

Intoxicating in her tireless appetite

Tracy Quan



We who cut our teeth on *The House at Pooh Corner* could never have imagined that A.A. Milne also invented Chloe Marr, a well-bred party girl whose beauty is "a brilliant attack on the sex of every man". Now that an authorized Winnie-the-Pooh sequel, *Return to the Hundred Acre Wood*, has introduced another type of party girl, Chloe deserves our attention.

Nine years ago, I discovered *Chloe Marr* in a second-hand bookshop in Ottawa. When I spotted Milne's name on the alluring spine of this 1946 novel about "a gay young woman in a year between the wars", I was suddenly forced to grow up. There is no gratuitous lesbian action, of course, but Milne makes allusions to incest that would go right over Pooh's head. In a claustrophobic Fulham studio we find one of Chloe's admirers in a curious arrangement with his insinuating sister Claudia.

Discovering that Pooh's creator wrote edgy irreverent '40s chick-lit is like finding out who your parents were shagging on the side. Indeed, there was something illicit about reading a grown-up Milne story, so I didn't gobble it up in one bite.

Chloe moves "with elegance and grace" through Mayfair, waking just before noon most days. Emerging "like a goddess" from her bath, Chloe tidies the bed with practised carelessness, because an excessive show of chastity might lead her next visitor to suspect she spent the night elsewhere.

Milne was trying, you might say, to recapture his adulthood after too much success with children. His grown-up novels and essays, along with his magazine career, had been snuffed out by Pooh's popularity. Until Chloe entered my life, I had no idea Milne had been an editor at *Granta* and *Punch*, a successful playwright, and a polemicist who wrote two books about war.

Adult Milne is very adult, but never crude, and often whimsical. The voice employed in the Pooh books was no aberration. Whether writing about a plane crash, a child's death, a difficult marriage, or a woman's right to sleep around, he touches upon his subjects lightly, but not too lightly. I nibbled *Chloe Marr* slowly, saving it for trips to the nail salon, where I lost myself in Chloe's nightlife, phone calls, hairdresser appointments, and the rumours she inspired about which man was or wasn't sleeping with her.

As a single girl, I began to feel that Alan Alexander Milne - of all people - was the writer who truly understood my way of life. Whenever real sex was hinted at, I reread the passage diligently. None of this was physically arousing - Milne isn't that kind of writer - but every reference to bed was uniquely enticing. In the same way that you prolong the emotional pleasures of a forbidden love affair,

I was reluctant to close the book on Chloe. Eventually I did, with a new appreciation for my childhood favourites.

Milne's erotic realism is very present in one of his best-loved nursery rhymes, "Disobedience", in which James James Morrison Morrison (commonly known as Jim) tries to monitor, without success, his wayward mother while she, in turn, calculates that she'll be "back in time for tea". This yummy mummy who "seems to have been mislaid" is a perfect example of Milne's light touch applied to an event which could be intoxicating, yet painful.

If I was once just another child of Milne along with millions, I became, thanks to Chloe, a Milne freak. Blame it on the New York Society Library's excellent collection, for this is where I became acquainted with the Milne demons. I fell in love with his family - not only with Christopher Milne, who laid claim to the dark side of those Hundred Acres in two memoirs, but with Christopher's mother Daphne, who eventually sold movie rights to Disney. I detest what Disney has done to Pooh, but love the story behind it. The squabbling is strangely reassuring.

What to make of Milne's behaviour in 1941, after his old friend P.G. Wodehouse was captured and imprisoned in a German internment camp? On the letters page of the *Telegraph*, Milne drew attention to Wodehouse's tax problems, attacked him for being a draft-dodger and did his bit to enhance the accusations of treason that sprang from those infamous radio broadcasts. There's nothing like the awful behaviour of a disappointed friend to put your enemies in perspective.

Milne wasn't a failure, for his Pooh books were selling, but the *Hundred Acre Wood* was not a happy place for him to end up, and he took this out on Wodehouse. *Chloe Marr*, which came out five years later, was Milne's last novel. Was it the necessary antidote to his bitterness? Perhaps not entirely, but Chloe and her circle have become piquant over time rather than dated.

When David Benedictus, author of the Pooh sequel, came up with Lottie the otter to complement Milne's characters, what did he and illustrator Mark Burgess have in mind? Could it be that Lottie's creators were inspired by Milne's charming depiction of a girl about town? I hope not, because Lottie doesn't hold a candle to Chloe.

An otter whose nakedness is punctuated by a thoroughly inappropriate and possibly obscene pearl necklace, Lottie is the product of two men trying to subvert a sexless creation myth. She is conceived as maternal Kanga's profane foil, a moralistic device that doesn't belong to the Milne tradition - and she's not even likeable. Imagine Pooh's demanding appetite combined with Rabbit's bossiness. By introducing this toxic snob to Milne's ecology, the sequelizers of Pooh have broken a faithful reader's heart.

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