



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

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Volume 42  
Number 2

Article 12

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April 2024

## Whatever Happened to *The Princess Bride*?: Thoughts for Further William Goldman Research

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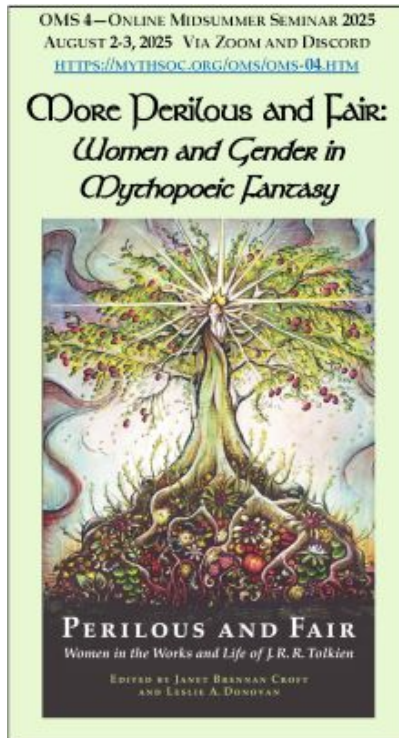
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## Whatever Happened to *The Princess Bride*?: Thoughts for Further William Goldman Research

### Abstract

This note considers why research on William Goldman, best known to fantasy fans as the author of the screenplay for *The Princess Bride*, has been sparse, and the potential to study him as a mythopoeic author.

### Additional Keywords

jrr tolkien; cs lewis; charles williams; william goldman; the princess bride; the silent gondoliers; on fairy-stories; detective fiction; butch cassidy and the sundance kid; westerns; dorothy l sayers; spider robinson; donald e westlake; ross macdonald; tom shippey; science fiction; fantasy; william goldman control 1984 novel; temple of gold; boys and girls together; william lindsay gresham; nightmare alley; Goldman, William. *The Princess Bride*; *The Princess Bride* (movie); Detective fiction; Science fiction; Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (movie); Westerns (genre); Gresham, William Lindsey. *Nightmare Alley*

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### WHATEVER HAPPENED TO *THE PRINCESS BRIDE*?: THOUGHTS FOR FURTHER WILLIAM GOLDMAN RESEARCH

G. CONNOR SALTER

WHILE REVIEWING VALERIE ESTELLE FRANKEL'S intriguing book *Jewish Fantasy Worldwide* for *Mythlore* 42.1, I noticed something interesting. There are some excellent essays in it. While the book primarily focuses on Jewish writers outside the United States, the book also includes wonderful insights into Jewish-American writers like Philip Roth, Ira Levin, and Isaac Asimov. Despite these many strengths, there was a surprising gap: I couldn't find any essays or even offhand references to William Goldman (1931-2018), the author of both the novel and the film *The Princess Bride*.

On one level, this is not particularly surprising. As Spider Robinson observes in his speculative fiction anthology *The Best of All Possible Worlds*, Goldman's novel didn't have much success upon release in 1973: "It was brought out in hardcover by Harcourt, who hadn't the least notion of how and where to market it (to be fair, at that time almost nobody knew how to market fantasy), and it just lay there" (189). The novel's reputation today relies much on the cult status of Rob Reiner's 1987 movie adaptation.

A larger problem is that while Goldman experienced much fame and acclaim, his work doesn't initially seem to have many recurring themes. His early career included literary novels like *Boys and Girls Together* and *Temple of Gold*. Following the 1973 death of his editor, Hiram Hayden, Goldman turned to popular fiction with the espionage novel *Marathon Man*. After his last novel, *Brothers*, appeared in 1986, Goldman focused on screenwriting. Many considered Goldman his generation's greatest screenwriter — "Few names in the opening credits were a safer guarantee of wit, intelligence and entertainment" (Bailey 1). Still, it's difficult to say what common threads run through his screenplays for *The Princess Bride*, *Misery*, *A Bridge Too Far*, *All the President's Men*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*.

One constant was Goldman's interest in crime fiction. His first entry into the genre, the mystery novel *No Way to Treat a Lady*, was published in 1964 under a pen name because Haydn worried its popular appeal might damage Goldman's literary fiction career (Anderson 62). According to Goldman, *No Way to Treat a Lady* received the best reviews of his career to that point (ibid). He would later write several novels that fit within the crime fiction category: the action thriller *Heat*, the psychological thriller-horror *Magic*, the espionage adventure *Marathon Man*, and its science fiction/espionage sequel, *Brothers*. As biographer Sean Egan notes, by the time Goldman published *The Color of Light* in 1984, his "stock-in-trade" had become action thrillers (263). His later screenwriting career would include thriller movies like *The Ghost and the Darkness*, *The General's Daughter*, and *Absolute Power*.

