

Everyday fairytales: USU professor analyzes new ways to teach folk tales

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May 26, 2017



Claudia Schwabe teaches German and fairy tale studies at Utah State University. She recently published two books on her subjects of study, one of those being “*New Approaches to Teaching Folk and Fairy Tales*.” This book is a collaborative project with her colleague Christa Jones.

“The book provides invaluable hands-on materials and pedagogical tools from an international group of scholars who share their experiences in teaching folk- and fairy-tale texts and films in a wide range of academic settings,” Schwabe said.

The main purpose of the book is to introduce a scholarly perspective on how to teach and study fairy tales in various courses and disciplines.

“Challenging the fairy-tale canon as represented by the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen and Walt Disney, contributors reveal an astonishingly diverse fairy-tale landscape,” Schwabe said. “The book offers instructors a plethora of fresh ideas, teaching materials and outside-the-box teaching strategies for classroom use as well as new and adaptable

pedagogical models that invite students to engage with class materials in intellectually stimulating ways.”

Schwabe, a native German, believes that fairy tales are a very important field of study.

“Very generally put, fairy tales are significant cultural artifacts because they preserve the cultural heritage of a country or society at a specific moment in time,” Schwabe said. “They contain spiritual and communal values, moral messages, and truths about life that every human being can relate to.”

Schwabe’s favorite fairy tales are those by the Grimm brothers, though she also prefers those by Andersen.

“Many of the 18th and 19th century moral messages are of course still valid today,” she said. “Furthermore, we can learn from fairy tales because they deal with profound cultural issues and contradictions.”

Still relevant themes would be innocence versus seduction — as addressed in “Little Red Riding Hood,” monstrosity versus compassion — as in “Beauty and the Beast,” and even hostility versus hospitality — as seen in “Hansel and Gretel,” Schwabe said.



“I was born in Hanau, Germany — the birthplace of the Brothers Grimm — so I was always surrounded by the legacy of the Grimms and their fairy tales growing up,” Schwabe said. “I was

surprised after choosing fairy tales as my research area how rich the field of studies is. The more I delved into fairy-tale studies, the more I realized that I want to teach fairy tales.”

Christopher Gibson, Schwabe’s husband, is an advanced emergency medical service provider/firefighter II for Cache County.

“Claudia is your typical German,” Gibson said. “She is extremely laid back, but is also very driven and very goal-oriented. She refuses to ever give up on anything without a fight. I have never known anyone to be sweeter or as kind.”

Gibson believes that fairy tales and Schwabe have a very important place at USU.

“She brings her knowledge and expertise in fairytale literature and the German language,” Gibson said. “Being a native German who grew up in the same region as the Brothers Grimm makes her a bit of an expert.”

Gibson also believes that fairy tales are important based on the cultural messages that they teach. His favorite versions are the original Grimm brothers’ tales.

“It is all well and good, every story handed down has been tweaked and open to different interpretations, that is part of their charm; but we should never forget or lose their origins. It is an essential art that needs to be remembered, researched and studied,” Gibson said. “Their messages and deeper meanings should continue to be handed down through the generations as they were originally intended. Claudia is driven to never let that happen, she believes there is room for all versions to be enjoyed and studied, even the bright pink marshmallow ones.”

Schwabe is happy about her current position teaching here at the university. She has various goals for her next few years of teaching.

“I hope to make tenure next year and become an associate professor of German and in the long run, of course, make full professor,” she said. “But I also want to work towards expanding the German section, help it grow, develop new classes and introduce some exciting and creative cultural projects along the way.”

Schwabe also plans to host a large, cultural exhibit in the library on campus during the fall semester.

“I hope such projects will attract more students to our German program and showcase the diversity of German culture, which goes beyond lederhosen and beer,” she said.

USU attracted Schwabe during her job search with its involvement in student life and the drive for diversity of both thought and culture.

“I liked the fact that USU is a thriving research university with a very respectable reputation around the world. Once I came here for the job interview, I was absolutely mesmerized by the

beautiful setting and natural landscapes.” she said. “And once I tasted Aggie Ice Cream, the choice for me was clear.”

In her time teaching here, Schwabe said USU has far exceeded her expectations.

Bradford Hall, the department head for the department of languages, philosophy & communication studies, said he is very pleased with Schwabe’s work at the university.

“It is clear to me that Claudia is very student-focused and that she is willing and happy to go the extra mile that it often takes to be a good advisor and mentor in the lives of our students,” Hall said. “She is dependable, professional and enthusiastic. She makes a positive difference in the lives of many students.”

Schwabe’s new book was published by the University Press of Colorado, Hall said.

“The book was favorably reviewed in Anthropology Review Database in August 2016, where it was praised as ‘original and somewhat wall-breaking,’” he said.

In addition to German and English, Schwabe also speaks French, some Spanish and some Arabic.

“This is normal when you grow up in Germany. In grade five, we start with English as our first foreign language. Then, in grade seven, we pick a second foreign language and I decided to learn French.” she said. “I simply do not like to look at a text and have no clue about its meaning. I want to be able to at least understand the basics of it. I already know that my next language will be Japanese, which I find extremely fascinating.”

Schwabe is very excited about her most recent publications and already has more in the works for the future. A lot of work goes into these publications, Schwabe said.

“I sometimes feel that it must be harder for non-native speakers to write in academic English than it is for native speakers, but then maybe that is just a convenient excuse,” she said. “In any case, I sometimes conduct my research while sitting on my couch at home, watching the sunrise in the morning. In the next moment, or so it seems, the sun sets already and I am still sitting in the exact same spot on the couch conducting research.”

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