

IN MEMORIAM

## William Gray (1952–2019)

Heather Robbins

Professor William Gray—or Bill to those who knew him—was Professor of Literary History and Hermeneutics and the founder and director of the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy (now the Chichester Centre for Fairy Tales, Fantasy and Speculative Fiction) at the University of Chichester.

He began his academic life by studying modern languages at Christchurch College, Oxford. After a further year at Princeton and then Edinburgh to study theology, he came to teach at Chichester where he taught for more than thirty-five years. During this time, his research led him to publish biographies of C. S. Lewis and Robert Louis Stevenson, three books on fantasy—*Fantasy, Myth and the Measure of Truth: Tales of Pullman, Lewis, Tolkien, MacDonald and Hoffmann*; *Death and Fantasy*; and *Fantasy, Art and Life*—edited collections of essays on C. S. Lewis and Mervyn Peake, and a collection of fairy tales from around the world. A volume of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Fables*, for which Bill went back to the original manuscripts to present Stevenson’s work as he had originally intended, is due out soon in the *New Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson*.

As Clive Behagg, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Chichester, has said, growing up in Parkhead in the East End of Glasgow made Bill passionate about the democratization of higher education, widening participation, and the transformative power of education. He saw folklore, fairy tales, and fantasy as ‘crossover’ subjects that reached people from all ages and all walks of life, and he aimed to make the latest research an accessible, useful resource outside academia wherever possible. He said, ‘It’s always been important to me that what I worked on as an academic was relevant to “ordinary people”—perhaps a legacy of growing up in Glasgow and trying to explain to punters in a bar what the heck I was doing at university!’ (quoted by Nione Meakin in ‘A Fairy Tale Ending for Local Professor’, *Argus*, 6 August 2012). He was Folklore Advisor to the film *Snow White and the Huntsman*, and advised on Tori Amos’s musical adaptation of George MacDonald’s *The Light Princess* for the National Theatre in 2013, and on a production of Massenet’s *Cendrillon* at the Royal Opera House in 2011. He was also concerned that fairy tales and fantasy were undervalued by the literary establishment, instead of realizing how much these genres teach us: ‘They are a place where we can articulate very basic human issues ... being lonely or lost or frightened to death’ (‘Fairy Tale Ending’). He appeared on national radio and wrote for the *Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Guardian*, and the *Mirror* to argue

that adults needed fairy tales now more than ever because they ‘connect with very basic issues’; they are about ‘finding solutions, finding hope, in hard times’, ‘a guide, something to help us find our way out of the woods’ (Nick Clark, ‘Philip Pullman to Publish New Adaptations of Grimm’s Fairy Tales’, *Independent*, 20 March 2012; ‘Fairy Tale Ending’; and William Gray, ‘Go into the Woods—at Your Peril’, *Telegraph*, 13 January 2015, respectively).

He designed the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy as a place where research into those topics could come together on an international and interdisciplinary scale through fora, events, and the academic journal *Gramarye*, which he launched as founding editor in 2012. He was very proud of the exceptional researchers who joined the Centre’s Board of Advisors, including Donald Haase, Jacqueline Simpson, Diane Purkiss, Marina Warner, Jack Zipes, and many others. Bill worked with The Folklore Society, notably hosting a joint conference with the Society in 2012 on ‘Folklore and Fantasy’, as well as public talks by Jeremy Harte and Jacqueline Simpson. The Centre was also fortunate to have Simpson as its Visiting Professor of Folklore and, under Bill, the Centre produced an interactive online map of Sussex folklore based on her research. The Centre continues Bill’s legacy in promoting research into folklore, fairy tales, and fantasy, and recently ran a conference and workshop with Sophia Kingshill on coastal folklore (‘The Fabled Coast’, April 2019).

Bill had to retire from university life at the end of 2016 after an unexpected and serious stroke, and died at his home aged sixty-six. As Diane Purkiss has said, Bill will be greatly missed by the whole folklore and fantasy community. He is survived by his wife, Lorna (née Taylor), whom he married in 2002; his son, Jonathan, and daughter, Rebecca, from his first marriage, to Carol Poong, which ended in divorce; and stepdaughter, Rosanna. His family have installed a memorial bench in the gardens at the University of Chichester; the plaque reads, ‘Professor William “Bill” Gray (1952–2019), who showed us other worlds, and other ways of seeing the one we have.’

### ***Biographical Note***

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