A Ceremony I Observed

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It was a big day for Monty Robinson, not quite one year old but ready for his first birthday party and his first and only Humanist naming ceremony.

Monty, his parents Jon and Claire, and dozens of guests had gathered in the stately hotel in the heart of A.A. Milne's Hundred Acre Wood in East Sussex. In the 1920s it had been a convent and the long cloisters still remained, cool, grey and silent.

I was to observe Monty's ceremony but first I had to find the room. We often signpost things in our written ceremonies but perhaps an actual signpost or two would have helped the guests. But suddenly an open doorway in the long corridor broke the sombre lighting to reveal a bright, gaudy and *happy* function room, laid out as if for a wedding breakfast.

Fiona, the Humanist celebrant was at the doorway, smartly dressed in a bright flowery yellow dress. Hundreds of excited little children – well, twenty – ran from table to table, dressed in their party frocks and little waistcoats and ties. Their parents, in clothing no less bright, sipped Prosecco and gossiped happily.

No-one was in a rush to get started but at the nominated time, Fiona, acting as the *maître d'* as well as celebrant, rapped a glass with a spoon. She welcomed everyone, saying that today was to be a Humanist naming ceremony for Monty, to give him the widest possible view of the world and one day choose what, if anything, he would believe in.

Fiona described the positive aspects of Humanism, such as altruism and kindness rather than a negative "non-this" and "non-that" definition. Given that we only have One Life, the birth of a new life is particularly significant to us, she said. Fiona took care to remind the guests that they were participating in a meaningful ceremony for Monty, as well as having a jolly good party. Everyone seemed on board with that.

Despite the jollity there was still a moment to acknowledge the absence of some relatives, including Ralph "*who would have so enjoyed his little grandson*".

A celebratory poem was read by a guest, mirroring the happy atmosphere. Then there was a tribute to Monty's life thus far. His parents were obsessed with travel, and safaris in particular, and lions most of all. But, as Fiona archly pointed out, the time had come for them to have a little cub of their own.

There are probably not too many naming ceremonies where the family and social life of wild big cats are described, but this was one, and was entirely appropriate for Jon and Claire's love of safaris.

The guide-parents were called upon to make their promises, to be supportive of Monty in his life. After their affirmations, several children came forwards, each in turn solemnly presenting Monty with a gift of a cuddly toy or book. I think there may even have been a cuddly book.

It's important to strike the right balance between formality and the informality of a party, and to mark clearly the end of the formal ceremony. Claire and Jon read aloud their promises to little Monty and just as Jon finished, Monty quietly and discreetly burped up his milk over his dad's shirt.

Everybody cheered. Monty had announced his presence to the world.