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The Hundred Acre Wood Revisited

Jennifer Harrison, ed. 2021. *Positioning Pooh: Edward Bear after 100 Years*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 218 pp. ISBN 978-1-4968-3411-9.

Nikola Novaković

As Jennifer Harrison, the editor of *Positioning Pooh*, states in the introduction to this collection of essays, the available scholarship on the *Pooh* books by A.A. Milne is “sparse compared to other classics from the ‘golden age’ of children’s literature”, perhaps because Milne’s stories “were traditionally considered simplistic and datedly nostalgic” (x). Abandoning such a stance and aiming at filling “a decades-long leanness in concentrated

Pooh scholarship” (ix), this volume seeks to highlight “the plurality of perspectives, modes, and interpretations these stories offer” (ix-x). It certainly succeeds on both fronts, collecting as it does ten articles (and a delightful “bonus” chapter) that offer a wide range of theoretical approaches probing into the fascinating complexity of the *Pooh* books.

Besides providing a brief but very useful history of the aforementioned sparse Pooh scholarship, Harrison’s introduction also retraces the complicated history of the Pooh phenomenon, from the origin of Winnie-the-Pooh’s name to Disney’s association with the character, illuminating the continuously shifting legacy of the franchise and “the fractured identity of Pooh” (ix). The latter point is taken up immediately in chapter one, “How Pooh Sticks... And Comes Unstuck: Derrida in the Hundred Acre Wood”, in which David Rudd explores the intersections between the *Pooh* books and some of Jacques Derrida’s central ideas. Embarking from the point of Derrida’s concept of *différance*, Rudd grapples with the fascinating complexity of Winnie-the-Pooh’s name and uncovers a range of tensions inherent both in its tangled history and the various slippages between the name and its signified. Furthermore, and as suggested by its title, the chapter surveys how the *Pooh* books both reveal the signifying process and challenge signification, or “the ability of signifiers to capture the world” (10). Rudd draws attention to several Derridean ambiguities within the *Pooh* stories, from their construction of the concept of house and home to the obscured identity of the narrator’s voice and the tensions created by the staging of conflicting perspectives on hospitality and gift-giving. Essentially, all of the ambiguities identified in the chapter revolve around boundaries, and Rudd successfully demonstrates ways of employing Derrida’s thought in the exploration of how Milne’s work stages the inconstancy and permeability of boundaries.

Donna Varga’s “Winnie: Troubling the Idealization of the Bear as Childhood Innocent” provides a chronological examination of how the real bear, Winnie, which served as motivation for Milne’s creation of the character of Pooh, was coded and framed in a variety of sources and publications. Varga traces this “anthropomorphized reconfiguration” (23) of Winnie as a commodity, moving from recognition of Winnie’s animal nature to a gradual anthropomorphisation that resulted in a “merging of Winnie’s selfhood with that of the literary character”, with the latter’s “childlike persona” being reflected onto the real animal (20). Varga thus reveals a process which occasionally relies on fictional rather than factual material and ultimately “devalue[s] [Winnie’s] animal being” (ibid.), erases “her animal telos” (33), and instead uses her as a surface onto which a vision of idealised childhood is inscribed. Although Varga discovers venues and sources that memorialise Winnie as an animal without utilising invented material or stripping her of her animal nature, she shows that such attempts are far outnumbered by those that rely on anthropomorphisation, warning that this type of approach negates the animal’s worth as a fellow being and may promote “erroneous knowledge about bears and unrealistic expectations of their behavior toward humans” (36).

