

# Il Fratellino Bianco: race relations in Salgari's adventure novels

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Emilio Salgari was the foremost writer of adventure novels for the young in Italy; at his apogee in the 1890s, he was writing in the era of extensive European colonialist expansion and, one might say, of imperialist orthodoxy. Indeed, in his time Italy, feeling politically disadvantaged, sought to acquire territory in Africa, events which – to his credit – Salgari never converted into fiction. Yet it is the *sine qua non* of Salgari's oeuvre that its subject is elsewhere, it is other, it is an act of exploration through which he reveals to his readers that which is unfamiliar, unknown, even thus far unimaginable to them.

As a young man from the Venetian mainland, he had experienced the call of the sea and understood the romance of foreign parts; he had felt thwarted in his longing to travel and know for himself the strangeness of the world. In his first decade as a writer five of the seven novels he published described the Orient: Cochinchina, China, Borneo, Burma and India.<sup>1</sup> The stories he devised for his exotic backgrounds sprang from the contemporary or recent state of political and social affairs in his chosen countries. His first chances to publish came from a travel magazine and from a daily newspaper; his first three, serialised, novels appeared in the Veronese *Nuova Arena* over a period of two years.<sup>2</sup> After that, another newspaper, *L'Arena*, also in Verona, gave him a salaried post as a reporter. So his formative years as a writer were spent working in close association with the business of conveying world news to the public. This may

have intensified his inspiration, as well as providing the topic for his third novel, *La Favorita del Mahdi*, which presented a political drama of 1883 to the public in a fictionalised version in 1884.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the editor of the *Nuova Arena* recalled in a memoir how the young Salgari had arrived in his office with several narrative pieces ready; these – *Tay-See* and *La Tigre della Malesia* – had plots rooted in the recent political situations of Cochinchina and Borneo respectively.<sup>4</sup> It seems that, from the start, it was Salgari's own inclination, which was subsequently simply reinforced by his experience of journalism, to choose to write about a contemporary political theme which happened to be wedded to an exotic landscape.

In this first decade all the novels except one include a colonial or quasi-colonial presence, which is given varying degrees of prominence from novel to novel.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, but not all, this implies the existence of conflict between the indigenous population and the colonial power. In *Tay-See* the colonial conflict is in the background rather than the foreground. It provides a context of enmity and danger, but the subject of the novel is a love affair. The lovers' path to union is full of obstacles, partly of a moral kind since it is an adulterous affair; the inappropriate nature of the affair is redoubled by the context of colonial strife, for this is a forbidden love for political reasons too: Tay-See is indigenous Cochinchinese and her lover, Josè, is a Spanish army officer. The sympathies of the reader are clearly led in human terms: the lovers are young and attractive and brave, whereas Tay-See's husband is old, authoritarian and finally cruel; besides, it was an arranged marriage, so all is excused. Better still, the young wife's friends help the lovers, from humanitarian motives; that is to say, these Cochinchinese assist a foreign soldier from the colonial forces which are bent upon subjugating their own people. Politically the novel is a little more complex; broadly speaking the French and Spanish invaders are seen, *en masse*, as reprehensible, with the exception, though, of one individual, Josè. We are invited

to sympathise with the beleaguered Cochinchinese yet the old husband is unattractive; this is partly because he is a General, and as such is seen as an official representative of the military machine, part of the political apparatus of authority which disrupts private lives. Often in Salgari personal and political affiliations are experienced with differing degrees of intensity, and where there is a conflict between the two it is always humanity that wins. His are not novels of personal desire being abandoned or suppressed in the interests of a cause. They are not novels of self-abnegation. Love and friendship are possible between individuals despite the impositions of a political power, which is seen as impersonal and official, and is normally represented in Salgari's stories by its functionaries, its administrators and armies (as distinct from its individual soldiers).

This does not imply that Salgari expresses no political views. To some extent in the first novel, and certainly in the second and many others, the colonial or imperial power is described as an oppressor. The publicity printed in *La Nuova Arena* to herald the new serial story referred to its location as "quei fantastici e ricchi paesi dove ora la Francia cerca di portare la civiltà a colpi di cannone."<sup>6</sup> The final phrase is certainly critical and must have been written either by Salgari himself or by the editor with Salgari's knowledge. It appears to indicate not only the rights and wrongs of colonialism, but also an awareness of the hypocrisy which accompanied imperialist ambitions.

The second novel was *La Tigre della Malesia* which would become, in its definitive version, *Le Tigri di Mompracem*.<sup>7</sup> Here it is quite clear that personal qualities match political affiliations; the reader's sympathy is drawn to certain individuals for personal reasons and this determines, or at least emphasises, the political judgements the reader is induced to make. Lord Guillonk is a rich, landed aristocrat and administrator of the British presence in Borneo; he is a

symbol of the imperial authority which has dispossessed indigenous rulers and interests. Therefore he is unpleasant, just as the alien power he represents is bad; together they provide the unequivocal villainy of the piece. Sandokan is a dispossessed and outlawed aristocrat of the indigenous people, who has taken refuge on an islet and who fights a righteous guerrilla war against the British. To finance this, and indeed for survival, he and his followers have been obliged to take to piracy, a way of life endemic in the East Indian islands. He has been politically, socially and economically wronged, he is dynamic and impressive, he and his men represent the good cause, the fight for right.

Our sympathies are engaged unequivocally, yet that does not mean there are no complications, for the plot springs from a conflict of loyalties which would not exist without the colonial conflict. Marianna, the niece of Lord Guillonk, is British, and part of the white, European, power elite; she is also pretty. When she and Sandokan fall in love, she changes sides politically, in order to marry him and live in the wilderness; her natural goodness had set her apart in the British context, but is clearly demonstrated in her choice of the rebel cause. So in this story, and in so many to follow, the characters who are personally and morally good are also politically good, and vice versa; moreover, the politically bad are in power, the politically good are subjugated. From Salgari's second novel (published when he was 21) onwards, it is clear in many different situations, political and otherwise, that his sympathies always lay with the "underdog", the person or people who had been wronged, abused, vanquished.

In Italy it has long been popularly supposed, and unthinkingly reiterated (with particular relish in the Fascist period), that Salgari was anti-British. Trifling personal reasons (an English girl's fierce governess who supposedly protected her charge from him in the streets of Verona) used to be retailed for his detesting the

English so much that he determined to embody his hatred in his novels. This is often advanced as the central, indeed only, political position presented in the East Indian “Ciclo dei Pirati” (or Pirate Series). This interpretation is wholly incorrect. It was the oppressions and injustices of colonialism that Salgari deplored, and in this instance the colonialists happened to be British. Besides, he had good, workmanlike, novelist’s reasons for painting the British authorities black. As a novelist rather than a propagandist, Salgari is careful not to allow his opposed camps of right and wrong to be too simplistically composed, on the one hand of the rich, white Europeans, and on the other of the poor, brown “natives”. Marianna disturbs that pattern, and, more importantly, so does another character who is part of the Sandokan camp for reasons more measured, less passionate than those of the girl in love. The Portuguese, Yanez, is a poor, white European, who lives with and fights alongside the so-called “Tigers” out of choice as Sandokan’s “fratellino bianco” (or white brother). It is in this often repeated phrase that Salgari makes overt reference to the racial implications of the story.

The Pirate Series did not come into being as such for another eight years after the publication of *La Tigre della Malesia*, when, in 1891 to 1892, Salgari published the sequel to the first Sandokan novel; the definitive title of the sequel would be *I Pirati della Malesia*.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, in 1887, there appeared the first version of a quite unrelated novel, set in the Sundarbans of the Ganges delta, which would ultimately become *I Misteri della jungla nera*.<sup>9</sup> Not till 1893, a decade after the first appearance of Sandokan, were the Indian and the Bornean stories brought together and intertwined to form one sequence. Thus the Pirate Series had two progenitors, existing separately at first but whose union founded a dynasty.

