

FAIRY TALES FASCINATE PROFESSOR OF GERMAN

Professor Donald Haase, Chair of the German and Slavic Studies Department for the past sixteen years, dates his academic interest in fairy tales back to 1983. “We were sitting around at a faculty meeting,” he said, “trying to come up with ideas for courses that might be popular, that would draw in large numbers of students.” Because of Haase’s specialization in Romantic literature—his dissertation was on the German writer Novalis, who wrote on fairy tales—Haase floated the idea of his teaching a course on fairy tales. As ideas battled about at faculty meetings go, this turned out to have been a good one.

Haase had come to Wayne State in 1981, and though his decision to teach a course on fairy tales a couple of years later was, he said, “a very practical, curricular move,” it quite quickly became “a career emphasis.” The course—“Understanding the Fairy Tale,” started back in the mid-80s—has closely linked Haase’s teaching with his research. “The one has fed the other,” he said. He acknowledges that not everyone understands the academic allure of what are sometimes perceived as nothing more than children’s stories. “You feel you have to justify teaching and researching fairy tales,” he said, “because it seems unusual. But in fact, it couldn’t be more pertinent. You get to deal with social, cultural and political issues because fairy tales always turn up in the struggle over values. What else would you expect of stories that poet W. H. Auden claimed ranked next to the Bible in importance in Western culture? Are they worth studying? You bet.” He has dealt with such issues in graduate-level courses on similar subjects, including “Fairy Tale Reception,” “Children’s Literature and Culture,” “Grimms’ Fairy Tales,” and “The Reception of Grimms’ Fairy Tales.”

Because of their popularity, fairy tales have taken Haase out of strictly academic surroundings. “I’ve spoken to community groups,” he said, “and fairy tales have led me into storytelling in schools.” He has served as a consultant to the British Broadcasting Company on issues relating to fairy tales and society, and as a consultant to Oregon Public Broadcasting for a project concerning Grimms’ fairy tales. He has also done three summer seminars, supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, with high school teachers. “In 1985 and 1986” he said, “there were bicentennial celebrations of the Brothers Grimm taking place all over the world. That, coupled with an NEH grant, brought it all together for me. I knew I was on to something.” He continued: “There was, at the time, an important reevaluation of fairy tales and their role in society. It was part of the larger coming of age of the fairy tale.” He points to a film like Terry Gilliam’s recent

The Brothers Grimm as evidence of the postmodern potential of traditional fairy tales.

Aside from his teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities, Haase also finds time to edit the international journal *Marvels and Tales*. The journal was started in 1986 at the University of Colorado by a French scholar who, Haase said, “had once solicited an article from me.” When the scholar decided to retire, he approached Haase for the job. The journal is now in its twentieth year, and Haase is in his tenth year as editor.

“We’re responsible for the content and scholarly direction of the journal,” Haase said. “It’s peer-reviewed, so we send out submissions we receive to be critically evaluated by other specialists. We get submissions from scholars all over the world.” The “we,” in this case, includes Haase; Seth Knox, who received his PhD from the German and Slavic Studies Department and now teaches full time at Cranbrook; and Professor Anne Duggan of the Romance Languages and Literatures Department, whose book *Salonnieres, Furies, and Fairies: The Politics of Gender and Cultural Change in Absolutist France* (University of Delaware Press) also deals with fairy tales. “We define fairy tale broadly,” Haase went on. “It’s hard to come up with a universally satisfying definition. We focus on literary fairy tales, not oral or traditional folk tales, as represented in print, film, theater, and other media such as the popular press and advertising. Fairy tales pervade every realm of our culture, from children’s education to politics. I’ve written an article on William Bennett’s use of fairy tales in his *Book of Virtues*, which is a good example of how fairy tales can be exploited for a political cause. Fairy tales have been appropriated by diverse groups with diverse agendas, from the Nazis to theologians to school teachers to parents to psychoanalysts. You can see what you want, if you remain willfully ignorant of history. We prefer socio-historical pieces that contextualize fairy tales.”

Haase recently edited the volume *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, published last year by Wayne State University Press, and is general editor of the Wayne State University Press’ Series on Fairy-Tale Studies. He is currently editing, for Greenwood Publishing, a three-volume *Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, which is scheduled to be published in the summer of 2007 ■

Dr. Donald Haase

