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## The Other 50th Anniversary

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Discusses the Disney film *Snow White* and notes that Tolkien's famous anti-Disney remark predated the latter's films based on fairy tales. Notes possible sources of dwarf-names in *Snow White* and *The Hobbit*.

### Additional Keywords

Dwarfs in Walt Disney; Dwarves in J.R.R. Tolkien; *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (film, Walt Disney); Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward film

# The Other 50th Anniversary

Jessica Giacres

In 1987 and 1988 we celebrated the 50th anniversary of *The Hobbit*, published in the UK in September 1937, and in the USA in March 1938. Many will also have noticed another 50th anniversary, of another famous entertainment for children, dealing with the triumph of good over evil, also inspired by Germanic legend, and including among the good characters a troupe of individually named dwarves. I refer, of course, to Walt Disney's first full-length animated cartoon, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which had its premiere in Los Angeles on 21 December 1937, and came to the UK the year after. Created in secret and nicknamed "Disney's Folly" by other workers in the film industry who did not believe that Disney could break out of the genre of comic cartoons, it stunned its first night audience with the range of emotions it excited.

For a comprehensive history of the making of *Snow White*, and a synopsis, you may go to one of the many books about Walt Disney's art, and particularly a recent celebration co-authored by Tolkien enthusiast Brian Sibley, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and the Making of the Classic Film*. This film tells you all you want to know, for example the rotoscoping technique as used by Bakshi, and by Richard Williams in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, was used by Disney to give *Snow White* natural movement. Sibley's book includes illustrations from scenes later cut out, e.g. when the dwarfs carve a bed for *Snow White*, and tells us that originally Disney planned to have the Queen capture the Prince and throw him into the dungeon to prevent him rescuing *Snow White*. What follows is a tribute to the film, a summary of the common sources used by Disney and Tolkien, and some details of the anti-Disney faction in the USA led by children's librarians.

When we grow disapproving of the sentimental Disney films of the 1960s and 1970s and the made-for-TV pap of the 1980s, when we shudder at the commercialism of theme parks and merchandising, we should remember that Disney's first full-length films set high standards, and that even towards the end of his life there were some gems. The first five films are generally reckoned flawless: these were *Snow White*, *Dumbo*, *Fantasia*, *Pinocchio* and *Bambi*. With *Alice* and *Peter Pan* there was a falling-off, but *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* had their moments, while later on *Mary Poppins*, *101 Dalmatians* and finally *The Jungle Book* still had the old magic, to be set against the appalling *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* and the animal version of *Robin Hood*. Even *The Sword in the Stone* had its moments, e.g. the wizards' duel, but we British tend to be put off by voice-overs in American accents interpreting a story by a British writer set in olden times.

But to return to *Snow White*, as it was his first full-length film, Disney had something to prove. It was the

repository of so much creative genius, and it had been a dream of his ever since he saw a silent, sub-titled version in 1917, to make his own film of *Snow White*. In the cartoon, the sentimentality which was to swamp Disney's later films, both cartoons and live-action, was held in check.

As well as the sentimentality illustrated in *Snow White*'s relationship with animals and birds, and the music-hall comedy for the dwarfs, Disney went back to the fairy-tale tradition for the Queen, Prince, Mirror and Huntsman. These are unaffected by sentimentality or comedy. *Snow White* is really a girl, not the "sex symbol" heroine of Disney's later animated films; nor is she like the eyelash-fluttering creatures who appear as the mates of *Bambi*, etc. It was, however, inevitable that in developing her character sentimentality should take a strong hand; for in the original story she has little personality. But is sentimentality so dreadful? There is a time to laugh and a time to cry, and if the work we are viewing or reading has artistic merit, let our tears fall willingly! We are right to cry when *Bambi*'s mother is shot, and when *Pinocchio* is resurrected. *Snow White*'s lying-in-state (the dwarfs weep, the animals and birds weep, the rain is pouring down) and her awakening are Great Moments, and if tears *don't* come to your eyes, there's something wrong with you!