Probing the tensions concealed under the “voyeuristic, syrupy, mawkish” (46) ending of the *Pooh* stories, Zoe Jaques’ “Always Playing: The Spectral Nostalgia of Cinematic Pooh” uncovers conflicting perspectives on and within Milne’s works. Beginning with the strained relationship between the ending’s creation of a fantasy of nostalgic desire and Christopher Milne’s own absence of nostalgia in his comments on his childhood, the chapter sets out

to examine how “the *Pooh* stories are indeed haunted by the disruptive specter of adult-child friction” (48). Aligning nostalgia with the liminal nature of Jacques Derrida’s concept of the spectre, Zoe Jaques focuses on two recent films, *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (2017) and *Christopher Robin* (2018), and uncovers the ways in which both establish a mode of remembrance she terms “spectral nostalgia” (50). Analysing the former’s haunting absences as well as its highlighting of uncanny and destabilising moments and elements in the history of the *Pooh* stories, Jaques discovers that the film resists the “nostalgic lure” and instead engages in “exposing and to some extent exorcising the phantoms that haunt *Pooh*’s textual history” (56). While Disney’s *Christopher Robin* is found to be focused on “a fantasy adulthood that bears little semblance to biography” (57), Jaques argues that the film simultaneously exhibits awareness of the frictions and tensions foregrounded in *Goodbye Christopher Robin*, particularly with regard to uncanniness and spectral absence, thus creating an approach that is “both nostalgic and resistant to that mode” (ibid.).

In “Latecomers to the Hundred Acre Wood: The Tension between Nostalgia and Updating in *The Return to the Hundred Acre Wood* and *The Best Bear in All the World*”, Niall Nance-Carroll compares the authorised sequels published for the eightieth and ninetieth anniversaries of the first book, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, both to each other and to Milne’s own books, showing how the former functions as a “progressive revision” of the *Pooh* books, while the latter operates as a “more purely nostalgic text” (66). Nance-Carroll performs this reading by exploring the ways in which the two sequels represent “two differing traditions of nostalgia” (67), relying on a conception of the “restorative” versus the “reflective” mode of nostalgia. Whereas *The Best Bear in All the World* is found to adhere more closely to the restorative mode, aiming at preserving Milne’s version of the Hundred Acre Wood and offering “an ever-available return to the familiar fictional space of childhood” (78), the author shows how *The Return to the Hundred Acre Wood* is more aligned with the reflective mode, incorporating both Christopher Robin’s progress toward adulthood and changing the gender dynamics between the animals by the introduction of a new female character.

“The Curious Disappearance of Christopher Robin: A New Understanding of Narratives in *The Many Adventures of Winnie-the-Pooh* in Hong Kong Disneyland” by Jonathan Tsang Chun Ngai examines one of the attractions in Hong Kong Disneyland, a guided trip with animatronic characters recreating selected scenes from the *Pooh* books, through a narratological lens in order to examine how the attraction in question places its audience in different subject positions. Embarking from an initial exploration of the interplay between the ride’s diegetic and mimetic aspects of world making, the chapter argues that the attraction deliberately frames the rider as focaliser and, more specifically, places the rider in the role of Christopher Robin. The author’s approach to the theme park attraction expands on Gérard Genette’s system of focalisation by introducing the idea of an “intrinsic” focaliser, a concept that could be usefully employed in other readings of such “embodied adaptations” (92). Finally, the chapter also takes into account the audience’s embodiment of a new cultural perspective within the context of an attraction where East meets West and argues for a consideration of such rides as sites of cultural negotiation.

The sixth chapter, “Bringing Winnie Home: *The World of Pooh* in a Canadian Context”, by Megan De Roover, touches on several issues that formed the central concern of Donna Varga’s

chapter, but provides a different perspective. De Roover examines efforts at appropriating the origin story of Winnie the bear in Canada but expands this theme to explore the cultural practices of transforming bears from animals into variously coded signifiers, from roadside attractions to military mascots. De Roover notes that bears, and animals as a whole, are made to symbolise humans and human culture, perhaps most prominently in the service of promoting nationhood, as in the case of Canada. By thus recontextualising the origin story of Winnie in the environment from which the bear was initially taken as a cub, De Roover draws attention to incompatibilities that arise from the relationship between Canada and bears, such as in the parallel stances of organised bear hunts and efforts at protecting and adopting bear cubs. How these contradictions between conquest and stewardship can be reconciled while making room for Winnie the bear and Winnie-the-Pooh as “the stories of two kindly and generous bears” (117) in which Canadians can find common ground for self-identification remains the central question posed by De Roover’s consideration of Winnie in Canada.

