When the theatrical rights reverted back to the Milne family estate in 1960, Walt Disney took them over and entered into an agreement with the Milne Estate in 1961 (Finch, 2000).

The first Disney Pooh Bear movie

In 1966, ten years after Milne's death, the Walt Disney Company released the animated featurette, *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree*. This was the only animated release of *Winnie the Pooh* during Walt Disney's lifetime. He died in 1967.

The British reaction to the animation was one of outrage; the use of American accents, the introduction of a 'gopher', not to mention the omission of Piglet, were considered 'just not Pooh'. Following a campaign by the British Film critic, Felix Barker, Disney consented to re-dubbing Christopher Robin's voice with a British accent, and Piglet appeared in the next Disney animation, *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day*. Sheppard, the illustrator of the books, reportedly called the first animation 'a complete travesty'; however, the American viewing public, who had little or no exposure at all to the original books of A.A. Milne, responded favourably.

Who was Christopher Robin?

In order to understand the connection the British (and, indeed, anyone who has read and fallen in love with the books) felt with *Winnie the Pooh*, it is important to include some background information on the real boy behind the character of Christopher Robin.

Christopher Robin Milne, the son of A.A. Milne and the boy behind the character of Christopher Robin in both of A.A. Milne's *Pooh Bear* books, was born in 1920 and passed away in 1996. When he was born, his parents, Alan Alexander Milne and Daphne de Selincourt, wanted to name him Billy but thought the name too informal, so he was named Christopher Robin Milne. His father favoured double-barrelled names because they 'come very trippingly off the tongue' (Melrose 1998). The boy who was named Christopher Robin, however, was called Billy from an early age; in fact, within his family, he was known as Billy Moon, Moon being an early attempt by Christopher to say his surname, Milne.

According to his first volume of memoirs, *The Enchanted Places* (Milne 1974), Christopher Robin Milne suffered 'an embarrassment of names' throughout the first 30 years of his life and spent until well into his 60s trying to escape from Christopher Robin. This was due to the fact that the fictitious character and the real boy shared the same toys, lived in a similar landscape and experienced the same adventures. 'It is difficult to be sure which came first. Did I do something, and did my father then write a story around it? Or was it the other way about, and did the story come first?' (Milne 1974). When Christopher Robin Milne 'grew up' he wrote a second memoir, *The Path Through the Trees* (Milne 1980), which tells about his eventual 'escape' from Christopher Robin.

The transformation of A.A. Milne's Pooh Bear into Disney's Pooh Bear

The Walt Disney Company took liberties with all of Milne's work. However, the movies and featurettes that most closely resemble the original works of A.A. Milne and E.H. Shepard are the animated works produced prior to 1984.

When I first viewed *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (Disney 1977), I was prepared not to enjoy it. However, I *did* enjoy the experience because the stories are closely aligned to the originals. The use of the '100 Aker Wood' (Milne 1926) map at the beginning and the way the stories are blended by

the narrator, Sebastian Cabot, so as to give the impression of reading a book, even including a background of pages of the book, is a surprisingly sensitive interpretation of A.A. Milne's work.

However, the omission of the little songs and poems that frequent Milne's stories was disappointing because, to me, they are a huge part of the appeal of the stories.

'It is difficult to be sure which came first. Did I do something, and did my father then write a story around it? Or was it the other way about, and did the story come first?'
(Christopher Robin Milne 1974)

A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne 1926) is a poet; his days are spent making up songs and poems. In fact, the stories are built around Pooh's songs.

As a substitute, the soundtrack to the Walt Disney animation is very much typical of Disney animations of the time, quite syrupy but also fairly catchy. One finds oneself humming along to the songs long after they have finished. The songs were written by Sherman and Sherman and they have captured the whimsy of A.A. Milne's poems, with songs like 'Rumbly in My Tummy' and '(I'm Just) a Little Black Rain Cloud' almost being something A.A. Milne could have written. Yet one has to wonder why the original songs and poems were not used.

The humour that occurs throughout the movies is distinctly Disney; the way Rabbit uses Pooh's legs to decorate his house when Pooh is stuck in his burrow is exaggerated and takes away from the original whimsy of the text.