So in *Snow White* Disney achieved his ambition, to prove that the animated cartoon could be a vehicle for the range of human emotions, not simply a type of comedy entertainment. There are many marvelous moments, so I will recall a few which might interest us particularly. Great pains were taken to transmit something of the original fairy-tale atmosphere. Immigrants from Central Europe to the USA had brought their traditions with them, and some must have been working for Disney. The film begins with a book, and with the opening of the story told on screen in gothic lettering. Later on the Dwarfs cottage has evidence of traditional rural skills, with its beer steins and totem-pole style organ pipes. The Queen's descent to her magic dungeon and transformation to a witch was considered so frightening by the British censors that the film was certified 'A' (adults must accompany their children) and reclassified 'U' after the war.

There's the crow who teases the witch by climbing inside a skull; and then the utterly chilling moment when the witch takes the apple out of the potion and a skull momentarily appears superimposed upon it. And there's the brilliant use of shadow: with the Huntsman looming over *Snow White*, the dwarfs coming home from work with giant shadows "dwarfing" them, the witch's shadow thrown over *Snow White* at the cottage, and the vultures' shadows flapping down. And of course the animated trees as *Snow White* flees through the forest.

Disney altered the plot, of course. Plans were laid for the witch to make three visits to the cottage, as in the folk-tale, but the film would have been too long. However, he gave the story shape, and some of his alterations have passed into other retellings. The Prince meets Snow White at the opening of the film, and finds her at the end because he has been searching for her. Snow White tastes the apple because the witch has tempted her with the promise that it is a wishing apple, and thoughts of the Prince prompt her to bite it. Then comes a brilliant stroke of Irony: "Now I'll be fairest in the land" gloats the ugly witch.

Disney altered the Queen's fate too, making it more acceptable to a child audience. The original Grimm's fairy-tale has the Queen invited to the wedding, and made to dance in red-hot slippers until she fell down dead. Most versions for children omit this, saying simply that when she saw Snow White wedded to the Prince she choked with rage and died. Disney's version is more artistic, and gets the death-scene out of the way before Snow White is awakened; her death is also converted into an Act of God so that none of the good characters is actually responsible. The dwarfs chase her up a mountain; in the act of levering a large rock on to them a flash of lightning strikes her and she plunges over a cliff to her death. (This scene must have influenced the final episode of the recent BBC TV adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. According to the book, and the cartoon film, Aslan slays the White Witch, though Lewis does not specify how – biting, mauling, however a lion kills a "human." However, on TV we saw the Witch, horrified at Aslan's reappearance, miss her footing and fall down what looked like a rather gentle slope, to certain death at its foot.)

Finally, the touch of fate. The Apple of Living Death has an antidote – the victim may only be awakened by Love's First Kiss. Luckily Snow White had not kissed the Prince; instead she had sent him a proxy kiss by dove. In the old tale, when the Prince lifted the sleeping Snow White, the piece of poisoned apple fell from her lips; but Disney's version is more satisfying – Love's First Kiss works!

It is well known that Tolkien was not Disney fan, but if you look at the date when he uttered his famous condemnation of "the Disney studios (for all whose works I have a heartfelt loathing)," you will see that 13 May 1937 was several months before *Snow White* was released. Up to then Tolkien would have seen comic cartoons, probably with his children, and hated their crude illustrations, even more any spin-off books which may have been imported. With that attitude, and with children too old to be taken to children's films, it is probable that he never saw *Snow White*. Although I can't find evidence for it in *They Stand Together*, I would like to think that C.S. Lewis saw it and enjoyed it, though if he had, wouldn't he have urged the other Inklings to see it too?<sup>1</sup>

