

A children's author goes meta with Winnie the Pooh

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This summer, The Globe's Dave McGinn takes the pros to the movies – people whose real lives, professions and passions are flickering up on the big screen – to see where seasonal silliness and reality intersect.

This week: Toronto kids' author Matt Beam takes on Disney's *Winnie the Pooh*.

As Beam well knows, even if kids can't get enough of the lovably flawed bear, and film critics enjoy the film, the real test of any adaptation of a classic is how it lives up to the original books.

Beam, who's explored the language all around us with author Joanne Schwartz in their book *City Numbers*, and told the story of a young boy who lives in his imagination in his book *Earth to Nathan Blue*, weighs in.

Were you a Pooh fan growing up?

My grandfather was the premier of Manitoba. I spent every March break in Winnipeg [the city Winnie the Pooh is named after]. It was around that time that I started reading. I was bored out of my skull and looking through my grandfather's library and there was nothing appealing except for the Winnie the Pooh books.

Why do you think Pooh has been so perennially popular?

It's an interesting narrative construction. Basically, it's a conversation between Christopher Robin and A.A.

Milne. A.A. Milne is asked by Christopher Robin to tell a story about his teddy bear, and A.A. Milne refers to Christopher Robin as "you," but you as a reader are being spoken to as well. You get sucked into it. I think that's part of it. And in the books there's a sagacity to Pooh's stupidity that doesn't come across in the movie.

What is Eeyore's deal in the movie? He's such a complete downer.

I thought Eeyore was done poorly. He was just too down. I don't know if it was the voice [by Bud Luckey] or what, but he was just impenetrably down. When you read the books, there's something funny about Eeyore. He was so unfunny in the movie.

What did you like most about the movie?

The thing I think was actually really well done is that in a way it's a story about books. The first shot was a shot of the teddy bear next to the Winnie the Pooh book. The movie started when the book opens, and then throughout the narrative we return to text, with Pooh climbing over sentences and letters. You think about where books are today, books are in threat of extinction, and this was a real promotion of books.

Were you disappointed that there wasn't 3-D or robots or smell-o-vision, considering how antic and action-packed today's kids' movies are?

Aesthetically, it looked a little different, and the pacing was different. It's old school. But the movie was also meta in a way. Here you are in a theatre, here's the bear, here's the book sitting on an animated couch. It's a story within a story. I think kids are more familiar with those kinds of leaps today.

What's the secret to a great children's story, besides an ADD-addled tiger?

It has to be relatable to their lives. And there has to be emotional stakes. It's the one challenge I find as a Young Adult author, the balance between what you want to say and what entertains kids.

The stakes in this movie didn't seem all that high. It's not like Pooh and the gang had to save the world. They were just out for a pot of honey and a tail, and you go, Um, okay. And it drags because of that.

Why does that bear love him some honey so much anyway?

Honey was a really special thing at one point. Now, watching the movie, the images sort of evoke sugar cereals for me.

What draws you to writing stories for a younger audience?

I think it has to do with a couple of things: not really growing up, for one. I don't act my age, for sure. Another thing is memory. People say to me, "I don't remember anything about that time." I can remember it like it was yesterday. I have a friend who's my age who writes YA novels, too. We went to a writer's conference together, and what did we do? We got a hotel room and used the water slide. We got in trouble from the 15-year-old lifeguard for going down backwards.

Do you sit in a movie like that and think, Oh, that's what kids think is funny?

As an author, it's difficult. You don't have an audience unless you go to schools. When I visit a school and read a book I'll hear what's actually funny. It's not always what I think. To write for kids you need to remember childhood. But it doesn't mean you can completely inhabit something like humour.

This interview has been condensed and edited.