In the first featurette, *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* (Disney 1966), Walt Disney uses a background very similar to E.H. Shepard's beautifully etched illustrations; however, the characters are unmistakably Disney. According to Christopher Robin Finch, the author of *Winnie the Pooh: A Celebration of the Silly Old Bear* (2000), Walt Disney insisted that the artist adhere as closely as possible to E.H. Shepard's original drawings. Yet, at the same time, they had to be unmistakably Disney.

The assignment of directing the first featurette was given to Wolfgang Reitherman, who was responsible for the Disney character of Monstro the Whale in *Pinocchio*. Reitherman was 'far from thrilled' with *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* as an assignment (Finch 2000), and actually looked on it as something of a punishment, for 'What other explanation was there for Walt handing him this weird British story in which nothing happened?' (Finch 2000, p. 38).

Walt Disney, who had just had a financial and critical disaster with the animation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, was determined not to let *Winnie the Pooh* go the same way. It may be that Disney handed the assignment to Reitherman because he would be open to 'Americanising' the

characters. Considering this, the characters are actually quite sensitively portrayed.

The very beginning of *Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree* starts with a real child's bedroom that is furnished in a style that could be British, but there is something 'all-American' about its appearance. The toys displayed, such as the locomotive railroad have a distinctive American appearance.

When one compares the drawings, however, to the drawings or animations of 2006, the difference is obvious; the 2006 characters are slick and rounded – a feature of the animation techniques employed today. Any references to the books or the original illustrations are completely gone and the characters have taken on a life of their own.

Some of the characters from the original *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne 1926), such as Roo, have been clothed for the animations, and Pooh bear, who quite often appears unclothed in the books, is constantly dressed, or semi-clothed either in a red t-shirt or his night gown. It is not clear why Disney saw fit to dress Roo and Pooh in this way or why Piglet, who always wore the same striped green suit, is dressed in hot pink, but one can only assume that Disney wanted them to appear to have more 'human' qualities (anthropomorphism) or, in the case of Piglet, more 'pig like' qualities.

The character, Gopher, was first introduced in the first featurette. He is a distinctly mid-western character with a speech impediment, and runs around handing out his card to everyone 'because I am not in the book, you know' (Disney, 1966). For those who hadn't read the books, it meant something entirely different; it referred to his phone number not being in the book. This acknowledgement by Disney is quite clever and I think pays homage to the works of A.A. Milne, but at the same time gives the project the definite stamp of Disney. According to the director, Reitherman, Walt Disney introduced the character of Gopher because he wanted to give the American audience an American character; something they could identify with.

We are also introduced to Eeyore and Owl in the first featurette; Eeyore is shown to be gloomy and depressed and always losing his tail, whilst in the book, we don't actually meet him until chapter four, 'in which Eeyore loses a tail and Pooh finds one'. Owl, who is full of bluster, appears and tries to solve the problem of Pooh Bear being stuck in Rabbit's burrow, whilst in the book, it is Christopher Robin.

The voice of Sterling Holloway as Winnie the Pooh in *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (Disney 1977) was a very wise choice on Disney's part. Sterling Holloway does have an American accent, but it is not brashly so. Even though Pooh is

described as having a 'growly' voice in the books, Sterling Holloway created quite an appealing vocal characterisation of Pooh bear, which managed to capture some of the whimsy of A.A. Milne's stories.

Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day (Disney 1968) is based on chapter nine of *Winnie the Pooh* (Milne 1926) 'in which Piglet is entirely surrounded by water', and chapter eight of *The House at Pooh Corner* (Milne 1928) 'in which Piglet does a very grand thing'. Disney has taken greater liberties with these two chapters than with the previous release; the two chapters have been combined in such a way that the meaning has been lost. There is even an attempt by Disney to include some 'Poohisms' with the use of the word 'Windsday' (Disney 1968). Wednesday is 'Windsday' because it is so blustery outside and Pooh sets out to wish everyone 'a happy Windsday', whereas in the book Pooh and Piglet actually set out to 'wish everybody a Very Happy Thursday' (Milne 1928), and it's not a blustery day but a 'very Blusterous day' (Milne 1928). There is a change in the drawing style; the characters have become a little more rounded and the background has become a little less sympathetic to E.H. Shepard's illustrations. Christopher Robin's voice for the first time is supplied by the authentically British John Walmsley, whereas in the previous featurette the accent was British-sounding, but still distinctly American.