While Goldman rarely wrote studies or reviews of other writers, the exceptions confirm his love for crime fiction. In 1969, he reviewed Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer detective novel *The Goodbye Look* for the *New York Times Book Review*, calling the Archer novels "the finest series of detective novels ever written by an American" ("The Goodbye Look"). Robinson's *Best of All Possible Worlds* anthology includes Goldman's introduction for the science fiction short story "The Seventh Victim" by Robert Sheckley (another under-discussed Jewish speculative fiction writer). Rather than discussing the story's science fiction qualities, Goldman makes an unusual comparison: "I don't know if Sheckley would be pleased or horrified to hear me say this, but I think he is science fiction's Donald Westlake—which by me is high praise. What I mean is that, like Westlake, he writes with incredible compression, humor and wit—and most important, he doesn't begin writing unless he has a marvelous *idea*" (230). Westlake (1933-2008) was best known for his crime fiction, including his 1963 thriller *The Hunter*, adapted into the movies *Point Blank* and *Payback*.<sup>1</sup> Like Goldman, Westlake occasionally published science fiction and fantasy, such as the 1995 science fiction novel *Smoke* and the 1992 fantasy novel *Humans*.<sup>2</sup>

While a case may be made that Goldman (like Westlake) was a crime writer who dabbled in speculative fiction, several factors make Goldman well worth studying from a speculative fiction and mythopoeic perspective.

First, little scholarship has been done on *The Princess Bride*. While the book's reputation may rely much on the movie's success, Robinson's comment shows that poor marketing may have caused the book's muted initial reception.

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<sup>1</sup> Westlake and Goldman had some history: Westlake sought Goldmann's advice in 1970/1971 about working with film producer Elliot Kastner ("Interview with Donald Westlake" 270). Goldman adapted Westlake's 1970 heist novel *The Hot Rock* into a 1972 caper film starring Robert Redford.

<sup>2</sup> John Clute provides a succinct summary of Westlake's speculative fiction in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* ("Westlake, Donald E.").

Since Goldman also wrote the movie's screenplay, much of the movie's classic material comes directly from the book. Understanding the movie and book together is key to understanding the movie's longevity. Many readers may also be surprised to learn there is a spinoff: *The Silent Gondoliers*, written again by S. Morgenstern (the metafictional pseudonym to whom Goldman attributes *The Princess Bride*). As *The Princess Bride* passed its fiftieth anniversary in 2023 (and unlike many fantasy novels of its period, is still in print), now is a good time to expand on critical research.

Second, as mentioned earlier, Goldman was Jewish. Richard Anderson makes a few suggestions in his 1979 study of Goldman about how Jewish identity informs the religious imagery in Goldman's novels (71). However, far more scholarship can be done. For example, Goldman contributed the screenplay for the 1975 science fiction movie *Stepford Wives*. As Judy Klass observes, the Ira Levin novel may have a Holocaust subtext—paranoia about observation, conformity, etc. (276). Given that Levin and Goldman were born in the late 1920s to early 1930s (a generation who experienced the Holocaust or were raised by its escapers and survivors), this angle presents some intriguing possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

Third, Goldman's work in crime fiction and speculative fiction presents interesting possibilities for exploring common territory between those genres. Inklings fans have explored this area already via Charles Williams and Dorothy L. Sayers. For example, Jared Lobdell (editor of *The Detective Fiction Reviews of Charles Williams, 1930-1935*) published an essay discussing Williams's place in the Golden Age of Detective Fiction as well as the genre's mythopoeic elements ("Detective Fiction As Mythic Comedy"). Sørina Higgins discusses how Williams uses and subverts detective fiction tropes in his novel *War in Heaven* ("Is a 'Christian' Mystery Story Possible?"). Other Inklings scholars have gone further afield: Charles A. Hutter has discussed detective fiction tropes in Lewis's *The Silver Chair* ("The Art of Detection in a World of Change"). Joe R. Christopher's contributions to *Mythlore* have included not only essays on Sayers ("Dorothy L. Sayers and the Inklings," "Dorothy L. Sayers at Fifty") but also on John Dickson Carr ("The Non-Dead in John Dickson Carr's *The Burning Court*")<sup>4</sup> and Sara Paretsky ("The Christian Parody in Sara Paretsky's *Ghost Country*"). Goldman presents an interesting possibility for exploring how crime fiction compares and contrasts with speculative fiction. This is particularly interesting

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<sup>3</sup> I'm currently exploring this topic and have discussed some of my conclusions with Matt Melema on his podcast Believe to See (see works cited).

<sup>4</sup> Carr's nonfiction aids this discussion: his 1932 essay "The Detective in Fiction" argues that in stories about solving crimes, "we penetrate a world of romance not far from the Arabian nights [...] detective stories are only fairy stories for those who have grown up" (52-53). To Carr, detective stories were essentially mythopoeic.

if one reads the detective story as a form of mythopoetic literature. At least as early as 1965, readers have discussed whether the detective story's tropes create new mythic symbols for the modern age ("Detective Fiction: A Modern Myth of Violence?").