In the first Indian novel the British Imperial presence in the subcontinent is acknowledged, indeed a British army officer is an important character. Yet the

mood is quite different from that of the first Borneo novel. There is a state of conflict and danger between two groups of people, but those groups are not the colonised Indians and the colonising British; they are the ordinary inhabitants of the area on the one hand, and on the other the members of the Indian sect of Thuggee, dedicated to the goddess of destruction, Kali, and given to ritual murder by strangulation. Most of the victims are other Indians, but the sect holds a white girl as prisoner and priestess. The Indian who falls in love with her from afar and the English officer who is her father form a close friendship and mutual determination to free her. As with Sandokan and Yanez, here is a warm partnership between a European and an Asian, in which, moreover, the Asian is the leading figure. On this occasion the enemy is again collective with one figurehead symbolising the whole, but this enemy is in no way political, or white, or imposed from outside; it is indigenous. The leader of the sect is the mysterious Indian, Suyodhana, who will survive in the subsequent novels of the series as the epitome of evil, challenged in future by Sandokan. The villainy of this character far exceeds that of Lord James Guillonk, who is disagreeable rather than evil and is mainly in the wrong because of his political and colonial role. Here, then the prime antagonism is between a good Indian and a bad Indian. There is no hint of anti-British sentiment in a novel with an English heroine and her good father, the friend of Indians, among the leading characters. Many later novels also give the lie to the notion that Salgari was anti-British. Indeed, the Sandokan series proper provides the only example of the British, taken as a group, being regarded as deplorable.

Salgari would still be writing about Sandokan at the end of his life and, though the two separate elements (of Indian origin and Bornean origin) would merge at an early stage, the geography of the cycle would continue to contain both Borneo and India. Though Sandokan would in future often visit India, the character of

the adventures in the two areas would always have a distinctly different flavour. The central issue in the Borneo adventures always remained the colonial conflict, the more so because Marianna died very young and Sandokan remained celibate thereafter. In the Indian context, while there is always an awareness of the British in India, and historical events such as the Indian Mutiny of 1857 are mentioned, nevertheless European colonialism is not the subject of these books. Superficially the subject is a lifelong power struggle between Sandokan and Suyodhana, which symbolises the struggle between good and evil. There is, however, a curious paradox in some of the later stories.

It is worth remembering in this context that after the first three titles in the sequence, ending with *I Pirati della Malesia* (1896) in which the first two stories were bonded together, Salgari then abandoned the sequence for eight years, finally bringing out two new sequels in 1904. Then in 1907 came *Alla conquista di un impero*.<sup>10</sup> The heroes have grown older, but the middle-aged Yanez is engaged to marry Surama who has a claim to the throne of Assam; this is held by a drunken and corrupt usurper (again a character who is both politically wrong and personally disagreeable). With the help of Sandokan, the usurper is dethroned and Surama and Yanez installed in their “empire”. One interpretation might be that brown imperialism, even when it entails killing people, is honourable; white imperialism is not. However Salgari would have justified his protagonists’ actions by pointing out that Surama had a rightful claim, whereas the British in Borneo did not; so, in India as in Borneo, it seems that Sandokan was committed simply to righting wrongs.

One way or another, the climate of colonialism informs the whole of the “Ciclo dei Pirati”, but this temporarily came to an end in 1891 when he produced his first novel specifically published for a young readership (*La Scimitarra di*

*Budda*). This heralded a period of treasure hunts, explorations, sea stories, all without any reference to colonial or other political contexts. It was not until 1898 that Salgari returned to colonialism, but now in new settings. It constitutes the general ambience for a story of big-game hunting and rescue by Europeans resident in *La Costa d'Avorio*;<sup>11</sup> it is once again the central – and topical – subject in *Le Stragi delle Filippine* which deals with a Filippino insurrection against the Spanish colonial rulers;<sup>12</sup> in *Il Corsaro Nero*, first published as a serial in 1898 to 1899, the colonialism described is for the first time located in the New World and for the first time situated in an earlier historical period (the 17th century).<sup>13</sup> All three of these novels use the circumstances provided by the colonial situation to supply a story or parts of it.

Two of the novels are in no way polemical, whereas *Le Stragi delle Filippine*, like his earlier work, is. Here the nub of the plot is the same as in *La Tigre della Malesia*: a conflict of loyalties and emotions arises from a love affair which bridges a deep political division. The story was based upon the real insurrection which had recently occurred in the Philippines on the part of the indigenous peoples against the Spanish colonial rule. The mixed race hero, Romero, supported by the Chinese, Hang-Tu, is in the forefront of the insurrection, but he loves the daughter of a Spanish army officer while he, in turn, is loved by a devoted Chinese girl. The attempt to throw off the Spanish yoke fails and, with Hang-Tu shot and Romero banished, the sympathy the reader has been encouraged all along to bestow upon the insurgents is intensified by pity for the courageous oppressed and by resentment against the politically powerful. Once more Salgari directs that sympathy towards native freedom fighters and against colonial might. The date of publication was 1898; the insurrection had taken place in 1896 to 1897; Spain was a near, Mediterranean neighbour of Italy. Salgari was not yet ill or troubled, and it seems inconceivable that he was not

conscious of the message he was elaborating for his tens of thousands of young readers. He was taking up a political posture and yet again, in a topical context, he was condemning colonialism.

Apparently as if to redress the balance, the following year *La Capitana del Yucatan* treated the Spanish-American War of 1898, taking the Spanish side along with the dashing Spanish heroine, who smuggles guns through the American blockade to the Spaniards defending Cuba.<sup>14</sup> The explanation is, of course, that the political roles are reversed in this novel; the USA is the aggressor and wields colonial ambitions and might. The sentiments on nationality are exactly similar to those expressed in the Sandokan books; Salgari is no more anti-Spanish (as might have been claimed on the basis of *Le Stragi delle Filippine*) than he is anti-British; he is anti-colonial, and if it is a case of colonisers threatened by a greater, external power then he sympathises with the first and weaker group. For Salgari, might is not right.

For some years, the world of colonialism provided the broad background of many of Salgari's novels, even if only in the sense that distant, colourful countries in other continents were sufficiently populated with Europeans to provide leading characters for stories of treasure hunts or explorations. For several years around the turn of the century, most of Salgari's protagonists were, in fact, European albeit against an exotic backdrop. Then came the return to the Asian hero, Sandokan, and the colonial context of India in *Le Due tigri*, the novel in which the good and righteous Sandokan kills the evil arch-enemy, Suyodhana.<sup>15</sup> This is a moral tale, not a political one, but in the same year Salgari pursued the political struggles of Borneo, through the agency of Sandokan, in *Il Re del Mare*.<sup>16</sup> So far only the "Ciclo dei Corsari" had represented the colonial world of past centuries, though without raising questions about it. Now Salgari published *Capitan Tempesta*

(1905);<sup>17</sup> in writing about the embattled Venetians in 1571 staving off the terror promised by the Turkish horde (counter-claimants to Cyprus), he came as close as he ever would to the theme of Italian colonialism. However, as with *La Capitana del Yucatan*, the political tables have been turned; Venice is the long-standing occupant of Cyprus and is about to be vanquished by an invading power more mighty and more brutal.

For about three years, until 1908, the theme of modern colonialism was only carried forward by the later examples of the Pirate Series; the period when Empire was constantly in the background of his stories seemed to have receded. Then in 1908 and 1909 Salgari made two new departures, both opening new series and both taking a new example of colonial conflict as their central subject. *Sulle frontiere del Far-West*, which was to have two sequels, concerned not only the wars between inimical Red Indian tribes but also the perpetual battle between indigenous and immigrant Americans.<sup>18</sup> *I Corsari delle Bermude* and its sequel used another aspect of North American history, the American War of Independence, a war to be free of European domination.<sup>19</sup> In these two stories the expected pattern is followed, but the Red Indian trilogy provides a surprise at the very end of Salgari's life, a surprise which was perhaps brought about in part by his own state of despair, and in part by the European terror and propaganda that accompanied the contemporary scourging of the Indian nations, with, for example, the annihilation of the Sioux at the Battle of Wounded Knee.

According to the ideas he had advanced all his life, the Red Indians, displaced, hounded, mercilessly killed by the white colonialists, should logically have been the hard-pressed heroes, attracting the readers' sympathy for their bravery and their lost cause. They are indeed the protagonists, but not the heroes, except in the abnormal sense of supremacy and chilling expertise in all the sanguinary

skills; they are passionless killers and grim seekers after revenge. Our potential sympathy goes unplaced, for the white characters have minor and colourless rôles by comparison. The mood of these tales is almost unmitigatedly sombre; there is precious little warmth or love to modify the universal hatred. These are novels which argue no case and evoke no sympathy. They are probably not colonial or political novels at all, even in the restricted sense appropriate to Salgari's work. In the depression of his late years, Salgari had lost sight of his old beliefs and optimism, and now wrote, not of the success of the weak and valorous, but of the bloodlust and will to self-destruction of wronged human beings. Beyond Salgari's condemnation of colonialism as a political system, there are other conclusions to be drawn from the thread of political and colonial subject matter which runs through so much of his work. Many of his novels present the reader with situations which raise questions specifically about race relations, or rather answer them. These questions are posed naturally by the interpersonal relationships developed in the colonial contexts already mentioned: the brown Bornean's closest friend and ally is his "fratellino bianco" (or white brother); Sandokan marries an English girl, Yanez marries an Indian girl.

