Corbin, William (1916-1999)

William Corbin McGraw and Eloise Jarvis McGraw, husband and wife, were award-winning Oregon authors of children and young adult books.

Corbin was born in Des Moines, Iowa, on January 22, 1916, to Frank Irving McGraw and Grace Corbin. He attended Principia College from 1934 to 1936, where he met Eloise Jarvis Hamilton. He transferred to the University of Missouri before graduating from Drake University in 1938. After two years in Harvard's English Department, he and Eloise married in 1940.

McGraw worked as a copyreader, reporter, and feature writer for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, the Oklahoma City *Times*, and the San Diego *Tribune*, where he penned the humor column "Between the Lines." He published stories in *Cosmopolitan*, *American Colliers*, and *Saturday Evening Post* before turning his attention to writing for young readers.

William Corbin—the name he used for his books—wrote a dozen children's books between 1952 and 1991. The first, *Deadline* (1952), was published in the same year that the McGraws bought a twenty-three-acre filbert orchard and moved to Wilsonville, Oregon. Of the books that followed, several deal with horses and dogs and reflect his love of the outdoors.

Corbin was long fascinated with the sonorities of Abraham Lincoln's language, and there are unforgettable beauties of simplicity in his writing. He was a close observer of the world around him, and he had the verbal facility to describe a scene. He wrote, for example: "From the treetops above, starlings exploded skyward in startled hundreds" and "Catching sight of me she studied my face as thoroughly as if the police had asked her for a description."

Corbin also incorporated pearls of wisdom for young readers, but without heavy-handedness and within the terms set by its characters. For example: "A family's public, not a private institution. Your family's interested in you, so they pay attention."

Using humor and sparse language, Corbin capitalized on readers' imaginations, and through masterful dialogue his characters reveal information and create mood and drama. His work was so successful that British television made his *Horse in the House* (1964) into a popular series, and *Smoke* (1967) was adapted for Walt Disney's *Wonderful World of Color*, with Ron Howard playing the main character.

The McGraws had two children, Peter and Lauren. When grandchildren started to fill Corbin's life, he began writing for the very young, continuing his attention to playful language and delightful humor. *The Everywhere Cat* (1970)—"a real, live, honest-to-goodness, dyed-in-the-wool, utterly absolutely and altogether…cat"—was followed by *The Day Willie Wasn't* (1971), in which Willie the Wisp does everything he is told with hilarious consequences, and *The Pup with the Up-and-Down Tail* (1972), an Easy Reading book.

When Corbin's son Peter left a little plaster reproduction of a gargoyle of Notre Dame at the house, the author was inspired to write *The Prettiest Gargoyle* (1971). To research the book, Corbin made a trip to Paris and the towers of Notre Dame, lest he "make ludicrous mistakes on physical details." That kind of careful writing, his facility with and respect for language, and his humor garnered Corbin a long list of awards, including the Junior Literary Guild Book for a number of his books. His books were also translated into several languages.

Corbin died in Portland on June 6, 1999.

Written by Ulrich H. Hardt

Further Reading:

Corbin, William. *Golden Mare.* New York: Coward-McCann, 1955.

Corbin, William. *Me and the End of the World.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991

Hardt, Ulrich H. "Gargoyles, Horses, and High Road for Reading: Profile of William Corbin." *Oregon English Journal*

Vol. XX:1 (Spring 1998): 44-50.

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