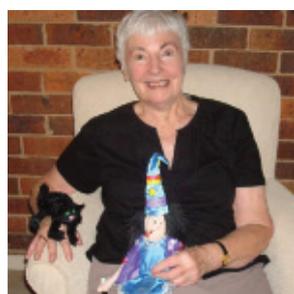


## A Magical Partnership

# Valerie Thomas and Korky Paul



## Winnie and Wilbur: Valerie's Story



First, a bit about me. I am Australian born and bred. I've spent about five years in England overall. I first came to London for two years in my twenties, which is what a lot of Australians did at the time. The first professional writing I did was during those years, when I wrote

about my travel experiences for a women's magazine. I picked the grapes in France for the champagne harvest and that was my very first article. Then I worked as a curriculum consultant for the education department and wrote extensively about spelling. And it was during this time that a friend asked me to write some stories for a reading scheme she was editing. She gave me a list of words and I wrote quite a few stories, including *Winnie the Witch*. Then she lost her job and the reading scheme was abandoned, bad luck for her but good luck for me. If Winnie had been part of an Australian reading scheme she would never have had her stellar career.

I put her in the bottom drawer and some years later OUP sent me some books from one of their reading schemes.

I thought of Winnie and sent her off to them. Then came the next piece of good luck. It was given to Korky to illustrate, to be part of a modest reading scheme, but he took it off to a Greek island and produced his wonderful illustrations. So, it was no longer a reader but a featured picture book, and it won the Children's Book Award that year. Its success is due in part to lucky twists of fate. It was my first children's book.

I used to tell stories to the daughter of a friend of mine who was obsessed with witches, so I had some background. The list of vocabulary I was given included the colours, so that is why they are central to the story. The editor at OUP at the time suggested that Winnie shout, "Abracadabra", and that is now

a feature of the stories. Children who are having a Winnie story read to them shout, "Abracadabra", in the appropriate places. We had a celebration for Winnie's 25th anniversary and 500 children shouting, "Abracadabra" in the Oxford Playhouse could be heard for miles.

After the first book, Winnie and Wilbur have had many adventures but their personalities have remained fairly settled. I try to make certain that the stories have nothing frightening in them. It's sometimes hard to guess what will frighten a young child. A baby dragon comes in through the cat flap in one story and I heard of a little boy who was nervous in case a dragon came in their cat flap. I know from letters children write to me that they enjoy slapstick humour. "I thought it was funny when

Winnie fell down the stairs." I try to make them laugh but also make certain that nobody really gets hurt. Wilbur has had an increasing role in the stories as his popularity grew.

Korky's illustrations are certainly a large part of Winnie's appeal. The details in each illustration give the children so much to look at, and the humour in the stories is also in the illustrations. When I saw the proofs of the first book I was amazed. And I continue to be amazed. When I am writing the stories, I am always picturing the

events. Sometimes Korky's illustrations match my mental picture, sometimes they are quite different. Winnie's house is a good example. I could never have imagined a house like that for her.

I don't write the young fiction books. We toyed with the idea for a while, but my style didn't suit OUP's ideas for the series so somebody else does them. And I am not involved at all with the TV series. They are using the characters but not the stories at the moment.

Winnie's next adventure is a puzzle. Something strange is happening in Winnie's garden. Could it be monsters? Probably not, but you never know.



# Winnie and Wilbur: Korky Paul's Story



In March 1988, I received a letter from the Federation of Children's Book Groups (FCBG). They were writing to tell me that *Winnie the Witch* had been voted one of the top ten for 1987. And who had voted for our book? Children! *Winnie the Witch* went on to win the Children's Book Award for

1987, the year our daughter Zoe was born. That was the start of my involvement with the FCBG, Winnie and Wilbur and being a dad. Now the FCBG is celebrating fifty years of extraordinary work in promoting literacy, Winnie and Wilbur are celebrating thirty years in publishing having sold eight million copies in thirty languages.

My younger brother, Donald, worked for Oxford University Press (OUP). He wrangled a meeting for me with the then Children's Books Editor, Ron Heapy, who must have been wary. You can imagine – some bloke in Sales has an older brother who draws... He looked at my portfolio, photocopied a selection of illustrations and said, "We'll put these on file." Followed by the usual, "Don't phone us, we'll phone..." As I slunk out, feeling a little depressed, Ron handed me a manuscript. "Do me three drawings. It's an A4 format, paperback, double staple bound and part of an Oxford reading

programme. It's about a witch that lives in a black house with a black cat. Written by an Australian, Valerie Thomas." A few weeks later, I returned with three full colour illustrations in a large picture book format. "That's not what I asked for!" he said. "I know. But it's a great story," I replied. "Pity to publish it as an A4 staple bound paperback..." So, the wonderful Ron Heapy agreed to publish *Winnie the Witch* as a proper hardback picture book. Nine years later, the second Winnie and Wilbur book, *Winnie in Winter* was published - the start of the long line of the Winnie and Wilbur capers.

Valerie Thomas, the author, works on her stories quite independently and then, later, she discusses each story with our editor, Helen Mortimer. These discussions are by email as Valerie lives in Australia. My collaboration with Valerie in terms of sitting down with her and discussing the manuscript has been non-existent. However, we have met on several occasions over the years when she visits Europe, but these are social events involving eating and drinking! My working relationship is very much with Helen and Art Director, Kate Adams, who, along with the marketing team, have been nicknamed 'The Winnettes' by my wife Susan! For me the collaboration is with the story and the words, not the author, which I know sounds odd.

Once a final manuscript is ready, Helen and Kate will present the story to me. This has become something of an occasion, a magic moment. For example, *Winnie and Wilbur: The Naughty Knight*, was read to me by a knight in a suit of armour at Broadway Tower, Oxfordshire. Coincidentally, there were a couple of families with young children visiting the