There are many other examples in the colonial books proper, and yet more interracial relationships appear in novels where the colonial context is nonexistent or is not so prominent and where Salgari makes, as it were, an unprovoked choice of such relationships for his characters. Indeed, in the period from 1892 to 1897 inclusive, when he was eschewing political situations in favour of simple travel and exploration – which, originally, he evidently viewed as more suitable for the young – we find some striking cases, especially in three novels published in the year 1896. In his first novel about the slave trade, *I Drammi della shiavitù*, a dramatic example of black-white relations is at the core of the story.<sup>20</sup> The Brazilian captain of a slave ship falls in love with a mixed-race girl among the

slaves; more than that, he makes a free man of another slave, a West African king. The treachery that provokes the drama comes from another white man, a European, who kills the captain in order to obtain the girl for himself. Apart from the decent captain, it is the black Africans who are the noble figures, who avenge the captain's death and who "live happily ever after".

Sexual relations between races are implicitly introduced towards the end of *I Robinson italiani* by way of providing a happy ending.<sup>21</sup> Three Philippino girls are conveniently shipwrecked on the island where three Italian men have been surviving as Robinson Crusoes for some time; when, at last, the British Navy arrives, it finds a thriving and multiplying colony. It is a story in a much lighter – even light-hearted – vein than *I Drammi della schiavitú*, but with the same message. Another variant of the theme appears in *Il Re della prateria*, where a young Spaniard becomes chief, or king, of a Red Indian tribe as successor to his own white brother.<sup>22</sup> This version is different from the others of the period in one important respect; in the others, Salgari assumes racial equality, whereas the Apaches, of their own volition (not from colonial imposition), and against all expectation, choose to have a white leader whom they respect and even revere. The theme of the white king or queen – for which there was a pre-existing tradition – is repeated many times in widely differing racial contexts, from Brazil to Pacific atolls, and is probably the only context in which Salgari makes assumptions concerning white superiority.<sup>23</sup>

In 1898, when Salgari began to reintroduce colonial themes into some of his work, he also produced his second novel concerning West Africa, *La Costa d'Avorio*. It is a novel which first recognises the existence of tensions between white settlers and black indigenous people, and so establishes a reality as opposed to fantasy. A Sicilian settler's farm is burnt and his young – white – brother is

kidnapped by an African from the barbarous kingdom of Dahomey. The racial equation is established when the search party is assisted by a wounded female – or “Amazon” – warrior from Dahomey, who later marries one of the Europeans. This is one of Salgari’s many novels which superficially seem to present a fairy tale invention, but where his data is surprisingly close to reality. For it seems that in fact on Africa’s West coast there was much miscegenation and Dahomey in fact had brutal kings and a regiment of warrior maidens.<sup>24</sup>

White and black, and white and oriental are not the only racial permutations to be treated by Salgari in plots where the resolution includes sexual harmony. Several stories employ associations between Gentiles and Jews, and between Europeans and Arabs; *I Predoni del Sahara* (1902) is an example of the former, and *Sull’Atlante* (1908) of the latter.<sup>25</sup> In the first, a Corsican on a journey from Morocco to Timbuctoo befriends a Jewish brother and sister; his search for the lost Flatters expedition is unsuccessful, but the story concludes with his marriage to Esther; the second novel is also located in North Africa, where a Hungarian is assisted in his escape from the French Foreign Legion by an Arab girl. Just as Salgari’s novels clearly propose a noncolonial world, that is the removal of white domination and exploitation, so too do they posit interracial harmony as the ideal, the happy ending, *par excellence*.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, under the rule of Fascism, a nationalist dictatorship with imperialist ambitions, which was also to be associated with the racism of Nazi Germany, it became fashionable to claim that Salgari, who had died in 1911, had been a “prefascista” (a pre-Fascist) whose work prefigured the Fascist ideology.<sup>26</sup> It was a superficial reading of his novels, which assumed that if they treated subjects located in distant and exotic lands, where the characters included Europeans resident or travelling among the indigenous people, who might be

supposed to be more “primitive” or less “civilised” than themselves, then the message could not be other than imperialist. Nothing could have been further from the truth. As we have seen, Salgari clearly condemned colonialism and created harmonious and equal human relations where colonialist reality would have imposed inequality and conflict; Salgari almost always sympathised with the oppressed and drew unattractive portraits of the European oppressors. His attitudes seem all the more surprising when one considers that in his own time the newly unified nation of Italy developed its first colonialist ambitions, so Salgari was out of sympathy with the official policies of the government of his day. The only modest connection with the mood of these politics could be the general expression of a fascination with far-off lands, rather than preoccupation with the local, the national, which had dominated Italian culture throughout the 19th century. But then this exoticism itself had a purely cultural explanation in the age-old tradition of the aesthetic vogue for orientalism, a European, rather than an Italian, phenomenon, but one which was promoted by Italian grand opera (as in Verdi’s *Aida* and Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*).

There was, however, perhaps a partial motivation for Salgari’s writing which was of political origin, albeit certainly an unconscious one. Its source is related precisely to that near-exclusive concern with Italian subjects which had prevailed in literature since the early 1800s, and still did in the Verismo of the 1890s. This had been generated by the determination on the part of the literate, professional classes that the “patchwork” of separate and disparate little states, ranging from Lombardy under Austrian rule in the North to Sicily under an alien Bourbon rule in the South should come together, free of foreign domination, as a single, unified nation of Italy, a political condition not experienced since Ancient Roman times. The emphasis on Italy and nationhood was promoted politically by the patriotic Risorgimento movement and culturally by the Romantic movement’s

championing of the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. The long fight for Italian freedom and unity was characterised by powerful passions and personal acts of generous bravery. Unification was completed in 1871, so Salgari was too young to experience any of the long revolution except its afterglow and the accompanying difficulties and disappointments. In a sense, then, his novels are a reliving of the Risorgimento ideals, emotions and deeds in new and exciting settings. Sandokan is the Italian patriot and guerrilla fighter, Garibaldi, with a brown skin and foreign clothes. But this is the politics of nostalgia, not of ambition.

## Notes

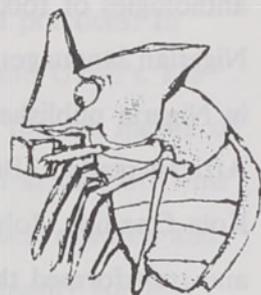
- 1 *Tay-See*, 1883; *La Tigre della Malesia*, 1883–4; *Gli strangolatri del Gange*, 1887; *La Scimitarra di Budda*, 1891; *La Vergine della Pagoda d'Oriente*, 1891–2.
- 2 He published a short serial, *I Selvaggi della Papuasias*, in the travel magazine, *La Valigia*, Milan, in 1883; the daily paper, *La Nuova Arena*, Verona, printed his serialised novels, *Tay-See*, *La Tigre della Malesia* and *La Favorita del Mahdi* between 1883 and 1884.
- 3 *La Favorita del Mahdi*, Guigoni, Milan 1884, concerns the uprising of the Mahdi in the Sudan in 1883.
- 4 R. Giannelli, 'Ricordi di un vecchio giornalista. Dove Emilio Salgari comincio a farsi conoscere dal pubblico', in *Il Raduno*, Rome, 21 January 1928.
- 5 The odd one out is *Duemila leghe sotto l'America*, Guigoni, Milan 1888, a fantasy underground exploration a la Verne.
- 6 "... those amazing and rich countries where France is now introducing civilisation by means of cannon-shot"; from a front-page advertisement in *La Nuova Arena*, Verona 1884, printed each day from 12th to 14th September inclusive.
- 7 The definitive version, *Le Tigri di Mompracem*, would not appear until 1900, published by Donath, Genoa.
- 8 *La Vergine della Pagoda d'Oriente*, was published as a serial in *La Gazzetta di Treviso*, Treviso 1891–2; the definitive version, *I Pirati della Malesia*, appeared in 1896, published by Donath, Genoa.

