



INNOCENCE LOST AND FOUND

DOMHNALL GLEESON'S PORTRAYAL OF A. A. MILNE IN *GOODBYE CHRISTOPHER ROBIN* SHOWS THAT THE TRAUMA OF WAR CAN LAST MORE THAN A GENERATION. **BY STEVE MARSH**

Domhnall Gleeson is giving the last interview in what has been a long day of interviews, at the beginning of what will be a long season of interviews. He has upcoming roles in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* and the new Darren Aronofsky movie, *Mother!* Today, however, the Irish actor is promoting *Goodbye Christopher Robin*, in which he portrays A. A. Milne, the British author and poet who survived the Great War to return to his wife, Daphne (portrayed by Margot Robbie), and their son, the real-life Christopher Robin (Will Tilston and Alex Lawther).

Milne was inspired by his son and his son's stuffed teddy bear to create the

world of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. The stories catapulted them both into fame at a point in history when the world was particularly thirsty for innocence. The movie delves into his son's effect on Milne—and the effect Milne's books had on his son, who became a reluctant celebrity.

When asked if things are feeling a bit too meta, trapped as he is in a London

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Gleeson as A. A. Milne and Will Tilston as his son, Christopher Robin, in *Goodbye Christopher Robin*; Gleeson as Captain Andrew Henry in *The Revenant*.



hotel room answering the same questions over and over, Gleeson admits to some parallels with the film. “Long calls,” he sighs, “and perhaps a bit of crying.” He laughs and assures me

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that he’s been promised they will allow him to go outside after it’s all over.

Gleeson grew up in Dublin, and he never read the very British *Pooh* books. “The most I knew about *Winnie-the-Pooh* was from one of the Adrian Mole books,” he says. “In that book, one of the babysitters scribbles out the word *Pooh* in all the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books and writes in ‘Winnie-the-S***’ because, she says, ‘at some point the child has to learn the realities of life.’”

Alan Alexander Milne knew about harsh realities; he was injured in July 1916 in one of the most horrific battles of World War I, the battle of the Somme. Gleeson’s portrayal makes



clear the lifelong impact of the Great War’s trauma. Once Milne returned to Britain, he moved from London to East Sussex in southeast England with his family and their nanny into a house on the edge of the Ashdown Forest—the forest that would inspire *Pooh*’s Hundred Acre Wood.

“What’s that famous poem?” Gleeson asks before reciting from memory the beginning of Yeats’ *The Second Coming* in his own lively Irish brogue. “Turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer, things fall apart. That’s the world this movie is taking place in,” he says. “People get bored with peace. People forget how important peace is—all of a sudden you’re getting into a fight over an archduke and everything goes to hell.”

Gleeson says that in the Somme, Milne witnessed the worst that men can do to each other. “And seeing that can destroy your brain,” he says. “Can destroy your innocence irretrievably.” A clearly shell-shocked Milne pushes away his wife and son, and it is only when Daphne slips away to London, leaving behind the man she calls “Blue” and the boy she calls “Billy Moon” to their own devices, that Milne finds hope. It is in the Ashdown Forest that Milne rediscovers the goodness of the world through

the imagination of his son.

Alongside Pooh, Tigger, Piglet and Eeyore, Milne and his boy shoot arrows, climb trees and serve afternoon tea (with honey, lots and lots of honey). The time in the woods begins to heal Milne, and he begins to write again. Not about the horrors of war, but about his idyll in the woods with Billy Moon and his friends. He captures their magic through the alchemy of his words, but he seems to understand that in the process he’s revealing an intimate part of a child’s life. He tries to protect his son by using Billy’s formal name, Christopher Robin, as a sort of alias in the stories.

“The fact that he finds [his innocence] again through the beauty of the relationship with his son, by learning to be loved and to be open again, it’s very redemptive,” Gleeson says. “And it’s just so sad that it backfires so badly for Christopher Robin in this case. That’s such a tragedy and I think that’s what makes the film really compelling.”

The modern psychological scourges of war and fame are the true subjects of the movie. Gleeson says he admires director Simon Curtis’ courage to honor the mores of the era by depicting them realistically,

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BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Gleeson with Tom Cruise in *American Made*; Gleeson and his father, actor Brendan Gleeson, in 2015.



without pulling punches by making the characters more “lovey-dovey.”

“People were much more reserved with physical affection,” he says. “You had half an hour with your kids in the evening, if you were a family of a certain financial standing, and the rest of the time the nanny looked after them. It was a different time, and I don’t think people really understood how damaging fame could be, especially at such a young age.”

What drew Gleeson to *Goodbye Christopher Robin* was the way the three main characters all struggled to deal with their own troubles on their own terms. “They all end up dealing with real trauma,” he says. “Milne obviously goes to war; Daphne’s [experience in] childbirth is absolutely fraught and really damages her long-term relationship with her son; and their son gets damaged by becoming famous when he didn’t ask for it and is unable to manage it.”

“I think people can be harsh on Daphne,” Gleeson says. “Margot [Robbie] was great, because she didn’t apologize for Daphne, she didn’t try to turn her into a modern mother to make her more likeable,” he says. “She showed her closer to how [Daphne] was and how parents at the time were.”

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And in fact, Gleeson says, “it turns out that a lot of the stuff that she did for Alan Milne helped him. The stuff that seems hard is the stuff that he needed. She forces him to dance at parties—and being able to touch people and get back into normal rhythms is really important for people who suffer from PTSD. She leaves him alone in the cottage with their child, and that ends up being a thing that opens the window to his relationship with the boy,” he says. “I think on some subconscious level she understood that what she was doing was necessary.”

Gleeson’s own career was bereft of any similar kinds of childhood trauma. His father, the formidable

Irish actor Brendan Gleeson, was a schoolteacher by day for 10 years while acting in the evenings before finding success. “My dad didn’t go full-time as an actor until he was 34,” he says, which is Gleeson’s age today. “And I was 19 before I did my first professional job.” Gleeson would go on to play Bill Weasley in the *Harry Potter* movies and landed roles in *Ex Machina*, *Brooklyn*, *The Revenant* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

Soon Gleeson’s restlessness becomes apparent—it’s almost time to go outside—so I ask him about his own fame, especially considering the looming *Star Wars* movie on the horizon, *The Last Jedi*, in which he reprises his role as General Hux—a character that may become more famous than Eeyore by Christmas. “Well, Eeyore might be a stretch,” he laughs. “Eeyore wasn’t a genocidal maniac.” Gleeson admits that there are drawbacks to *Winnie-the-Pooh* levels of fame. “Look, that stuff does impact your life, but nobody wants to hear an actor moan about that stuff,” he says. “I made a decision to do *Star Wars*, and maybe that’s affected my life in some ways that are less than positive, but it’s affected my life in so many positive ways that I can’t even think to complain about it.”