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### Reassuring Readers: Winnie-the-Pooh

Stephen Canham

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE ASSOCIATION

# Quarterly

FALL 1980

## Byars, Kuskin to Speak at ChLA Spring Conference

Banquet speaker at the Eighth Annual Conference of the ChLA will be Newbery Award-winning novelist Betsy Byars, whose most recent novel, *The Night Swimmers* (Delacorte, 1980), was a Boston Globe/Horn Book Honor Book. Featured also will be Karla Kuskin, winner of the 1979 NCTE Poetry Award, whose poetry was the subject of an article by Alethea Helbig in the last *Quarterly* (Vol. 5, #2). A local panel, consisting of Susan Pearson, an author and editor, Karen Ritz, an illustrator, and Jane Resh Thomas, an author and critic who served on the National Book Awards Committee, will discuss creating and publishing away from New York and Boston. The third speaker will be announced shortly, and ChLA members will receive a mailing with further information on the program and on registration.

In addition to papers, exhibits, autographing session and cocktail party, the March 27-29th meeting will offer a Children's Theatre production of *The Three Musketeers*, and tours of The Ralph Waldo Emerson Room of the Minneapolis Public Library, and of the Kerlan Collection of the University of Minnesota Library. The Kerlan Collection specializes in 20th-c editions, mss., original art, and correspondence, relating to children's books. Among the panel and group discussions at the Conference will be one on "The Canon of Children's Literature" published in the last *Quarterly*, and another on "Teaching Children's Literature."



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## Reassuring Readers: Winnie-the-Pooh

The world of Winnie-the-Pooh is an "unself-conscious" world, one which is complete in and of itself, a world of the imagination, of play and distress, a world which is very much a child's world. Reassurance is one of the key values of this world, one of the central, operating principles of the fiction. It is reassuring, it is consoling. Inside its simplicity is an impulse to reassure the reader (not just the child), to tell us despite the apparent confusion and chaos of the world for those of us with very little brain, there is beauty, order, and harmony. That all of life's crises, from diluvian disasters to friendlessness, can and will turn out right. This is reassuring, no doubt about it; some would call it sentimental, even downright false, but this is the Hundred Acre Wood, not Los Angeles. (cont. p. 25)

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

CORINNE HIRSCH teaches in the English Department of Simmons College. She read a paper on Natalie Babbitt at the 1980 Conference of the ChLA.

ELIZABETH SEGAL teaches at the University of Pittsburgh and is working on a study of girls' books and boys' books.

LOIS R. KUZNETS is Assistant Professor in the English Department of Lehman College, CUNY, teaching children's literature among other courses.

SUSAN R. GANNON teaches children's literature and other courses at Pace University. Her article on parallels to Pinocchio in Lucian appeared in Children's Literature, Vol. 8.

gedy can result. Just as things look their blackest, Christopher Robin reveals himself (deus ex machina) perched in a tree, able to Sort It All Out and to greet Pooh with "Silly old bear," his affectionate, endearing phrase for the toy he has made come alive. Christopher Robin gently enlightens the misguided pair and, more importantly, soothes the addled Pooh -- "You're the Best Bear in All the World." Pooh brightens and recalls that it is nearly Luncheon Time. It is a pattern repeated throughout the book: Pooh in or involved with Danger and Distress, Christopher Robin appearing to solve, rescue, and console.

Patterns of temple and escape about Christopher Robin

Christopher Robin possesses the ability to think clearly and act effectively in the world of the Hundred Acre Wood, to transform potential disaster to comic resolution. He is, in one sense, the analytical, intelligent aspect of the child, the complex, knowledgeable, confident side of us. But, and we must not forget this, he is not a symbol but a boy, a loving, kind, adventurous child.

Pooh, himself, is much more than an engaging klutz, more than foil for Christopher Robin's efficiency, and it seems to me that it is in this "moreness" that both his enduring charm and his significance lie. We all note and respect Pooh's admirable childlike qualities, such as his openness, his honesty, his compassion; but I think he is even more fundamentally like a child than even these traits reveal. Pooh is a bear of very little brain, but of great feeling, and, even further, of great hunger. He is always involved with food, with obtaining, sampling, and protecting his precious honey (and it is precious to him, which makes his birthday gift to Eeyore, though slightly abortive, so endearing). It is almost always time for a little something, time to satisfy the unrelenting demands of the body. What child (or adult, for that matter) does not have to accommodate the needs of the spirit to the needs of the body?

we all have hunger in common with Pooh

POOH (cont)

This impulse to reassure is also fundamentally comic, in that profound aspect of comedy which recognizes creative, constructive patterns beneath the often baffling surface of events and actions. It is upon this comic impulse that the individual episodes and larger movement of the book depend. Take the Woozle hunt, for instance; it is funny to watch the artless bumbling of Pooh and Piglet, and those of us who have spent our nights out snipe hunting, flashlight and gunnysack in hand, can chuckle (with chagrin or smugness) at the errant hunters. But the child and "young" adult may not laugh, for this is, after all, an adventure, one that seems to be going rather badly for the heroes. The calm surface of life in the Hundred Acre Wood has been disturbed--if it can be restored and the characters made to learn from their experience, then we have a comedy; if not, meaningless repetition, confusion, and even tra-

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And what better way to represent this demand than with a bear, one of those voracious, hulkingly beautiful creatures -- "Old Eat-and-Sleep," Jarrell calls his bear in The Animal Family.<sup>1</sup> Notice how the book begins: Pooh is sitting by his tree, when he hears buzzing bees. With the utter, uncalculated solipsism of a hungry animal (and we are animals, like it or not), he pursues the bees to their hive, resourcefully, we might add. Of course the quest is unsuccessful, in that it does not result in food, but it is highly successful rhetorically, for it outlines Pooh's primary concern and the relation he will bear to Christopher Robin, who curtails Pooh's ballooning with an accurate popgun shot.