- 9 *Gli strangolatori del Gange* of 1887 became, definitively, *I Misteri della jungla nera*, in the book version of 1895 published by Donath, Genoa.
- 10 *Alla conquista di un impero*, Donath, Genoa 1907.
- 11 *La Costa d'Avorio*, Donath, Genoa 1898.
- 12 *Le Stragi delle Filippine*, Donath, Genoa 1898.
- 13 *Il Corsaro Nero*, Donath, Genoa 1898–9.
- 14 *La Capitana del Yucatan*, Donath, Genoa 1899.
- 15 *Le Due tigri*, Donath, Genoa 1904.
- 16 *Il Re del Mare*, published as a serial in *Per Terra e per Mare*, Genoa 1904–5, and in book form by Donath, Genoa 1906.
- 17 *Capitan Tempesta*, Donath, Genoa 1905.
- 18 *Sulle frontiere del Far-West*, Bemporad, Florence 1908. The sequels were *La Scotennatrice*, Bemporad, Florence 1909, and *Le Selve Ardenti*, Bemporad, Florence 1910.
- 19 *I Corsari delle Bermude*, Bemporad, Florence 1909; its sequel was *La Crociera della Tuonante*, Bemporad, Florence 1910.
- 20 *I Drammi della schiavitù*, Voghera, Rome 1896.
- 21 *I Robinson italiani*, Donath, Genoa 1896.
- 22 *Il Re della Prateria*, Bemporad, Florence 1896.
- 23 *L'uomo di fuoco*, Donath, Genoa 1904, was based on a historical circumstance and is set in Brazil. *Il Tesoro della Montagna Azzurra*, Bemporad, Florence 1907, is set in the islands of the Pacific Ocean.
- 24 Bruce Chatwin gives details in *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, (1980) Pan, London 1982, pp 96–7.
- 25 *I Predoni del Sahara*, Donath, Genoa 1902; *Sull'Atlante*, Bemporad, Florence 1908.
- 26 These ideas were first advanced by Luigi Motta in his preface, entitled “Emilio Salgari. (Il Romanzo d'avventure: il suo carattere e la sua influenza)”, in Salgari's *Il Tesoro del Presidente del Paraguay*, Casa editrice “L'Italica”, Milan 1923. They were enthusiastically promoted over a six-month period in the weekly journal *Il Raduno*, Rome, from December 1927 to July 1928.

# Nigerian children's literature

and the changing social scenes

philomena osazee fayose



## Introduction

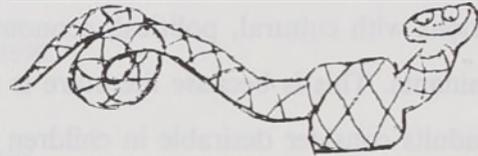
The patterns of children's literature have always been conditioned by national aspirations with cultural, political, economical and social factors being the major determinants. This is because literature is socially inclined. Whatever behavioural traits adults consider desirable in children are reflected in the literature produced for them. This is particularly evident in countries with a long tradition of children's book publishing<sup>1</sup>. (Children of course have little or no say in the literature produced for them. It is the adults who write the stories, publish them or recommend them for reading).

Though Nigerian children's literature is still quite young being only 34 years old, the stories reflect the changing patterns in the social, economic, cultural and political fabric of the Nigerian society. Early fiction for Nigerian children were anthologies of folk stories and stories drawing heavily on oral tradition. This is to be expected because when a nation turns from an oral to a written tradition the oral forms provide easy source materials for the new writers<sup>2</sup>.

## Nigerian children's literature 1960–1978

Two main periods can be discerned in Nigerian children's literature. The period from independence in October 1960 to 1977. The first period was dominated by anthologies of folk stories collected and transcribed into English or the major Nigerian languages. Between 1963 and 1972, all the major publishing companies in Nigeria published series of folktales. The most popular being the Oxford African readers. Between 1966 and 1970, clever authors like Chinua Achebe, Kola Onadipe, John Iroaganachi, amongst others, took individual folk stories and transformed them into more episodic narratives thus producing new and refreshing stories.

### Traditional beliefs and practices



Alongside the early folk stories were a number of novellas and novels drawing their themes from traditional beliefs and practices. These works are useful for their sociological and educational viewpoints. In fact, in 1965, five years after independence, Achebe, one of the leading exponents of African literature expressed his views about what is expected of the newly emerging crop of African writers. He states:

My aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet ... I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them ... Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure art. But who cares? Art is important but so too is education of the kind I have in mind<sup>3</sup>.

Thus the early writers for children such as Kola Onadipe, Neville Ukoli, Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe and Onuora Nzekwu, to mention a few, saw themselves as teachers who sought to teach their readers about the Nigerian past as well as help them to come to terms with the uneasy changes brought about by colonialism and contact with the Western world. In particular, these authors were out to refute or re-affirm certain widely held views on traditional beliefs and practices. In some books among which are Onadipe's *Koku Baboni* (1965) and Ukoli's *The Twins of the rain forest* (1969), the authors refute the belief in the evil nature of twin children. In the past, and even today, multiple births such as that of twins or triplets were considered taboo in many Nigerian societies. Such children and sometimes their parents were killed or banished from the community for fear they bring harm to it. In *Koku Baboni*, Adia, a wealthy but barren woman is directed in a dream to a river bank where she finds an abandoned baby who turns out to be a twin. Adia keeps the baby whom she names Koku Baboni. The name means he refuses to die (Koku), Gift of God (Baboni). The boy is brought up to be a fine young man, the pride of his mother and the village. On Adia's death bed, the facts of Koku's life are made known to him. The boy returns to his village of origin and makes himself known to his people who indeed remember the circumstance of his being thrown into the river. The novella ends thus:

But many parents wept because their own twin children had been killed. They now know that twin children are not evil. Perhaps their own children had been brave, strong and handsome like Koku. From that day twin children were welcome into the village<sup>4</sup>.

Besides refuting the belief in the evil nature of twin children, Onadipe touched on two very important issues in early Nigerian societies – barrenness and maternal love. In many Nigerian societies a barren woman is often regarded with suspicion and pity. The ultimate desire of every Nigerian woman is to have children. A marriage is considered unsuccessful unless there are lots of children and preferably

male ones. Today the desire for male children has been played down in most children's stories. Barren women are no longer portrayed in an unfavourable light. But the question of maternal love is emphasised throughout the literature. Lack of maternal love, as we shall see in post-1978 stories for children results in delinquent children.

The belief in witchcraft is again rejected in two novellas by Onadipe *Sugar girl* (1963) and *Sunny boy* (1978). In some Nigerian societies, old women and sometimes men who live alone or encounter disasters, frequently are regarded as witches and wizards. People will have nothing to do with them. Ayawa of *Sugar girl* has been driven away from Apampa village because the people consider her a witch. She explains to Ralia "they say that I am a witch and that I had killed my husband and children. They drove me out of the village"<sup>5</sup>. But Ayawa was kind to Ralia when she was lost in the bush. Witches are not known to show kindness to human beings. Ayawa is recalled to Apampa town and all is well with her again.

Mama Saro of Shanka Town in *Sunny boy* has lost her husband before the story starts. Nobody in Shanka Town knows about her past. Abai's mother warns:

"They say she is a witch," Abai's mother said.

"Who is a witch? That old woman? Mother that is not a kind thing to say. Is she a witch because she is old and wrinkled? Will you become a witch when you are old?" Abai asked one after another (p 17).

Abai's mother must have been thoroughly embarrassed by the questions put to her by the boy. There was no further discussion of witchcraft between mother and son. In fact in the course of the story Abai benefited immensely from the generosity of Mama Saro. Onadipe thus shows that being old and wrinkled does not make any one a witch.

Superstition, Caudwell suggests, is adapted to an exploited class. Nigerian writers for children use the belief in superstitions in some of their novellas to show how a class of people initiate or spread superstitions in others to exploit other classes of people. In *Juju rock* (1966), the belief in the supernatural powers of certain categories of men is established. The inhabitants of Dankom and the surroundings live in absolute fear of the “Keepers of the Rock” who are said to possess magical powers and are able to turn into all sorts of animals and objects in order to harm their enemies. The fear is created in order to exploit the local people by the men who were looking for the lost gold mine in the area. After the bloody battle on Juju Rock, the “Keepers of the Rock” are defeated and exposed. The Kamalu men in *The Rescue of Charlie Kalu* (1971), are another set of secret society men exploiting the fears and beliefs of the local inhabitants of the Rivers State. Dorothy Wimbush in most of her novels written between 1965 and 1971 uses the belief in spirits and other supernatural beings to further the plots.

