



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 6 | Number 4 | Issue 22, Fall

Article 2

10-15-1979

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Recommended Citation

Speth, Lee (1979) "Cavalier Treatment: The Pig in the Widow's Shawl," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 6 : No. 4 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol6/iss4/2>

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

Cavalier Treatment: The Pig in the Widow's Shawl

Additional Keywords

Brooks, Walter R. The Freddy the Pig series.

CAVALIER TREATMENT



BY LEE SPETH



THE PIG IN THE WIDOW'S SHAWL

There is a compendious and impressive *Atlas of Fantasy* making the rounds and while I would discourage no one from buying it, I must note, in disappointment (but not surprise) that it does not include a map of Oteseraga County.

Of course Oteseraga County is not located beyond misty mountains or enchanted glens, on the verge of an untravelled ocean or beneath the nethermost gulf. It did not flourish in the legendary past nor does it encumber a parallel world. It sits, prosaically, in upper New York State, below the Adirondacks and west of Syracuse. It is of our own time, it contains ordinary small towns like Tushville, South Pharisee and Plutarch Mills, and its principal landmarks are Lake Oteseraga and the private farm of Mr. William F. Bean.

From *To and Again* in 1927 till the posthumous *Freddy and the Dragon* in 1958, Mr. Walter R. Brooks chronicled the Bean Farm in an inventive and entertaining series that came at last to twenty-five volumes, plus the supplemental *Collected Poems of Freddy the Pig*, all rakishly illustrated by Mr. Kurt Wiese (*To and Again*, the first book, was originally pictured by Adolfo Best-Maugard, but Wiese reillustrated it after it became *Freddy Goes to Florida*).

"There's nothing I like better," says Freddy's human friend, the Sheriff of Centerboro, "than just to take my collar off and set back in my chair with my feet on the mantel and read a good fairy tale book." The Mythopoeic Society will applaud these sentiments, but may feel uncertain as to just where in the hierarchy of fantasy Mr. Brooks' stories of Freddy the pig and his cronies are to be placed. They are about animals, not immortals; they are full of deceptions, contrivances and bargains rather than heroic confrontations. The villains are as much comic as malevolent. There is one brief flourish of a sword in *Freddy the Magician*; the rest of the series is irregularly punctuated by gunfire that rarely hits anyone. "Not true fantasy," some will judge and turn away unappeasably.

Yet I'm inclined to point out that, after all, talking animals are a more truly fantastic notion than are many "adult fantasy" conventions.

I think it probable that ghosts do exist, I can well credit that witchcraft is real and I maintain a judicious agnosticism toward leprechauns and the djinn. But I am fixedly certain that animals are incapable of reasoned human speech. Not only experience but physiology is against it. But we want them to talk.

No need to refurbish dim archetypes here, or to remind ourselves of some lengthy heritage of literary symbols. It is the burning fantasy of every child who ever took his teddy bear or his earliest

pet seriously. There is consummate tragedy in our separation. We humans have been summoned forth from among the brute creation and our specialized consciousness and gift of articulation are a paliade between us that neither they nor we shall ever pass more than superficially. We can't, as the cliché runs, go home again. We can only ask for stories in which the animals are allowed our gifts, and if the story is humorous, the exultant child has all the more reason to laugh.

Of course the moralist may growl that in seeking out animal stories rather than those of faërie, we lower ourselves, plunge back into the depths of mired nature from which divinity fetched us. Shun such a critic as a Manichee. And as an inobservant analyst - such stories raise them to our level, not the reverse.

At any rate, in a spirit directly opposed to all this profundity, Mr. Brooks has given us Freddy, equally at home in his sty (with its typewriter, closet full of disguises, folio Shakespeare and uncleanable windows), in the Centerboro jail (that kindly model facility where the convicts all have passkeys and a party always seems to be in progress), or in the mansions of such pleasant rich folk as Mrs. Winfield Church (whose late husband, "like most bankers," had had a passion for playing hide-and-seek) and Mr. C. Jimson Camphor (who, with his butler Bannister, tests old maxims against reality, rolling stones down hill to see if they gather moss and so on).

Horseman, pilot, banker, editor, explorer, baseball coach and more, Freddy's two most consistent *personae* are the bucolic poet and the Great Detective. In all of these avocations he is assisted by the populace of the Bean Farm, particularly by Jinx the black cat, raffish, irrepressible, full of comebacks, criticisms, and inspiring but improbable anecdotes about his father, and by Mrs. Wiggins the cow, the maternal figure of the series.

After the first five or six books, the rest of the farm community stabilized at Robert the collie and Georgie the brown mutt, Mrs. Wiggins' two sisters (Mrs. Wogus and Mrs. Wurzburger), Hank the horse, Bill the goat, the two spinster ducks Alice and Emma, Charles the oratorical and appropriately henpecked rooster, his wife Henrietta and their brood, and a small assortment of what most farms would regard as vermin - the four mice, Eek, Quik, Eeny and Cousin Augustus, live in a cigar box under the stove, Mr. and Mrs. Webb (spiders of course) roam the house, and Jacob the wasp and his family nest beneath the eaves. This group is eventually joined by the ducks' pompous, fraudulent Uncle Wesley, by an ant named Jerry Peters who comes to room with Freddy down in the pigpen with his pet beetle Fido, by Freddy's cowpony Cy, and, in the last book, by Percy the bull,

father of the three Mrs. W's. Jinx's jet set sister Minx pays flying visits. We do wonder what became of some of the animals who appeared in the earliest books - Robert's brother Jock, the black dog Jack, Hank's Uncle William, Ronald the English rooster - and, oh yes, there were also no less than four children adopted by the Beans in *More To and Again* and *The Clockwork Twin*.