It was an article by Robert T. Sidwell in Children's Literature in Education which sent me back to a scholarly source for the dwarfs' names which Tolkien must have

known. In 1980 Sidwell argued that Disney chose names appropriate to folklore, that although Grimm's dwarfs are not differentiated, the dwarf-names in the *Elder Edda* imply an identifying characteristic for each dwarf. Sidwell cites Bettelheim as disapproving of Disney's portrayal of the dwarfs, but Smith Thompson as enthusiastic, praising him for "catching the traditional concept of the dwarf." Sidwell lists seven dwarf-names taken from Old Norse, with English translations: Toki = Foolish one; Orinn = Quarrelsome one; Radvíð = one who gives good advice, etc. – and then proves that these seven Old Norse names are pretty close equivalents of the seven dwarf-names of the film: Dopey, Grumpy, Doc, etc.! Sidwell also gives the meaning of ten Tolkien dwarf-names: Bifur = zealous one; Bombur = swollen one; Gloin = glowing one; Ori = violent one; Thorin = bold one; Dwalin = lazy one; Dori = borer; Fili = filer; Killi = wedge user; Nori = shaver. It must be admitted that Tolkien's dwarves are mainly interchangeable and apart from Thorin and Bombur, don't have individual personalities – apart from Balin, whose name comes from Celtic mythology. (See Jim Allan on the dwarf-names in *An Introduction to Elvish*.)

From Sidwell and Allan I went back to Gould's article in *PMLA* on Dwarf-Names; and it was published in 1929 I am sure that Tolkien read it before writing *The Hobbit*, though whether he read it just once, around publication date, or referred back to it while revising the book, I shall not determine. Gould supplies an alphabetical list of all dwarf-names in Old Icelandic writings, including the Elder and Younger Eddas, and provides translations – or admits defeat. Dwarf-names, he says, are not nonsensical; the poet's audience would have expected meaningful names, though with a riddling element. Gould organizes the names into groups, and then discusses a theory which I have not come across elsewhere: that the dwarves are the dead; to become a dwarf is what happens to the corpse after burial, which is why so many dwarf names refer to slowness and death. Heroic names refer to the traits of the man when he was alive. Gould draws attention to the name Gandalf 'magic-elf': "There is a border-land of elves and dwarves, for we have elf names for certain dwarves." Gould also spotlights the names Bifurr, Fili and Killi, as loan words from Frisian to Old Icelandic. Clearly Tolkien would have nothing to do with the concept of dwarves as corpses underground; for him they were a separate race, like elves. Finally Gould declares that the dwarf-names do not, in his opinion, derive from legendary times, but were coined in the 12th and 13th centuries, when the Icelandic literature we have was written down.

If you have followed me this far, you will have noted my spelling "dwarves" in the previous paragraph. Yes, it comes from Gould, and it would now appear that Tolkien adopted Gould's usage, deeming it right, rather than invent the plural "dwarves" independently.

Tolkien and Disney were brought together in the pages of the American review magazine of children's books, *Horn Book*, which had enthusiastically reviewed *The Hobbit*

in March, 1938, and again in June. Also in the March issue, leading children's librarian Anne Carroll Moore wrote an article about current fantasy, opening with a quotation "Instead of fewer fantastic books for children I should like to see a great many more." Moore continued to note:

a revival of interest in fairy and folk tales in Soviet Russia, from which country they were banished for a time. . . . (and) a recent reevaluation also of the importance of the tales collected by the Brothers Grimm's in Germany in relation to the rest of the world. The 125th anniversary of the publication of *Kinder-und Haus Märchen* was observed in 1937 in Berlin.

(What political realities lay behind those two remarks! both referring to totalitarian governments which were making use of children's books to indoctrinate the young.)

Moore then speculated as to the likely reception of the film *Snow White* in Germany, and whether the Germans would reject its American idiom.<sup>2</sup> She doesn't criticize the film as much as the related book versions which, she says, will ruin children's first impression of the story, which they ought to have heard in traditional form well before they view a sophisticated film version. Traditional tales are in danger of losing their "integrity as works of art," and children are in danger of losing "the crystal of imagination which is just beginning to sparkle." Moore then turns with relief to two books which are faithful to the tradition, Farjeon's *Martin Pippin in the Daisy-Field*, and Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, "in the true tradition of the old sagas. . . firmly rooted in *Beowulf* and authentic Saxon lore."