### **Colonialism**

Nigeria’s contact with Europe and the break up of traditional societies has also provided themes for Nigerian children’s fiction. This contact is often revealed as a conflict especially in school stories. The European missionaries tried to discredit all that the child held most dear at home. There was conflict, for example, between the Roman Catholic Mass and Traditional Worship in *Blade among the boys* by Onuora Nzekwu.

But generally the stories show the comic scenes between Nigerian teachers who try to imitate their European proprietors.

There are funny descriptions of teachers' physical deportment and mannerisms in two books by Anezi Okoro. *The Village school*, and *New broom at Amanzu*.

Many natives did not believe in Western education because it breeds thieves, idlers and ne'er-do-wells as in *Akin goes to school* by Christie Ade-Ajayi and Michael Crowder. Eze's relatives in *Eze goes to school* were unwilling to help him continue his schooling after his father's death because schooling is not good.

Were schooling a good thing, I would not mind helping. But it takes people away from their proper living<sup>6</sup>.

Thomas Chigbo crams into his *Odenigbo* all the features of colonialism and its effects on Nigeria: the break up of traditional societies because of disregard for tradition by those who have imbibed European ways; new means of gaining a livelihood working for Europeans as opposed to the traditional occupations of hunting, farming, palmwine tapping, local crafts; the introduction of sophisticated household gadgets and weapons; the relationships between colonial administrators and powerful local chiefs. In all, writers employing the theme of colonialism make it clear that a total disregard of the traditional will lead to disaster.

### **Nigerian children's fiction since 1978**

The Macmillan Winners Series whose first title *Ehanna and friends* appeared in 1978 may be said to be the watershed of children's book publishing in Nigeria. In 1976 Macmillan Nigerian Publishers started a yearly children's story competition to discover talents in this new but rapidly growing area of book publishing. The competition ran from 1976 to 1986. The winning stories now

appear as the Macmillan Winners Series. Nineteen seventy eight was also the year of 16th Congress of the International Board on Books for Children and Young People (IBBY). The theme of that Congress was “Modern Realistic Stories for Children and Young People”. More realistic stories have been published for children in Nigeria since 1978. Realistic stories are those which deal with the social, economic, political and cultural issues in society and how these affect children in order to help them come to terms with these issues. Realistic stories are true to life, many deal with children’s immediate problems and the details are often grim or blood curdling. Many of the post-1978 stories for children reflect the changing scenes of life in the country.

(a) *Children as present in their stories*

The early books for Nigerian children presented them in a beautiful, ideal world of their own. This world was dominated by play and food. The children are contented and happy. When there are problems, adult teachers or parents are around to help the children solve these. Parents get on very well with their children and there are good interpersonal relationships between siblings.

Since 1978 it would appear as if family relationships have broken down. In *Sparing the rod* by Bayo Adebisi, and *Motherless baby*, to mention two novels, parents no longer have control over their children. They in fact quarrel openly in front of them. Some children are shown to run away from home either because they feel their parents are too harsh or they want to be independent as in *Call me Michael* (1980) and *Together again* (1983). Cooperation between parents in the proper upbringing of their children has been a major theme in Nigerian children’s literature since 1978.

(b) *Child exploitation and abuse*

Child exploitation and abuse have been recurrent themes in Nigerian children's literature since 1980. *A Lucky chance*, *The Drums of joy* and *Footsteps in the dark* look at the dreadful abuse of children by adults. In the first novel Chisa leaves the village and goes to the town to live with his wealthy and educated uncle who has promised him a better start in life. He is told that

Uncle Kulu will take good care of you. He will buy you new clothes. You will go to a big school<sup>7</sup>.

But instead, Chisa finds himself a second class citizen in his uncle's household. He is treated worse than a servant and exploited in every way possible. It is by sheer luck that the boy is able to go to secondary school.

The problem of money to pay school fees so that children can carry on their education was common in stories written before 1978. Where the situation is desperate, as in *Eze goes to school*, adults like Teacher Okafor or Wilberforce came to the rescue. In some post-1978 stories where the same problem arises, adults to whom children go for help exploit them in every way possible. In *Call me Michael* by Kola Onadipe "Area Father" and his criminal gang use innocent, needy boys for their nefarious jobs of smuggling, burglary and pick-pocketing<sup>8</sup>.

Two stories by Teresa Meniru *The Drums of joy* and *Footsteps in the dark* look at child abuse, armed robbery, kidnapping and men of the underworld. Nigerians have become insensitive to the needs of children and the aged alike. Through these stories, Meniru unveils many of the evils in the Nigerian society.

Two novels *Motherless baby* and *Iheoma comes to stay* look at premarital sex and unwanted pregnancies. In the former book, Ngozi, a school girl finds that she is pregnant. She runs away from home to a big city where she is unknown. When the baby is born she abandons him. The rest of the story reveals Ngozi's mental torture as a result of that evil act. Ekwensi takes the opportunity of the story to criticise the night life in the urban areas of Nigeria with its glib-tongued musicians and uncontrollable young girls looking for premature enjoyment.

(c) *Feminism and Nigerian children's stories*

Since 1982 more female characters that play major roles in the stories have appeared increasingly in Nigerian children's fiction. Before 1978, most of the female characters in Nigerian children's fiction were passive. In *Eze goes to school*, we only hear of Chiwe Agu's academic brilliance in two paragraphs. Eze's sister and mother are in the background. Nnenna in *The Drums of joy* is a memorable character. She holds her own against Mr Fish in the ferry boat, against the robber at Kafanchan railway station and in fact, it is her own ingenuity that helps her to escape from her captors at the beginning of the story. Unoma of *Unoma at college* breaks the traditional view of the African woman when she rejects a brilliant offer of marriage in preference to continuing her education. Nigerian women are beginning to wake up to the realities of life. They want equal opportunities with their male counterparts and have proved that they are as capable as men. Though many women are still very much in the background, more are coming into the limelight. The men can no longer hold them in servitude. Education and economic buoyance are sure steps to liberation.

## Conclusions

Nigerian children's literature has tried to express the changing needs of society. Many of the writers see themselves as social critics. Their main purpose in writing is to make their society a better one. Emenyonu (1974), for example, praises Cyprian Ekwensi in particular for his exposure of social ills. He writes:

the work of the novelist is to hold up a mirror to nature and describe the reflections truthfully regardless of the over-sensitiveness or otherwise of his public.

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# Why pooh-pooh Pooh?

Isn't he universal?

peter havard-williams



## Introduction

A church in Gaborone each year organises a Christmas party for handicapped children from a poor area of the city. This year two of the photographs from the party showed first, one of the children tearing off a corner of a paper to reveal a bear's ear, and secondly, the girl hugging her toy tightly. Of course, a single case does not make a universal, but the example does indicate that bears can be inter-cultural!

*Winnie-the-Pooh*, however, has had a bad press over the years. Children's librarians prefer books more recently published. Pooh is too comfortable, he does not face the realities of life, nor does he adjust to a modern outlook. In the age of disenchantment, violence and sex, Pooh is enchanting, peaceable, viable to sell in an increasing variety of forms and in increasing numbers, in spite of the "cognoscenti" of the library world – a sale of over 500 000 a year of which 30 percent go to Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and Pooh has been translated into 31 languages, from Afrikaans through Chinese, Dutch, Hebrew, Macedonian, to Thai, Esperanto and Latin (Thwaite 1992:190). Then there are Pooh china designs, Pooh calendars and even Pooh clubs – one for students of the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand (Thwaite 1992:188), for Pooh appeals to young people and even the

aged, as well as to children. The Pooh industry had already begun in the 1930s but has risen to new heights in the past 10 to 15 years.

The creation of a personality to appeal to children in the age range of below 10 years is important. The complaint of the ages is that teenagers are hard to handle. Before being a parent, one has the notion that children are animate but uninteresting before they are 15 or 16. But obviously Milne's experience was different. Even though Christopher Robin's nanny came between him and his son, he was aware of the reality and the interest of a young child as a person. From my experience, I found that children develop early. Children at one or two or three are real people. My eldest daughter could sing in tune at the age of three years, and we exchanged experiences of the day, every day together at bed-time. Friendship has to grow in these early years in order to blossom further as children grow older, and this is a fundamental message of the Pooh books. If parents are preoccupied, rushing hither and thither, ignoring their children when they are young, how do they expect friendship and confidence to develop during the teenage period? This view is reinforced by an article recently published by Janet Walker (1994), "Parenting in the 1990s: great expectations and hard times", an article of considerable importance. In every case it is the quality of interpersonal relationships that matters most.

