

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject. This Thursday the 18<sup>th</sup> January is National *Winnie the Pooh* day.

Most people probably associate Winnie the Pooh with the classic Disney movie, and the prolific merchandising of soft toys and baby gifts based on the odd group of characters who populate the stories, namely Pooh, Tigger, Eeyore, Piglet, Kanga, Roo., Owl and Rabbit. Apart from cuddly soft toys, you can also buy a Winnie the Pooh cookbook (quite a lot of honey based recipes I should add), spiritual and philosophical studies of what Pooh can teach us, alongside the inevitable key-rings, pyjamas, pencils backpacks and notebooks.

We might think of merchandising as a recent type of marketing whereas in fact it was first used in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when toys based on characters called Brownies who featured in books by a Canadian writer, Palmer Cox. However, it's very unlikely the creator of Winnie, AA Milne, was thinking of financial gain when he decided to entertain his son with stories about an imaginary group of characters. That came later. In fact, it's the kind of success story that must give business strategists sleepless nights, something so unpredictable and whimsical, so unplanned, that turns out to be a multi-million dollar product.

The now well-known story bears repetition I think (excuse the pun) – Milne was a serious writer – a poet and playwright. He was a complex personality and a deep thinker – he served in both world wars and held strong opinions. His son – Christopher – had a group of stuffed toys and these were the inspiration for the stories. The toys can be seen today in the New York public library. Milne added two other characters – Rabbit and Owl. E.H Shepherd illustrated the books and, in a tradition that includes *Alice in Wonderland* and *A Christmas Carol*, defined the appearance of the characters that predominates to this day. Milne bought the original Pooh at Harrods, by the way. It's a story that strangely combines real-life and fiction, children's fiction at that. Real toys – and a boy - becoming characters in timeless stories in a setting based on a real wood close to the house where the Milnes lived. The fictional Hundred Acre Wood of the Pooh stories derives from Five Hundred Acre Wood in Ashdown Forest in East Sussex, South East England.

The innocence and sweetness of the characters and tales is a great source of enjoyment for readers, but Milne combined this with humour, idiosyncrasy and something close to nonsense texts which allow his stories to make surprisingly deep, emotional links with readers. It's one of those rare creations (like *Alice*, or the *Toy Story* films) that engages adults and children alike.

Curiously, Winnie has recently become a political figure. The Chinese government has blocked images and mentions of him on social media because Internet users have used the character to mock the president as he and Winnie are oddly similar in appearance.

But there's another side to this story which is another timeless tale – relationships and resentments. Milne came to resent the success of the books as they eclipsed his other writing and were what people associated him with. And the adult son became estranged from his father, feeling his childhood had been exploited for fame and gain.

The forest where the stories take place is largely unspoiled and can be visited today. Inevitably, the Winnie the Pooh publicity machine has produced guides and tours and the tantalizing possibility of standing right under Owl's tree, or lingering in Eeyore's Gloomy Place. In his very short and personal essay on the location of the stories Daniel Kahn observes that for many readers, the map of the woods accompanying the books is also a map of childhood. It's an evocative idea, and to quote another English writer with a not dissimilar sensitivity to place as Milne, a map of the 'happy highways where I went, and cannot come again.' A sentiment many of us will recognize.

Well, I hope you have enjoyed this episode of the Upper Street Today podcast. What's your experience or memories of the Pooh stories and characters? Please tell me by leaving a comment.

Thank you.