In “Reading *Winnie-the-Pooh* in Croatian Primary Schools”, Nada Kujundžić and Ivana Milković explore the reasons for the “fairly unenthusiastic response” (140) that Milne’s work has enjoyed in the Croatian literary and academic environment. As the results of the authors’ investigation show, the Croatian translation of *Winnie-the-Pooh* has consistently appeared on reading lists for Croatian primary schools, but its relegation to the “recommended” part of such lists indicates that it is not necessarily studied in Croatian schools. Following this discovery, the authors analyse the annotated editions of the Croatian translation of *Winnie-the-Pooh* and various guides and companions (including sources available online) intended to foster reading comprehension. While providing detailed observations about the number and purpose of the paratexts of such editions, the authors also show how some of the annotations and other accompanying materials either ignore or omit certain elements in their interpretation of them (one obvious omission being some of the humour and irony present in the original but absent from the translation) or overexplain other aspects of the text (such as wordplay), thus potentially reducing the playfulness of Milne’s text. Lastly, Kujundžić and Milković offer a survey of Croatian primary school textbooks which shows where, when, and to what extent Milne’s work has been represented in such teaching material.

As Sarah E. Jackson points out at the beginning of chapter eight, “Brains and Fluff: Classification, Colonialism, and Childhood in A.A. Milne’s Pooh Books”, “[i]t is difficult to read certain children’s ‘classics’ in isolation from the colonial contexts in which they were written” (148). Jackson argues that “the Pooh stories are not immune from the influence of colonialism” (ibid.), identifying this influence in Milne’s parody of nineteenth century adventure novels and stories of hunting or the theme of new animals arriving in the Forest representing “the intrusion of the colonies into Milne’s arcadia” (150). If the Pooh books respond to the influence of colonialism, Jackson argues that this response is complex, with the roles of coloniser and colonised never clearly or permanently demarcated. Emphasising the importance of rhetoric in the colonial process, the author focuses on a tension between colonising and anticolonising attitudes in the Pooh books that rest on the characters’ attempts to “classify each other, themselves, and their environment in order to appear knowledgeable and in control of their surroundings, establish a hierarchy among themselves,

and gain power over each other” (149). However, as Milne constructs a “complex and, at times, contradictory narrative world in which readers can encounter a range of perspectives on colonialism” (152), Jackson reveals that the same methods can also be harnessed for anticolonial resistance, and that both colonial classification and anticolonial reclassification can exist within a single character as they “shift in and out of the role of colonizers through their language” (ibid.).

In chapter nine, “Seeing Past Cuteness: Searching for the Posthuman in Milne’s Pooh Books”, Perry Nodelman offers a fascinating exploration of the intersections and interactions between the categories of animal, toy, and (adult and child) human as embodied by Milne’s characters. Inquiring whether such a subversion of boundaries can be read within the framework of a posthumanist “view of life that crosses restrictive lines” (165) and “rejoin[s] what humanism has put asunder” (166), Nodelman shows how Milne’s representation of his characters as “less than adult, less than animallike, even less than toylike” because “they are essentially perceived as being childlike” (170) resists posthumanist interpretations that rely on a definition of humanism according to which Milne’s characters are preadult and thus prehuman. Probing into the ways that Milne’s books construct the childlike nature of their characters through the deployment of cuteness, Nodelman argues that by looking beyond “the framework of cute childlikeness” (174) we find a bleakness and emptiness of activity that aligns the Pooh books with the hopeless futility of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and therefore “too much a vision of human angst and solitude to offer much in the way of a celebration of animal- or cyborg-like otherness” (175). However, what Nodelman’s reading ultimately reveals is that the shifting perspectives of Milne’s books which depict his characters as both childlike and adult “open a pathway beyond the very act of colonization that defines them as acceptably childlike in the first place” (176). By arguing that Milne creates “unstable entities combining childlikeness and adulthood in ways that challenge the separation and thus the validity of those categories” (180) and by exploring the ways in which Milne’s books enact a world of childlike utopia penetrated by adulthood, Nodelman reveals that Milne’s “act of imagining a childlike space representative of childlike thinking” (181) was always contaminated by what that safe place sought to eliminate: “the mind that made it up – the mind that therefore remains active within it in ways that undermine its separateness and its supposed limitations” (ibid.).