It is not difficult to recognize in Pooh a manifestation of the child's hunger, the incessant compulsion to check on the refrigerator just to see how it's doing, to see if there might be a little something in it that needs eating. He is more: I think he can be seen as a way of representing the child's body, the physical self to which the energy and excitement of the child is attached. Pooh is forever getting into tight places, into places where he doesn't fit, such as rabbit burrows and honey pots. Shepard's illustrations (which are irrevocably wedded to the text, in my mind, anyway) capture the precarious balance of the bear body, the often awkward, often stumbling corporeal self. Delmore Schwartz, in his poem "The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me," recognizes the same correspondence, finds the same analogy:

The heavy bear who goes with me,  
A manifold honey to smear his face,  
Clumsy and lumbering here and there,  
The central ton of every place,  
The hungry beating brutish one  
In love with candy, anger, and sleep.  
.....  
That inescapable animal walks with me,  
Has followed me since the black womb held,  
Moves where I move, distorting my gesture,

A caricature, a swollen shadow,  
A stupid clown of the spirit's motive . . .  
[Drags] me with him in his mouthing care,  
Amid the hundred million of his kind,  
The scrimmage of appetite everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

Schwartz pushes further in the poem, to the fear of death, the end of the physical body, but in his perception of the "scrimmage of appetite everywhere," he is one with Pooh. But he is also at odds with Pooh, for the speaker is embarrassed, even frustrated and angered, by the fumbling, groping antics of the body and its constant need for sustenance. Winnie-the-Pooh is just the opposite; if it does anything, it assures the child that this body, this hunger, is quite all right and perfectly normal, even wonderful and lovely. After all, we are asked, in order to make Pooh live, to love him in the same way that Christopher Robin loves him, to accept him in a bear hug that both recognizes and fulfills him, to acknowledge that his is a practical way to go about life. In the Introduction, Christopher Robin, finding that special cage in the zoo where you can experience the animals, not just watch them, rushes into the arms of one beloved bear with "a happy cry of 'Oh, Bear!'" This is what we too must do, what all children must learn, to accept and love the embrace of the body.

Pooh seems to move from a concern for himself and his foraging toward a concern for others (such as Eeyore) and in the end is able to act decisively and intelligently to help his companions in the Hundred Acre Wood. The pattern is clear and constant: with Christopher Robin's loving reassurance, the bear of very little brain gradually moves toward an incredulous but proud recognition of his own capacities, a fuller sense of what he is and what he can do. In the next-to-last chapter, "Surrounded by Water," Christopher Robin does not need to rescue Pooh, for the paradigm can now be inverted, allowing Pooh to provide a clever means for the two of them to rescue Piglet. When we recall that he has already dis-

relationship between Winnie-the-Pooh and Christopher Robin  
the awkward Bear Body

the lesson of hunger being natural and acceptable

Winnie-the-Pooh's confidence blooms

Pooh provides the means to rescue in chapter 9, "Surrounded by Water"

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covered a pole and saved Roo, his actions here seem even more significant. He is beginning to act, to shink, to go beyond the fundamental, infantile "body first, all others after" premise of very young children and very immature adults. And notice too that at the end he is acting in consort with Christopher Robin, that together, at Pooh's instigation and idea, they sail off in the "Brain of Pooh."

typo should be "think" read samples for the text to edit in these claims

Christopher Robin, of course, is more than the mental faculties of the child, just as Pooh is more than "the heavy bear who goes with me." But Christopher Robin does show us the child's ability to sort things out, to make sense out of the world, and finally, crucially, to come into harmony with one's own body, to gain a sense of wonder at it, to love it and celebrate it. The eternal dichotomy of body and mind is here resolved quietly, beautifully, and with great sensitivity. Just as the child, for all of his or her occasional difficulty and frustration with the limitations of a developing form, can rise to moments of splendid grace and beauty, so does the book, for all of Pooh's misadventures, in the end go beyond them to a consoling and reassuring celebration of the bear within and around us.

← lessons from the book - Jimmie - the Pooh

Stephen Canham  
University of Hawaii, Manoa

Notes

Jarrell, p. 78. Michael Hornyansky, in "The Truth of Fables" in Sheila Egoff et al., eds., Only Connect: readings on children's literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 124-25, discusses the cartoon character Yogi Bear. "The real secret," Hornyansky says, "of Yogi's appeal is first, his lust for food -- which he must steal despite parental disapproval." Bears will be bears.

Yogi Bear!

Roger Sale, in Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E. B. White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 15,

takes a more disparaging view of Pooh than my own, but he nevertheless admits the great power of Pooh's reassurance for the child reader/listener.

<sup>2</sup>Delmore Schwartz, "The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me," in Summer Knowledge: New and Selected Poems, 1938-1958 (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1959), pp. 74-5.



## NEW STATUS FOR CHILDREN'S LITERATURE!

From Marilyn Apseloff: "Children's Literature has just become a major Division of the Modern Language Association. According to PMLA, 'MLA Divisions encompass the primary scholarly and professional concerns of the Association, with each Division representing a major area of membership interest.' The first meeting of Children's Literature as a Division will be in December, 1981, at the New York MLA; we will still be a Discussion Group this year in Houston. That is a major accomplishment, and again Francelia Butler, with help from Glenn Sadler, deserves most of the credit."

Francelia Butler's adult novel on child abuse, The Lucky Piece (published by Stonehill Publishers), is due out in November, 1980.