Fourth, little has been written about William Goldman's science fiction work. Admittedly, he only wrote one proper science fiction novel—*Control*, published in 1982. However, *Brothers* combines science fiction with espionage fiction. Goldman also wrote the screenplays for the science fiction movies *Stepford Wives*, *Dreamcatcher*, and *Memoirs of an Invisible Man*.

Fifth, there is room for further discussions about Goldman as an adventure fiction author. Eva Alfonso and Marta Frago discuss how adventure fiction informs his most acclaimed screenplays, *The Princess Bride* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* ("The Adventure Screenplay in William Goldman"). The question of what adventure fiction and fantasy have in common could make for an engaging discussion—and some recent Inklings scholarship has already opened this discussion. Holly Ordway's *Tolkien's Modern Reading* documents that Tolkien read adventure fiction classics like John Buchan's *Greenmantle* and S.R. Crockett's *The Black Douglas* and considers how they informed his writing (105-162).

Sixth, more work remains to be done on Goldman as a writer of westerns—his first notable screenplay was *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Westerns present intriguing possibilities for writers interested in mythopoeia's range. Robert B. Pippin and others have argued that westerns created a new mythopoeia for American culture. John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett provide a particularly deep analysis in their book *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Some scholars have also noted how much westerns influenced speculative fiction (for example, see David Mogen's book *Wilderness Visions*). Inklings scholarship has an advantage here: Tolkien refers to his childhood love for stories about "Red Indians" in his essay "On Fairy-stories" (41). Tom Shippey suggests this love for westerns means that Tolkien's love for warrior stories includes American as well as British influences (78-78). Discussing Goldman's contributions to the western genre, and how those contributions compare to his speculative fiction, opens new possibilities for exploring westerns as mythopoetic fiction.

Finally, more work can be done on discussing Goldman as an escapist writer. Anderson argues that the recurring theme in Goldman's work is that they all qualify as escapist fiction: the contrast between aspiration and reality, and the conflict emerging from the struggle to escape one's current reality (10). *The Princess Bride* provides a particularly overt example: the child hearing the Morgenstern novel has his expectations crushed when the novel describes Wesley dying on the Machine. However, Anderson argues that all of Goldman's

works explore this question at some level. In this respect, Goldman can be seen as an author preoccupied with one aspect of mythopoeia: wondrous stories that provide an escape from, or coping tools, for reality.

An intriguing comparison could be made here to William Lindsay Gresham, Joy Davidman's first husband. Like Goldman, Gresham received great acclaim for his crime fiction (the 1946 novel *Nightmare Alley*). Like Goldman, Gresham's best work features a fascination with magic (stage magic, telepathy) where the craving for magic seems to indicate a craving for something otherworldly—hope, the supernatural, the possibility of belonging to something larger. In other words, magic was to Goldman and Gresham what Norse myth was to C.S. Lewis: a fascinating hint of something more. *Sehnsucht*. Goldman particularly shows a magic-as-*Sehnsucht* motif in his novel and screenplay *Magic* and his screenplay for the 1994 western *Maverick*. Both stories feature characters exploring card tricks to test whether they have psychic powers. Both stories consider the near-religious hope and potential for despair if paranormal powers do not exist. Ultimately, neither Goldman nor Gresham found their fascination with the supernatural led them to organized religion: Goldman never expressed any documented interest in it, and Gresham's 1940s interest in Christianity gave way to Zen Buddhism and Dianetics, then secularism by his 1962 death. One might say that Goldman and Gresham present a counterpoint to the Inklings: intrigued by mythopoeic yearnings for the supernatural, yet never "surprised by joy," as Lewis was.

How Goldman studies will evolve remains to be seen. Primary documents are available to study at Columbia University's archives ("William Goldman Papers, 1949-1998"). While his early literary fiction is mostly out of print, many of his later works are still in print. Almost all of his screenplays have been published through Applause Books.

As we pass five years since Goldman's death, and fifty years since *The Princess Bride* was published, fresh insights into his work are in order. I look forward to seeing what scholars bring to the table.

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## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEWSPAPER REPORTS OF TOLKIEN'S ANDREW LANG LECTURE IN 1939

MATTHEW THOMPSON-HANDELL

**I**N THE 2008 CRITICAL EDITION OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S ESSAY "On Fairy-stories," the editors reproduce the text of two newspaper articles which reported on Tolkien's Andrew Lang lecture on 8 March 1939 at the University of St. Andrews, which formed the basis of the later essay. The two reports that are reproduced are from *The Scotsman* on 9 March and *The St. Andrews Citizen* on 11 March (*Tolkien On Fairy-stories* [OFS] 162-9). When placing these reports in the historical context of the essay, the editors state that the former "is clearly based on the much longer local reportage that would appear a few days later in *The St. Andrews Citizen*" (OFS 126). Subsequently, when introducing the texts themselves, they state that the report from *The Scotsman* (as well as one other