Chapter ten, “‘There’s Always Pooh and Me’: The Reality of Edward Bear in a Posthuman World” by Tim Wadham, continues the exploration of the intersections between the *Pooh* books and posthumanism. Wadham traces the history of children’s literature “as it has moved from a mythic, prehumanist literature that acknowledged the spiritual, to a humanist literature that insists upon human reality” (193), finally comparing Edward Bear to such “posthuman bears” (ibid.) like Teddy the “Super-Toy” from Brian Aldiss’s 1969 short story “Super-Toys Last All Summer Long” (later adapted by Steven Spielberg in *AI Artificial Intelligence*) and the evil Lots-o’-Huggin’ Bear from *Toy Story 3*. Observing that the “antihumanist incarnation” of posthumanism “rejects the traditional understanding of the human condition, taking the idea of human superiority and relegating it to the level of biocentric, nature-based inquiry” (184), Wadham’s reading argues that the *Pooh* texts are “profoundly humanist” because the character of a human child is required to bring “alive” Pooh and the other toys within the framework of Christopher Robin’s imaginative play.

In an amusing and penetrating bonus chapter, “Pooh, Poohing, and Other Verbal Time Bombs”, Nicholas Tucker explores the possible reasons behind the fact that the (originally unintended) scatological meaning which has become attached to Pooh’s name has not provoked attempts at modification of Milne’s text. Starting from this problem, Tucker embarks on an exploration of double entendres in the history of children’s literature, investigating works that have received revisions or alterations over their publication history, as well as those that have either ceased to be published or, as in the case of the *Pooh* books, have been preserved in their original form despite the suggestive extra meaning. Tucker’s research suggests several potential reasons behind “the persistence of genuine double entendres from the past [...] well into modern times” (207), such as hesitation on the part of editors to alienate respected authors or the psychological concept of cognitive dissonance, ultimately arguing that the most salient reason currently lies in the changing attitudes to the discussion of taboos, reflected in the modern trend of including double entendres in contemporary texts in general and speaking openly about formerly unseemly subjects (such as excrement) in children’s literature in particular.

As evident from the above outline of the chapters of *Positioning Pooh*, the volume succeeds in its aim of “present[ing] a central argument that the Pooh stories remain relevant for readers in a posthuman, information-centric, media-saturated, globalized age because of the ways in which they destabilize social certainties on all levels – linguistic, ontological, legal, narrative, political, and so on” (xii). The essays collected here will be useful to anyone interested in or performing research within any of the above fields, both inside and outside the frame of A.A. Milne’s books and children’s literature in general. For those among us who have long been absent from the Hundred Acre Wood or have even made the error of aligning ourselves with the view that these were “simplistic and datedly nostalgic” (x) stories, the publication of *Positioning Pooh* sends out an urgent invitation to reconsider, return, and observe that enchanted place through a new set of theoretical lenses.

A Bookish Feast

Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard. 2020. *Table Lands: Food in Children’s Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 215 pp. ISBN 978-14-9682-835-4.

Nikola Novaković

Table Lands, a collection of essays on the function of food in children’s literature, brings together articles written by Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard, both from the Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia, USA. In their own words, the authors “intend *Table Lands* to be a broad survey of food’s function in children’s texts, showing how comprehending the sociocultural contexts of food reveals fundamental understandings of the child and children’s agency and enriches the interpretation of such texts” (6). And it is certainly a broad look at the subject, covering a diverse pool of authors, from classic writers such as Beatrix Potter, Maurice Sendak, and A.A. Milne to more contemporary novelists such as Francesca Lia Block and Rita Williams-Garcia. The book consists of ten chapters, each focused on a specific role played by food in children’s literature, using an