A rabble of birds and beasts lives in the Bean Woods, a private stretch of forest across the road from the sinister Big Woods. Of these we must mention Peter the bear from Canada, Theodore the stuttering frog, J. J. Pomeroy the robin (whom Freddy gets fixed up with glasses), Sniffy Wilson the skunk and his family, the owls (Old Whibley, Uncle Solomon and Vera), and the rabbits who assist Freddy in his detective work and who are so numerous that they go by numbers rather than names. Some of these rabbits form a combination fraternity and protective organization called the Horrible Ten, for whom Freddy writes macabre chants.

If all this sounds cluttered, I can only say that I haven't mentioned the large cast of neighboring humans, the recurring villain Simon the rat (who figures in these books rather as the gnome king does in the Oz series), the Boomschmidt Circus which marches in and out of Freddy's world after dominating *The Story of Freginald*, or the large number of characters who appear in only one book but leave a definite impression - Presto the magician's rabbit, Lyman the muskrat who swaps comic books with the skunks, Howard the field mouse, and so forth.

The only supernatural or preternatural being who ever turned up in the series was Santa Claus - the animals penetrated the Arctic to find him in the second book, *More To and Again* (later republished with the more coherent title *Freddy Goes to the North Pole*).

But the most mythopoeic book in the atmospheric sense, and possibly the best book in the series, is *Freddy and the Ignormus*, a sustained commentary on fear and courage, bravado and superstition, the comedy heightened by the sudden chilling effects as Freddy nerves himself against the Thing in the old Grimby house, the Thing in which he does not believe as long as he isn't near it. In later works science fiction rears its head and we have space flight and spidery Martians.

But above all we have Freddy, Freddy in his detective disguises - crotchety old man, Irish widow with a brogue, lispng boy in a sailor suit, Dr. Henry Hopper, on one occasion mother of the bride. We respond to his loyalty, resourcefulness, sense of humor, vanity, and all those verses about the life of the pig. Initially Brooks did not intend a Freddy series - of the first six books only one of the original titles carried his name. But the versatile pig inevitably took over and we may suspect that he was closest to the author's heart all along.

There are, no doubt, flaws in these books. One grows a little tired of the Beans' folksiness and in some of the early middle books of the series the villains meet an inadequate retribution - and here I am reminded that I have not spoken as they deserve of these villains. But there is no space to do justice to the dirty-faced boy, or Mr. Condiment the comic book publisher, or Grover the megalomaniac woodpecker, or Penobsky the communist, or the freeloading Mr. Bismuth, or - but, ah well.

At their best the books are full of illuminating observations on life, valid psychological insights, native kindness and plot construction that can only be called brilliant. The esprit-de-

corps of the Bean animals offers a model of companionship. These chronicles are, as Kai Lung would say, gravity-removing - indeed a reviewer once called Brooks the Wodehouse of the farmyard and the comparison is just. Adults can enjoy them; I know, for I have tried them out on any number. Indeed it is doubtful if a child will fully relish that Lakeside Hotel (in *Freddy Goes Camping*) had a hired couple named Mr. and Mrs. Edipus, or that a Russian agent in *Freddy and the Flying Saucer Plans* is called Smirnoff.

The series faded from the bookstores about a dozen years ago. A few titles are still available from Knopf in library editions. It is a considerable tribute to them that, though popular in their day, they are very hard to find in old book stores. Who has them, keeps them. Or has read them to pieces.

If all has not tempted the potential reader to set off hungrily for the children's room of the nearest library, I shall close with a sampler.

LOGIA:

(Rajah the tiger) had been with the circus for years, and had many friends, indeed he got more invitations than he could accept, for he was a fine storyteller, a good dancer, and entertaining without being noisy.

... the poem fell unnoticed to the floor. It was later picked up by the chambermaid, who was so impressed by the lazy, happy life led by pigs that she cried for several days because she couldn't be one.

"If Mr. Bean heard this disturbance tonight, you know what he'd do: he'd fire every last rabbit on the place."

"Oh a life of adventure is gay and free,/ and danger has its thrill;/ And no spider of spirit will bound his life/ By the web on the windowsill./ Yet many a wandering spider sighs/ For the pleasant tang of the home-grown flies."

Freddy had to spend a lot of time in the men's furnishing department of the Busy Bee, getting fitted to a space suit. The Busy Bee had a good line of space suits....

Mrs. Talcum gave one final tremendous sneeze and said: "Pleased to beet you."

"Sorry you have such a cold, ma'am," said Freddy politely.

"Hay fever... Cubs od every subber."

"Must be trying," said Jinx sympathetically.

"Dot at all," said Mrs. Talcum. "Sdeezig is -a-a-chew! is very edjoyable. I biss it id the widder tibe. Always look forward to subber ad a good bout of sdeezig fit."

"That's true," said Jinx politely. "I like a good sneeze myself."

Mrs. Talcum nodded. "Two hudred years ago," she said, "folks took sduff to *bake 'eb sdeeze*. Dew how to get edjoybedt out of life id those days. Do do what's cub over people today. Parties ad busic ad daddig, whed there's just as buch fud id a good sdeezig fit."

"That's right," said Freddy. "The simple pleasures are the best."

* * * * *

One last note. I have said above that *Freddy and the Ignormus* is possibly the best book in the series. Ironically, it is the only one I do not own. If anyone has, or knows where to find a copy, a word to me care of this magazine will be deeply appreciated. Any demand for money, however extortionate, may well be met.