Throughout the entire series of Walt Disney animations, the American style of humour is very obvious, and there is a sense that Disney 'just doesn't get it' when it comes to the books. The humorous sequences are taken that one step further than they need to be. I have watched *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (Disney 1977) a number of times and, after watching it for the fourth time, I have decided that the long 'humorous' sequences and the syrupy soundtrack are the source of my irritation.

The Disney characters

Tigger, as a Disney character, is larger than life and a caricature of his story book self. He has developed a coil tail and his bouncing reaches new proportions. His catch cry of 'TTFN' (ta ta for now) is not heard of in the books. He doesn't appear to be co-habiting, as he does in the books, with Kanga and Roo, and I feel he has lost his cuddly appeal. Christopher Finch (2000) claims that 'Disney's Tigger must be judged an unqualified triumph – arguably more convincing on screen than in the Milne books,' but one is compelled to ask the question, why does he need to be more convincing than what he is in the books? As far as I am concerned, within the context of the books, he is as



depressed and less philosophical than he should be, and in the Disney movies he is made faintly ridiculous through having a pink ribbon tied to his tail.

Kanga and Roo have been 'Disneyfied' and have lost some of their quaintness. Roo has become an 'all-American' kid, precocious and brash.

Owl has taken on a distinctly Disney appearance and his character is rather more pompous and bossy than I feel he should be. Disney has made his character more present in each situation, whereas in the books he is usually visited by the other characters when they require an answer to a problem.

Christopher Robin is probably the least changed character in the move from book to screen. His appearance has remained much the same, apart from his clothing, which has become less British in appearance. Apparently, there was some initial discussion by the Walt Disney Company about his 'boyishness' or lack thereof. The Disney team wanted to cut his hair, but decided that as it was 1966 and the likes of The Beatles were sporting the same haircuts, then his hair would remain (Finch 2000).

convincing as he needs to be!

Rabbit has maintained his bossy, busy-body nature, but his appearance is totally Disney; he looks as though he could have hopped out of any Disney animation, with his huge eyes, elongated features and human-like hands. The Rabbit of E.H. Shepard is more naturalistic and bears more resemblance to a Beatrix Potter Rabbit than anything. Walt Disney made Rabbit bossier and fussier than A.A. Milne's Rabbit; he is also a keen gardener in the animations, but nowhere in the books is it mentioned that he likes to grow vegetables.

I think the most beautiful relationship in A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* stories is the relationship between Pooh and Piglet; they are kindred spirits. Pooh is big and brave and not very intelligent and Piglet is small and timid and considers himself to be smarter than Pooh, when really he hangs on Pooh's every word. They conjure up images of George and Lennie in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck 1938), and the illustrations where Pooh and Piglet are pictured sitting or walking side by side are so utterly moving. To me, the Disney animations have failed to capture fully the relationship between Pooh and Piglet.

Eeyore, the depressed donkey who ponders the meaning of life in the A.A. Milne stories, has maintained most of his character in the transfer from book to screen, although he is probably more

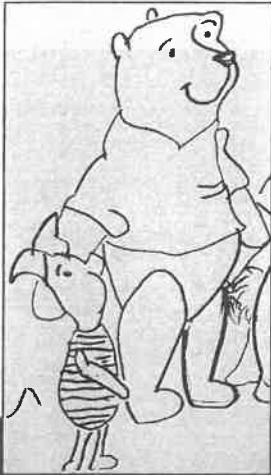
Final thoughts

While researching *Winnie the Pooh*, I have found that it is a subject that evokes strong emotional responses. I have met people who, like me, loved the books as a child and have mixed emotions about the Walt Disney productions. I have met people who abhor what Walt Disney has done to Pooh, and I have also spoken to people who only know the Walt Disney Pooh and love him. I have found the ubiquitous Disney Winnie the Pooh is absolutely everywhere; t-shirts, books, videos, toy shops, supermarkets, fast food chains, tissue boxes, mobile telephone covers, beach towels, the list goes on and on.

What I have decided for myself, however, is that no matter what the Walt Disney Corporation did to, or continues to do to the 'bear of little brain' (Milne 1926), nothing can ever change what A.A. Milne and E.H. Shepard have immortalised in the classic stories of the 1920s, and that is the wonderful thing about literature and books as a medium. If they are classics, as A.A. Milne's books are, they will rise above the likes of the Walt Disney Company and, in the words of A.A. Milne (1928), 'Wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place on the top of the forest, a little boy and his bear will always be playing.'

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