

ICON OF THE MONTH

It's official: the meek have inherited the earth. A Bear of Very Little Brain is now one of the most valuable, and most fiercely contested, properties in the world.

Winnie-the-Pooh first appeared in 1926, when a whole nation, still traumatised by the Great War, seemed eager to escape to 'an enchanted place' – in reality, Ashdown Forest in Kent – where 'a little boy and his Bear will always be playing'. He was created, said AA Milne, 'for grown-ups, and more particularly for two grown-ups: my wife and myself'.

He is quintessentially English: a humble, unassuming chap, kind-hearted if a trifle egocentric, Inclined to Stoutness (and capitalisation), who wants nothing much beyond a little something to sustain him and the comfort of a few close friends.

In the very limited society of the Hundred Acre Wood, where Owl excels in his ability (sort of) to spell and Rabbit in his managerial flair, and Piglet prides himself on his lineage as the descendant of Trespassers Will, the 'Silly Old Bear' has nothing to boast of but a way with a hum and the fact that he is dearer than anyone to Christopher Robin's heart. It's very apparent that the source of the warmth in these stories is the love of an actual little boy for an actual teddy.

Oddly enough, given his solidity and simplicity, Pooh has proved to be endlessly malleable. Besides being rendered in Latin – his *sententiae* are, says one reviewer, 'even funnier in the language of Cicero' – he has been found to be an exponent of Taoism and an expositor of Western philosophy, a brilliant psychotherapist and a natural

expert on Feng Shui – and his world has been subjected, tongue in cheek, to alarmingly plausible analyses Freudian, Marxist, feminist, New Darwinist, New Historicist, post-colonialist, post-structuralist and queer.¹

Yet none of this affectionate adult play can detract from (or break) his timeless charm. The moment at the end of *The House at Pooh Corner* when Christopher Robin, soon to go to



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school to begin his long initiation into the world of grown-ups, asks Pooh to promise never to forget him and, *whatever* happens, to understand is still almost unbearably poignant.

All of which makes Pooh's fate at the hands of that adult world very sad. In 1929, he was sold by his creator to Stephen Slesinger Inc, which in 1961 licensed him to the Walt Disney Corporation. Forty-three years down

the bottom line, he and 'the gang' are commercialised to the tips of their ears and fetching their owners as much as \$4 billion a year.

But things made to be merchandised are very different from creatures of the inspired imagination. The innocent-and-yet-knowing whimsy of Milne has been replaced by a kind of Concentrate of Feelgood Factor which no more resembles the original than Starbursts taste of real strawberries or bananas.

The expression most characteristic of E H Shepard's bear – a doubtful paw to his mouth – has given way to a permanent infantile grin. His head has been greatly enlarged, to make him look more like a baby, and Pooh has acquired eyebrows expressly so that they can be oh-so-lovably arched.

This genetically modified impostor has been disseminated so relentlessly, through every conceivable medium, that the imaginations of children today are hopelessly contaminated. One wonders whether now the real, more delicate Pooh could ever live there.

The final desecration is a ruthless legal tussle over rights and royalties that has now dragged on for 12 years. Disney accuses SSI of stealing crucial documents, SSI counter-accuses Disney of shredding them. So much for the magic of childhood.

What shall it profit a Bear, you might say, if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? **Huw Spanner**

¹ *Winnie ille Pu*, Alexander Lenard (1961) and *Winnie ille Pu Semper Ludet*, Brian Staples (1998), both published by Dutton: *The Tao of Pooh*, Benjamin Hoff (Dutton, 1982); *Pooh and the Philosophers* (Reed, 1996) and *Pooh and the Psychologists* (Methuen, 2000), both by John Tyerman Williams: *Winnie-the-Pooh's Little Book of Feng Shui* (Methuen, 1999); *The Pooh Perplex* (Penguin, 1963) and *Postmodern Pooh* (Profile Books, 2002), both by Frederick C Crews