This is what the Pooh books are about.

### **Pooh – a personality**

Pooh is, after all, a personality of, and for, all ages and for every age. The books have something special to offer. The creation of Pooh seems to have been

based on perceptions of Christopher Robin and his mother. The text was, as it were, merely edited by Milne and was in fact dedicated to Mrs Milne, though of course the stories were Milne's.

The Pooh books rest on certain fundamental elements which remain important whatever the time and the place. These elements are the creation of a personality, the portrayal of intimate family relations, the recognition of a child's universe, the events which typify it, and a profound sense of humour – sustained by an excellent simple English style (simplicity of this kind is the mark of genius).

The evolution of Pooh's personality is supported by the drawings of EH Shepard. Take, for instance, the very first drawing in *Winnie-the-Pooh*. There is a child's bear, going down the stairs, head first, held by Christopher Robin. He is obviously a toy. Even his name is in doubt. Yet he is presented in his own right and he has a mind.

Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs (Milne 1950:1).

Although he is a toy, he wonders if there is another way of doing it:

If only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn't (Thwaite 1992:190).

That statement of alternatives is found throughout the book, and is a very useful piece of intuitive child psychology. Much better to say "If you do A, X will happen, if you do Y, B will happen", rather than "Don't do Y". The name "Winnie-the-Pooh" comes from Christopher Robin but this is unstated so it

might have come from Pooh himself. The name is just, even though he is a boy and Winnie is a name for girls. “Pooh” seems to have been taken on board because it was the name of a Swan the family had met. This is in fact the short name for Winnie-the-Pooh, not Winnie.

Sometimes Winnie-the-Pooh likes a game, sometimes a story – preferably about himself – the same as any child. The name problem is further complicated in the first story by the fact that he lives “under the name of Sanders”. This is quite a subtle pun: to live “under the name of” implies that Pooh has an alternative name which gives him a separate existence in the forest, with all the other animals, but it also (through Shepard’s drawing) shows him literally sitting under the name on a sign over the door:

It means he had the name over the door in gold letters, and lived under it (Milne 1950:3).

This was at first beyond Pooh’s comprehension. The drawing incidentally re-appears once more in *Winnie-the-Pooh* and once in *The House at Pooh Corner* (1963) but Sanders is all but forgotten.

*Winnie-the-Pooh* is the result of a dialogue between father and son, and this collusion between the two in creating the name itself begins the creation of Pooh’s personality and also sets the tone of the story.

When Winnie-the-Pooh, in the first story, tries to fly, suspended from a balloon in the hope of visiting a bees’ nest, helped by Christopher Robin, he is still a toy. When he visits Rabbit, in the next story, he gets stuck in Rabbit’s burrow and is read to by Christopher Robin:

... a Sustaining Book, such as would help and comfort a Wedged Bear in Great Tightness ... at the North end of Pooh (Milne 1950:28).

At the end of the week, Christopher Robin pulls him out with Rabbit “and all Rabbits’ friends and relatives – Pop”!

So, with a nod of thanks to his friends, he went on with his walk through the forest, humming proudly to himself. But, Christopher Robin looked after him lovingly, and said to himself, “Silly old Bear!” (Milne 1950:31).

The chapter begins to create a personality for Pooh. He walks proudly (it is important to support self-esteem) while Christopher Robin says “Silly old Bear!” (equally important not to take children too seriously but to show affection at the same time.) We see in fact an evolution of Christopher Robin as a parent-substitute and Pooh as a Christopher Robin substitute. Moreover, a social system is in the process of being created. Rabbit is well-organised – better organised than Pooh – and he has more common sense (“The fact is you’re stuck, he states”). He goes to fetch Christopher Robin, he uses Pooh’s paws as a clothes line, and when the friends and relations help to pull Pooh out, Rabbit is the organiser.

### Piglet



And then Piglet is presented. Though he is small, he compensates for this by living in a very grand house in the middle of a beech-tree which was in the middle of the forest. As Benjamin Hoff (1993:4) points out in *The Te of Piglet*, Piglet craves security and wants to be somebody.

Unlike Pooh, who simply is and does, Piglet agonises (Milne 1950:1).

Piglet starts out as “piglet” but swiftly becomes “Piglet” with a capital “P”, a name. He also wants to be somebody – hence “Trespassers W”, from a broken board near his house, which indicated the name of his grandfather, Trespassers Williams.

And his grandfather had had two names in case he lost one – Trespassers after an uncle, and Williams after Trespassers (Milne 1950:32).

There is in Milne a propensity to balance qualities. Piglet is small, but he lives in a big house and has ancestors with which to establish his identity. As we find in later stories, the diminutive Piglet is the material from which heroes are made. He is the only character in the books to change, to grow, to become a finer personality than he was in the beginning (Hoff 1993:49).

Pooh is, Piglet becomes – a fundamental distinction almost since the beginning of philosophy.

Piglet finds Pooh walking round and round in a circle, hunting – Piglet suggests it's a woozle. And Pooh who sees several tracks, asks Piglet to accompany him. The solution is found only when Christopher Robin arrives – when he, Pooh, realises that it is he and Piglet who have been making the tracks and not the Woozles or Hostile Animals. “I have been Foolish and Deluded”, said he, “and I am a Bear of No Brain at all” (Milne 1950:41). He is nothing if not honest about himself, but he is comforted by Christopher Robin:

“You're the Best Bear in All the World, however”, said Christopher Robin soothingly. ... “Anyhow”, he said, “it is nearly Luncheon Time”.

So he went home for it (Milne 1950:41).

Pooh is still something of a toy, but he is increasingly growing into a personality.

We should bear in mind the following:

Bears are like cats – they arrive disguised as nonentities. Only time will reveal just who they are. A bear grows more alive with age (Teddy Bear ... 1992).

### **Eeyore's tail**

Pooh discovers that Eeyore, the old Grey Donkey, has lost his tail. Eeyore has not been aware of it.

“That Accounts for a Good Deal,” said Eeyore gloomily. “It Explains Everything. No Wonder.”

The upper-case letters, as ever in the Pooh books, indicate the importance of what is said. Eeyore is the image of the sad, unhappy child (or the unhappy mood of a child) while Pooh is the incarnation of the ideal, such as AA Milne and his wife no doubt wanted Christopher Robin to be. The ideal child is always ready to help, to cope with a situation, even-tempered and with a sunny nature. But he is also a bit obstinate (he has a strong will) and he can occasionally be slightly foolish (but not too much so) and not bad.

So Pooh goes off to consult Owl –

“and if anyone knows anything about anything, said Bear to himself, “it’s Owl who knows something about something,” he said, “or my name’s not Winnie-the-Pooh,” he said. “Which it is,” he added. “So there you are”.

Owl lived at the Chestnuts, an old-world residence of great charm. And greater charm than anyone else's because it had a knocker and a bell-pull. Spelling, however, was not Owl's strong point. He was able to read, write and spell his own name "Wol", so that notices had been done by Christopher Robin:

PLEZ CNOKE IF AN RNSR IS NOT REQID (Milne 1950:60).

However, Pooh turned his attention to both notices.

Winnie-the-Pooh read the two notices very carefully first left to right, and afterwards, in case he had missed some of it, from right to left (Milne 1950:60).

Pooh finally discovers after a long complicated speech by Owl, that the bell-pull is Eeyore's tail.

"Owl," said Pooh solemnly, "you made a mistake, somebody did want it." ...

Eeyore, my dear friend Eeyore.

"He was – he was fond of it?"

"Fond of it?"

"Attached to it," said Winnie-the-Pooh sadly (Milne 1950:50).

Christopher Robin nailed the tail back on, and Eeyore frisked about in the forest. He was so happy.

Winnie-the-Pooh came over all funny, and had to hurry home for a little snack of something to sustain him (Milne 1950:52–3).

This is just one absurd incident among many which, in their naivete, is based on an incorrect interpretation, a misunderstanding where the successful ending depends on the simplicity of language and the underlying humour.