Hostility to Disney's works is based not on hatred of the full-length films, I feel, but on spin-off merchandising which Disney's critics, frequently children's librarians, were requested to stock in their libraries. The images which in animated cartoons appear artistic, or at least technically inventive, were redrawn more crudely as book illustrations, and dull narrative took over the film dialogue. Sex stereotyping, especially of the female characters, was worse in the books, and this especially of-fended career-oriented female librarians, of whom the most outspoken was Frances Clark Sayers, who challenged the concept of Disney as a great educator. (Sayers succeeded Moore as head of children's services in the New York Public Library.)

In an interview published in *Horn Book* in 1965, Sayers first attacked Disney for his distortion of folklore tradition, and then moved to his treatment of children's classics, such as *Pinocchio*, *Treasure Island*, and *Mary Poppins*. As well as the films, she deplored the rewritten and simplified books Disney published to accompany the films, and their illustration, produced by anonymous artists with the "Disney look." Children should be learning to appreciate quality illustration produced by individual artists with their own trade-marks. Disney, Sayers felt, was actually aiming his works at adults, not at children; he conditioned children to take books passively, so that they would grow up to be soap opera addicts instead of discriminating readers. the only aspect of Disney's art Sayers approved of

was the cartoon featuring his own invented characters — and just the cartoon, not the merchandising.

While agreeing with Sayers about the merchandising, of which we have seen far less in England and the Americans, I would disagree over book-based films. I have greatly enjoyed introducing my children to the Disney classics over the last three years, and we also possess some "books-of-the-film" which I consider well produced. Moreover, in the UK we often find that the "tie-in" book of the film is identical with the original text, simply having a still photo on the cover. Sales of Lloyd Alexander went up when (ghastly) photos from the Disney film were placed on the covers of the *Prydain Chronicles* — they have just been replaced with gorgeous Celtic-style portraits by Patrick Lynch. (There was also a storybook-of-the-film.)

*The Black Cauldron* is not classic Disney, but more recently Disney money backed the artistic and technical success *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* With the right staff and the right version, who's to say whether Disney's *The Hobbit* would have been dire or satisfactory? Surely it couldn't have been worse than the made-for-TV version? But as for *The Lord of the Rings*, any remake will have to be live action — and you never know. Disney's money may be backing the remake, in spite of Tolkien's aversion!

**Endnotes**

1. In response to this article, Richard Storch offered these comments: C.S. Lewis certainly had seen and enjoyed Walt Disney's *Snow White*. . . . I couldn't trace the reference, but he singled out for praise both the good, unoriginality of the Queen, and the traditional "evil beauty," as the good originality of the scene where the night is filled with sinister eyes — which turn out to be innocent and friendly animals. But he did not like the *Dwarfs!*
2. In *A Bridge of Children's Books* (American Library Association, 1969; first published in Germany in 1964) Jella Lepman, who did so much to help German rebirth after the Second World War by bringing children's books back to book-starved children, writes that "most German children knew of it (the film) only by rumour", and tells how she organized showings at Christmas 1946, by special permission of Walt Disney.

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Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 8, No. 1, whole number 24, Spring 1977. (Critical of Disney for replacing the independent heroine by the helpless creature; attacks books based on film, and other retellings, rather than the film itself, which in my opinion, actually gives a more independent role to Cinderella than Yolen implies.)

(This is an expanded version of an article which appeared first in *Amor Heri* 96, March 1989, and it is reprinted with the permission of the author and the Tolkien Society.

### The Letter (continued from page 41)

While it is true that this feeling is aimed more at Lewis and Williams than to Tolkien, he does not escape either. Some would like to make him the esteemed founder of the modern fantasy phenomena, and have said *that*, leave his bust reverentially ignored on the shelf.

