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“High Fantasy Track.” Dragon Con, Atlanta, GA. September 1-5, 2022. Reviewed by Tim Lenz

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other genres descended upon downtown Atlanta to celebrate all their favourite stories, creators, and worlds. Although Dragon Con merged its dedicated ‘Tolkien Track’ with the broader ‘High Fantasy Track’ in 2017, the appetite for Tolkien-related content is clearly still present, as indicated by packed rooms for Tolkien programming (even though overall Dragon Con attendance was capped at about 75% of its pre-COVID levels), and rousing Middle-earth evening activities. This being the first year there has been a new live-action adaptation to discuss since the final Hobbit movie was released in 2014, the focus of the Tolkien programming was on Amazon’s ‘Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power’ streaming series, set in the Second Age of the Legendarium.

A last-minute announcement from Amazon that the 2-episode series premiere of ‘Rings of Power’ would air at 9pm on Thursday night caused the unfortunate cancellation of at least one Tolkien-related panel that was meant to take place that evening. The organizers assumed (likely correctly) that most fans of Tolkien’s Legendarium would opt to retreat to premiere viewing parties in hotel rooms rather than attend discussion panels. However, a last minute addition ended up being the highlight of the entire event for this reviewer – Amazon sent legendary Tolkien artist John Howe and experienced Elvish and Khuzdul dialect coach Leith McPherson to Atlanta for a panel titled ‘Behind the Scenes of the Rings of Power’ on Friday afternoon. This event was announced just a couple of days before Dragon Con commenced, but word spread fast and the panel was well-attended. Both Howe and McPherson recounted their experiences working on the billion-dollar Amazon production, and reassured the attendees that all involved in the series, from showrunners to writers to actors and crew, hold Tolkien’s writings and world in high esteem. The soft-spoken Howe described his joy in creating concept art for an earlier, more vibrant age of Middle-earth,

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Over Labour Day weekend, hordes of fans of fantasy, science fiction, comic books, and

while McPherson complimented Ismael Cruz Cordova's ability to quickly pick up Elven language, and conveyed emotionally how thrilled Cordova (who plays the elf 'Arondir' in the series) was to become a living part of Tolkien's world, having not found elves of darker complexion in previous screen adaptations of Middle-earth.

Unfortunately, no other Tolkien media guests were present at Dragon Con this year – none of the actors or production team of the previous Tolkien adaptations attended, saving Howe and McPherson, who both worked on Peter Jackson's films as well as 'Rings of Power'. This has been a recurring issue since the merging of the Tolkien and High Fantasy tracks. Other high profile media properties such as Star Trek, Marvel, and DC have a larger presence, being routinely represented by numerous actors.

The recurring mainstay of Tolkien programming at Dragon Con is the 'Evening at Bree', which took place in its usual slot on Friday evening, and as always had a huge line to enter. The festivities included a costume contest, which was judged by Howe, McPherson, and cosplay personality Artemistyck (straight from the woodland realm in full Thranduil garb). Mythsoc Social Media Steward Alicia Fox-Lenz and I debuted our hobbit costumes for the first time in the contest - there were completely handmade using historical techniques (hand sewing and embroidering) by Alicia as a pandemic project. With about 30 entries, the judges were presented with the unenviable task of choosing champions across a few categories. Winners of the costume contest included an impressive, book-inspired female Dwarf Warrior, a complete 'Fellowship'

group, a 'Sexy Eye of Sauron', and an excellent 'Rings of Power' Galadriel in armour, made even more impressive by the fact that she had only promotional images and trailers to use as reference material. Best in show was awarded to an Eowyn cosplayer in her highly-detailed 'Dernhelm' disguise. It was discovered after the contest that Howe had been sketching Gandalf and Balrogs on his judging form, which he left behind for lucky fans to enjoy. After the costume contest, hobbits, elves, dwarves, and men danced the night away together to live music, and listened intently to the ethereal voices of the Elf Choir.

Panel programming at Dragon Con is distinct from that found at more 'corporate' cons

such as San Diego Comic Con or New York Comic Con. As a completely fan-run event, Dragon Con programming does not exclusively involve media personalities telling 'behind the scenes' production stories, but adds in panels of fan experts giving detailed discussions of various elements of their favourite franchises or taking questions from attendees. Fox-



Lenz was a panelist on one of the High Fantasy panels, which summarized the transformative nature of 'underworlds' in Middle-earth, including underground strongholds, cities, and monster-filled caverns. It almost felt like a preview of Mythsoc's upcoming Online Midwinter Seminar, with its theme of 'Fantasy Goes to Hell'. Other Middle-earth discussion panels included 'Gandalf vs Sauron', a recounting of the conflict between the two most famous Maiar, and a preliminary discussion of the upcoming anime-style film 'War of the Rohirrim', scheduled to release in 2023. The latter panel featured a special video message from Philippa Boyens and Weta's Richard

Taylor, who are involved with the production. Non-Tolkien programming on the High Fantasy Track was focussed around George R.R. Martin's tales of Westeros and the multiple planned 'Game of Thrones' spin-offs, Robert Jordan's 'Wheel of Time' and its own Amazon streaming series, and the Netflix adaptation of Andrzej Sapowski's 'Witcher' stories.

The significant contributions of 'The One Ring dot net' staffers Kirsten Cairns (greendragon), Jim Wert (Madeye Gamgee), and Rebecca Perry (deej) to the continued success of Dragon Con's Tolkien programming cannot be understated. Together they were responsible for the presence of Howe and McPherson at the event, with Cairns deftly hosting the 'Behind the Scenes of The Rings of Power' panel, and also ran both a 'preview' and post-premiere 'Spoiler Special' for 'The Rings of Power', ensuring the much-talked-about Amazon series was well-covered. Plus, the 'TORn' fan table always has a wonderful selection of T-shirts, pins, and other Middle-earth-themed goodies that make attendees exclaim "we wants it, Precious!"

As we embark upon a new age of adaptations of Tolkien's Legendarium, conventions will be a pillar of the fan community, allowing acolytes of all stripes to gather and celebrate stories new and old. From cosplayers showcasing beautiful hand-crafted costumes to passionate discussions about Middle-earth lore to the peoples of Arda marching in Saturday morning's well-attended Dragon Con Parade while onlookers shouted "Yay! The Hobbits!", it is clear that Tolkien fandom is as vibrant and diverse as ever it has been. And as always, a legion of melancholy Lantern Elves, singing a lament as they marched West through Dragon Con's host hotels, heralded the closing of the festivities until next year.