## Heffalumps

One of a child's nightmares is encountering a large animal. In *Winnie-the-Pooh*, the imagining of such an encounter leads to boasting:

Christopher Robin finished the mouthful he was eating and said carelessly: "I saw a Heffalump today, Piglet" (Milne 1950:54).

This is not only a boastful statement, it is also cruel, since Christopher Robin would know Piglet was small and nervous. But it was "just jumping along". Pooh had seen one, he said, wondering what a Heffalump was like.

The whole conversation includes statements about Heffalumps which Christopher Robin, Pooh and Piglet have never seen except as a fantasy. Pooh decides to catch a Heffalump, and the chapter's theme has been fixed. As usual, events are experienced by each of the personages in terms of their own personal interests. Heffalumps could be captured if a pot of honey was put in the trap, so after a lot of discussion, Pooh goes to get the honey ("Hunny") in the jar.

Quite incongruously, Piglet digs the Very Deep pit. When Pooh brought and threw the honey pot down to Piglet, he says:

"Yes, but it isn't quite a full jar," ... and Piglet said, "No, it isn't! Is that all you've got left?" and Pooh said, "Yes". ... So Piglet put the jar at the bottom of the pit and climbed out, and they went off home together (Milne 1950:60).

The whole incident is based on fantasy. Piglet, for instance, thinks that string is needed to lead Heffalumpa when they have been caught, while Pooh thinks they

respond to whistling. But Pooh, after counting Heffalumps to get to sleep, dreams of Heffalumps and goes back to the pit in the middle of the night to finish off the honey. Piglet, when he goes, finds Pooh who having finished the honey, has his head stuck in the honey pot. Piglet is terrified of the “Heffalump” and runs to Christopher Robin. When they approach the pit again, they hear Pooh knocking the jar against a tree-root. Christopher Robin laughs and laughs when he realises what is happening. But Piglet does not walk quietly away as Pooh did – he is so ashamed of himself that he runs straight off home and goes to bed with a headache.

And Christopher Robin and Pooh go back to breakfast. For Eeyore’s birthday, Pooh gives him an empty honey pot, from which he has eaten all the honey on the way – it would be a pot to put things in! He wants to have “Happy Birthday” on it, so he goes to see Owl.

### Eeyore’s birthday

“Many happy returns of Eeyore’s birthday,” said Pooh.

“Oh, is that what it is?”

“What are *you* giving him, Pooh?”

“I’m giving a Useful Pot to keep things in, and I wanted to ask you –”

“Is this it?” said Owl, taking it out of Pooh’s paw.

“Yes, and I wanted to ask you –”

“Somebody has been keeping honey in it,” said Owl.

“You can keep *anything* in it,” said Pooh earnestly.

“It’s very useful like that. And I wanted to ask you –”

“You ought to write ‘*A happy Birthday*’ on it”

(Milne 1950:78–9).

Is this not so typical of two children, each preoccupied with his own world, and desiring to communicate while bypassing each other?

“It’s a nice pot,” said Owl, looking at it all round. “Couldn’t I give it too? From both of us?”

“No,” said Pooh. “That would not be a good plan. Write on it” (Milne 1950:79).

Owl licks the end of his pencil, and wonders how to spell “birthday” ..... and this is what he writes:

HIPY PAPY BTHUTHDTH THUTHDA BTHUTHDY (Milne 1950:87)

Pooh looks on admiringly. Piglet gives him only a burst balloon, but, in keeping with his character, Eeyore accepts the gifts with pleasure.

Eeyore wasn’t listening. He was taking the balloon out, and putting it back again, as happy as could be ...

“And didn’t *I* give him anything?” asked Christopher Robin sadly.

“Of course you did,” I said (Milne comes back into the narrative to help Christopher Robin). “You gave him – don’t you remember – a little – a little –” (waiting cleverly for Christopher Robin’s response).

“I gave him a box of paints to paint things with.”

“That was it” (Milne 1950:87).



### **Kanga and Roo**

Kanga and little Roo come on the scene later than the other animals and new arrivals are not welcome in a group of children. Accordingly they decide to take

Roo as a hostage and replace him with Piglet. But the adventure does not turn out quite as planned. Piglet jumps into Kanga's pouch, suffers a cold bath, his colour is lighter after this ordeal and Christopher Robin joins the game with Kanga:

“Perhaps it's some relation of Pooh's,” said Christopher Robin. “What about a nephew or an uncle or something?” ...

“I shall call it Pootel,” said Christopher Robin. “Harry Pootel for short.” (Milne 1950:105).

Harry Pootel jumps out of Kanga's arms, runs for his life through the open door, and when he is a 100 yards away rolls the rest of the way home, so as to get his own nice comfortable colour back. After that Kanga and Roo stay in the Forest and they are all happy again.

The roles of Christopher Robin and Pooh are interesting. Christopher Robin, as has already been noted, becomes the parent substitute. He is on the side of Kanga against the others, he plays the role of the back-stop, who is there to resolve situations time and again. Pooh is the ideal child – or the sort of child Milne thought of as ideal, yet all the animals are aspects, moods of any one child. Kanga brings in the maternal element. We must remember Christopher Robin was an only child – and only children often create an imaginary society for themselves. (My eldest daughter used to visit her friend, Howdodowdy, who lived first in India, then in Australia. She often went with a small suitcase packed with fruit and a sweater to the summerhouse at the top of the garden).

## The flood

The sight of a spectacular event can create a lasting impression on a child.

Piglet's house was completely surrounded by water, after "It rained and it rained and it rained". If only he was not all alone.

"It's a little Anxious," he said to himself, "to be a Very Small Animal Entirely Surrounded by Water" (Milne 1950:128).

All the others could escape ...

... Eeyore could escape by – by Making a Loud Noise Until Rescued, and here am I, surrounded by water and I can't do *anything* (Milne 1950:128).

Piglet may be a "Very Small Animal", but he has his moments.

Then suddenly he remembered a story which Christopher Robin had told him about a man on a desert island who had written something in a bottle and thrown it into the sea ...

He searched for a pencil and paper and a bottle and wrote

HELP!

PIGLET (ME)

on one side of the paper, on the other side –

IT'S ME PIGLET, HELP HELP (Milne 1950:130).



He throws the bottle, with the paper in it, as far as he can throw, and is aware he has done all he can to save himself. He is obviously, in Kipling's words "an animal of infinite resource and sagacity", who can spell (without making a fuss about it) and can use his knowledge in action.

When the rain began, Pooh was asleep. Pooh, who had had a tiring day, and had eaten well, suddenly had a dream. He was at the East Pole, where it was very cold. Woozles came to nibble the fur off his legs to make nests for their young – until they were so cold, he woke up and found that water was all around him. He must escape. He gets the pots of honey which he finishes in four days. He finds Piglet's bottle and recognises the "P's" on the paper inside and thinks that it's a "missage" (Milne 1950:132-4).

He uses a large honey jar as a boat – and gives it the name "The floating Bear". For a while Pooh and "The Floating Bear" – were uncertain as to which of them was meant to be.

He paddles off to see Christopher Robin, who lived at the very top of the Forest, where his house was beyond the reach of the flood, and where he marked the rising level of the water, each day,

On the morning on the fifth day he saw the water all round him, and knew that for the first time in his life he was on a real island. Which was very exciting! (136).

Owl flies over to say "How do you do?"

"The atmosphere conditions have been very unfavourable lately," said Owl.

"The what?"

“It has been raining,” explained Owl.

“Yes,” said Christopher Robin. “It has.”

“The flood-level has reached an unprecedented height.”

“The who?”

“There’s a lot of water about,” explained Owl.

Owl is obviously a child who will become a professor of meteorology!

“Have you seen Pooh?” asks Christopher Robin. Owl flies off to find him.

Pooh turns up.

“Here I am,” said a growly voice behind him. Pooh has come by boat, as we know.

“On my boat,” said Pooh proudly, “I had a Very Important Message sent me in a bottle, and owing to having got some water in my eyes, I couldn’t read it, so I brought it to you. On my boat” (Milne 1950:137–9).

A splendid excuse for not reading it and so typical of a child’s “alternative reasoning” to avoid admitting the truth.

When it comes to rescuing Piglet, Pooh has the brilliant idea of using Christopher Robin’s umbrella.

“And then this Bear, Pooh Bear, Winnie-the-Pooh, F.O.P. (Friend of Piglet’s), R.C. (Rabbit’s, companion), P.D. (Pole Discoverer), E.C. & T.F. (Eeyore’s

Comforter and Tail-finder)’’ thinks of the umbrella. This is so characteristic of certain children, wanting to create an impression and praise their companions. Piglet is rescued in the umbrella boat (*The Brain of Pooh*) (Milne 1950:140).