For many years the Mythopoeic Society has been the closest thing available to being a general fantasy society. There have been, and there are, those who would like it to become exactly that. What then would become of its special devotion to these men and where would the special vision of the Society prosper? One way would be to officially change the nature of the Society in its governing documents, but that would be more difficult work than most people in favor this are willing to undertake. An easier way, if much less intellectually honest, was and is to ignore the Society's purpose; instead, use and permeate the existing structure, which took years of hard work to establish, for experiences and motives that are personally gratifying. And when the structure will not bend to these motives, they then either have become disruptively factious and/or dropped out with an injured complaint. This mentality or frame of mind has had an eroding effect on the Society from the first until now.

When we seek a product or service we naturally do comparison shopping, and chose that which is best suited to our needs or interests. And if this is not to our highest expectations, we may complain or bring pressure to see that the product or service is improved. This is perfectly normal, and indeed many changes have been made in the Society because of members' desires. But what if I join the George MacDonald Society and then pressure it to devote itself to Lewis Carroll? Should I join the American Society of Scottish Dancing and then demand that it devote equal attention to the native dances of the hundreds of nations on the earth? We need to respect the stated purpose of any organization we join, work to see it improve, and support it in the best way we can; not to pressure it in various ways to abandon or dilute its purpose, either in fact or in practice, so that it is weakened to the point that only mere lip service, or less, is paid to its stated goals.

Why are people not in full sympathy with the Society's purpose attracted to it? Many reasons: its very existence—its activities, its publications, its conferences, and the quality of other interested people involved. There is great amount of information and learning to be shared, and also great fun to be had in this organization. When people join the Society, we do not question their motives, but in good faith assume they share its interests.

Over the years its preexisting structure has been very tempting for certain individuals who emerge, or attempted to emerge, in a flurry of trumpets, to use what already has existed to make their grand mark. Some lost interest after a while, and went on to new fields to conquer; others spread bad feelings and dissent when their goals were not accomplished as they wished. Some left to form other organizations which had their day in the sun and faded. Yet others stay.

The point of this, is so those who really *want* to delve into George MacDonald or learn the lore and intricacies of Scottish Dancing can indeed find other kindred spirits who have the *same* enthusiasm as they do; so they will not have to wade through organizations that promise one thing and deliver another. I wonder, will The Mythopoeic Society survive until its 50th anniversary in 2017 and beyond? And if so, will people who then study, discuss and enjoy Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams indeed find kindred spirits within The Mythopoeic Society? This is one of the very reasons why the Society was begun — not to see it mutate through gradual change away from its original intent and first love.

Change is necessary, and I have always welcomed changes that would *improve* how the Society's *purpose* was carried out. Unfortunately, some others have seen changes as an opportunity and leverage to alter the very purpose itself, usually with the best seeming of motives, of course. It will may be they are not consciously doing this, only following their own interests, but the effect is the same.

### The Letter

It was in the autumn of 1972, when my daughter, Arwen, was about six months old, that I reflected personally how far we had come and how well things seemed to be going, that I received a letter from a man in another state. Its message was brief and to the point:

I hear much about The Mythopoeic Society, with all its functions and activities. I don't want to hear so much talk about the organization as an *organization*. What about speaking more *about* Tolkien, Lewis and Williams?

At first I was stung and annoyed — what could he mean? Of course the Society spoke of Tolkien, Lewis and Williams, and didn't the Society as a large and growing organization promote them better by offering something for nearly every interest? But then I began to see that in my five year whirl-wind experience with the Society, in many important ways the organization as a thing in itself was taking precedence over its stated purpose. Vocal people were pressuring for further generalizing changes. What had become of that original enthusiastic and unifying vision. Had it been compromised to see the Society grow? I wrestled internally, not sharing the letter with anyone in my pain over the matter. Yes and no, I finally said.

The reasons behind this yes and no answer, how the concept of the Middle Way was formulated, and why I have written this long, and at times plaintive account, will follow in the next issue.