And as that is really the end of the story, and I am very tired after that last sentence, I think I shall stop there (Milne 1950:143).

Milne, the author, reappears to bring this series of adventures to an end. He is present in the first chapter, when he is asked by Christopher Robin to tell a Winnie-the-Pooh story. By the double magic of *I am a storyteller*, he brings Winnie-the-Pooh to life and introduces Christopher to the universe of friends/toys.

The first person he (Winnie-the Pooh) thought of was Christopher Robin.

“Wasn’t it me?” said Christopher Robin in a voice full of emotion, hardly daring to believe his ears.

The author then retires from the stories and intervenes only once before closing the story as he began, shortly before bath-time, when Pooh again becomes a toy bear (revealed by Shepard’s drawing).

### **House at Pooh Corner**

Thus, in this first book, toys take on personalities. This is developed further in *The House at Pooh Corner*. When Tigger appears, he is not considered as a toy,

but as a “bouncy” child, fussy about his food. He does not like honey (fortunately for Pooh) nor acorns (Piglet) nor thistles (Eeyore) but he loves Malt Extract (Roo’s Fortifying Medicine). But Piglet, who finds Tigger excessively bouncy finds that “he is already fortified enough”.

Even small (short for “very Small Beetle”) is personified and when he is lost all the animals “organise a search”. Small is found on Pooh’s back when he and Piglet get out of the gravel-pit into which they had fallen.

So when Christopher Robin has helped them out of the gravel-pit, they all went off together hand-in-hand.

The animals all sign a “resolution” which is presented by Eeyore, for they know that Christopher Robin is going to leave them. Eeyore has written a poem:

The Poem which I am now about to read to you was written by Eeyore, or Myself, in a Quiet Moment. If somebody will take Roo’s bull’s-eye away from him, and wake up Owl, we shall be able to enjoy it. I call it – POEM.

This was it.

Christopher Robin is going  
At least I think he is  
Where?  
Nobody knows  
But he is going –  
I mean he goes  
*(To rhyme with “knows”)*  
Do we care?  
*(to rhyme with “where”)*  
We do  
Very much ... (Milne 1963:164).



Pooh and Christopher Robin stay behind.

They walk on, thinking of This and That, and by-and-by they came to an enchanted place on the very top of the Forest called Galleons Lap ...

The evolution of the personalities is ended, for Christopher Robin thinks about his future, while Pooh remains his favourite companion. Pooh says

“What I like best in the whole world is Me and Piglet going to see You, and You saying ‘What about a little something?’ and Me saying ‘Well, I shouldn’t mind a little something, should you, Piglet?’ and it being a hummy sort of day outside, and birds singing”.

In the second volume the storyteller disappeared and the child and his friends have their own life and it is Christopher Robin himself who puts an end to the interplay of imagination and of childhood.

“Pooh, when I’m – *you* know – when I am *not* doing Nothing, will you come up here sometimes?”

“Just Me?”

“Yes Pooh.”

“Will you be here too?”

“Yes, Pooh, I will be *really*. I promise I will be, Pooh.”

... “Pooh, *promise* you won’t forget about me, ever. Not even when I’m a hundred”.

Pooh thought for a little.

“How old shall *I* be then?”

“Ninety-nine”

Pooh nodded.

“I promise,” he said (Milne 1963:171).

The author is content in these last lines to look from a distance at the world he has created, but from which he is excluded.

Here then are the books. They give children the security of a family environment, with different friends who each have their particular characteristics – feel small like Piglet, be sad like Eeyore or verbose like Owl.

But these traits are also the different facets of the personality of Christopher Robin (and of any child). Through the dialogues, the child-reader (or listener) becomes conscious of his moods and the moods of others.

Milne (his wife and many other parents) have thought that toys, if they are loved, become people or at least personalities and create an environment which, especially for a child, encourages the development of imagination and gives a sense of security which are both so essential for children.

### The Hums



The pleasure of the text also derives from the humour of the verses with which it is studded – the famous hums of Pooh – mixing verses “of no importance” with a prose full of surprises.

Isn't it funny  
How a bear likes honey?  
Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!  
I wonder why he does (Milne 1950:6).

And when Pooh climbs into the tree looking for a bees' nest, which will have honey he thinks of another song.

It's a very funny thought that, if Bears were Bees,  
They'd build their nests at the *bottom* of trees.  
And that being so (if the Bees were Bears),  
We shouldn't have to climb up all these Stairs (Milne 1963:1).

These verses have their own logic, even if they prove enlightening in a rather unrealistic kind of way on bears and bees and the logic created from the humorous verse.

In the first chapter of *The House at Pooh Corner*, Pooh is looking for Piglet's house and to his surprise, he saw the door was open, and the more he looked inside the more Piglet wasn't there.

“He's out”, said Pooh sadly, “That's what it is. He's not in. I shall have to go for a fast Thinking Walk by myself. Bother!” (Milne 1963:6).

But first he thought that he would knock very loudly just to make quite sure ... and while he waited for Piglet not to answer, he jumped up and down to keep warm, and a hum came suddenly into his head, which seemed to him a Good Hum, such as is hummed Hopefully to Others.

Humour also is found in the repetition of effects. Pooh loves honey, as we know, and in *The House at Pooh Corner* there is constant reference to honey (perhaps symbolising food in general – an important factor in a child's life.)

Sing Ho! for the life of a Bear!  
Sing Ho! for the life of a Bear! ...  
Sing Ho! for a Bear!  
Sing Ho! for a Pooh.  
And I'll have a little something in an hour or two!

He was so pleased with the song that he sang it all the way to the top of the Forest, “and if I go on singing it much longer,” he thought, “it will be time for the little something, and then the last line won't be true.” So he turned it into a hum instead.

This formula is well-known in many English families. Of course one cannot be too precise and one just needs a “little something,” specially towards eleven o’clock in the morning.

“Nearly eleven o’clock,” said Pooh happily.

“You’re just in time for a little smakerel of something,” and he put his head into the cupboard (Milne 1963:3).

The clock was still saying five minutes to 11 when Pooh and Piglet set out on their way half an hour later.

### **Charm of nature**

The charm of the story and its appeal for children as well as adults depends on the novel use of language, and its subtle understatement. The confusion, the marvellous discovery of its own logic, with words in a simple language reflecting an insight into the child mind. And, many children like eating.

In fact, Pooh and Piglet were in Pooh’s house when outside,

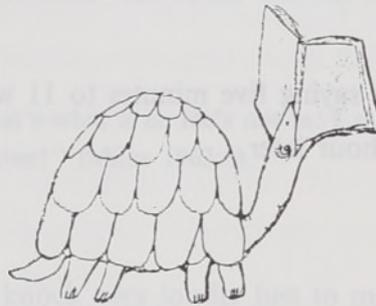
... the wind had dropped, and the snow, tired of rushing round in circles trying to catch itself up, now fluttered gently down until it found a place on which to rest, and sometimes the place was Pooh’s nose and sometimes it wasn’t, and in a little while Piglet was wearing a white muffler round his neck and feeling more snowy behind the ears than he had ever felt before (Milne 1963:3–4).

The personification of the snow, the tenderness and humour of the text, the simplicity of the construction and the unusual, subjective use of snow translated

into the recognition of a situation by an adult, yet with the impressions and the unique sensation of a child.

The more it snows  
    (Tiddely pom),  
The more it goes  
    (Tiddely pom),  
The more it goes  
    (Tiddely pom),  
On snowing.

And nobody knows  
    (Tiddely pom),  
How cold my toes  
    (Tiddely pom),  
Are growing.



This is the kind of alternative logic which is so liked by children.

The subtle humour which underlies the description and the personification of nature, the creation of an ambience in which the characters – to a large degree more or less grown-up, can laugh at their inadequacies and face them. All that is a valuable contribution to the literature of childhood.

It is thus the memory of a happy childhood – and who does not want to feel the possibility of that – the humour of a Bear of Little Brain, the easy and simple style and the evocation of nature which enables Winnie-the-Pooh books to be seen on the shelves of children, young adults – and even the aged. In a new South Africa, it is to be hoped Pooh and his friends become known to a much wider audience, emphasising the role of friendship and love, whatever the problems beyond that of a parent and child, and among the family as a whole.

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