

Summer 7-15-1966

Letters

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Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

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Letters

Authors

Carlton Maley, Michael P. Higgins, Helen Fox, Laird H. Barber, Barliman Butterbur, and Peter Carney

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
Summer School of Arts and Sciences
June 16, 1966

Dear Mr. Plotz,

We are writing to you, knowing of your interest in Tolkien, to tell you that we have received an application for admission to the Summer School from a Mr. Bilbo Baggins, who gives his present mailing address c/o J.R.R. Tolkien, even though his permanent address is Bag-End, Underhill, Hobbiton, The Shire.

His application in some respects is like many others that we receive. His remarks, for example, under our question #17 (please state your reasons for wishing to attend the Harvard Summer School and your reasons for taking the courses you have indicated on your Tentative Study List) are almost familiar: "My friends at Harvard have invited me to visit in Cambridge for the summer and I would like to use this opportunity to sample the literary and social culture of the area. Since Harvard is the foremost burrow of The Western Lands, I think that taking a couple of courses at the Harvard Summer School would be a practical means of reaching my goal."

His previous education is somewhat different from that of many of our applicants. He has, for example, only a certificate from Gandalf Academy in the major of Adventure and Poetry (Saga). He gives as his present occupation simply gentleman, and his two references seem somewhat strange to us: Gandalf the White (formerly "The Grey"), whose address is c/o The White Council, Middle-earth, and whose occupation seems to read "wizzard", and Meriadoc Brandybuck, of Over the Water.

We were pleased to discover that in spite of these evidences of eccentricity the applicant--unlike some others--properly completed his Tentative Study List. He registered to take Celtic S-131, Irish Literature and Civilization (1200 to the present) in European Context, as a noncredit student. In addition he selected two courses to audit: a conference course, History S-270, the Guilded Age in American History, and Natural Sciences 9, The Astronomical Perspective.

The Housing Office is currently assigning a room to Mr. Baggins. The staff in that office were concerned that he should have a ground floor, since his birth date (May 4, 2890--of the Third Age) left them in some doubt about his physical condition. Their concerns were reinforced by his question about the possibility of having additional meals served daily in his room. Whether permission for this will be granted we cannot yet report. It is a somewhat extraordinary request and will require approval in the central Summer School kitchen.

We hope that the summer will prove satisfactory for Mr. Baggins. We have, by committee vote, admitted him to the Summer School, and his code number is 00-5598-05-71-1-000.

Yours truly,
Carlton Maley
Director of Admissions

Dear Sir:

Last night I attended a farewell party for two of my friends who are leaving for the service. As I entered the bar where the party was held I was handed a sealed envelope by a hooded figure with a patch over his left eye. He then turned and vanished into the night.

This being rather bizarre even for my neighborhood I immediately opened the letter. Inside the envelope I found these cryptic words
TOLKIEN SEP

After the party (and I admit a sizable number of drinks) I was even more puzzled and returning home decided to pursue the matter further.

I first telephoned the Post Office, and being put through to the Post Master enquired as to whether or not one of his employees was in the habit of wearing a hood and eyepatch. After first reassuring me that it was no bother to him to be called at three in the morning he continued, "None of our employees wear patches or hoods while delivering mail though I certainly cannot speak authoritatively as to their off duty garments. Have you considered the possibility of a disguise?"

"No," I answered, "I never felt the need for one."

"Not for you, sir," (Post Masters are always civil, especially early in the morning), "the messenger."

Bearing this in mind I decided the search for the missing messenger might well be left off until I had examined the message itself.

A qualitative analysis of the envelope revealed that it was a standard one cent (1c) envelope which had been purchased at E.J. Korvettes on the night of Sept. 4, 1965 by a left handed man between the ages of 50 and 55 years, with flat feet, prematurely gray hair, a hitlerian moustache, twice broken nose and a weak left eye!

Assured at least that this was the same envelope I had been given earlier (one can never be too careful) I felt justified in not subjecting the message to such scrutiny until after I had attempted to ascertain its meaning.

TOLKIEN.....

who was there so ignorant of the deeper realities of the Cosmic Sphere as to not have a knowledge of J.R.R. TOLKIEN?? Even more, who would dare admit it and thenceforth be barred from meaningful communication with his fellow man, doomed to be frowned upon by king and subject both??

but SEP?

a different matter. Many know of the new work to come from this great author but this could certainly not be its name.

Then came one of those strokes of genius for which I am noted. SEP S.E.P. SAF. EVE. POST THE SATURDAY EVENING POST!!! There was something to do with TOLKIEN in the Saturday Evening Post. I immediately rushed out and procured a copy of this magazine (difficult indeed at four in the morning, even more so in Yonkers) and found

"The Hobbit Forming World of J.R.R. Tolkien"

and in it The TOLKIEN SOCIETY

SO PLEASE SEND ME SOONEST INFORMATION ABOUT SOCIETY

Yours compulsively,

Michael P. Higgins

17 Summit St.

Yonkers, N.Y. 10701

PS do you have hooded members with a patch over the left eye? mph

Honourable Thain,

Mr. Tolkien, his publisher, and his followers should not be overly distressed at the cover of the Ballantine Hobbit.

The artist is clearly a successor to E.A. Poe, in his own field. Being loyal to both the publisher and to the Poe tradition, he was labouring under the influence of Ballantine Beer. Such genius can not be stifled.

He seems to have read the trilogy too quickly, and in confusing Ents and Eagles (natural history not being his strong point), arrived at Emus. Visions of Narnia and C.S. Lewis must visit him frequently, although I am intrigued as to why Aslan looks as if he has just eaten a particularly hot Red Hot.

Aslan is approaching the Emu-ents to warn them about the Pink Light Bulbs, which so distressed Mr. Tolkien. The artist has interpreted them as inventions of Weston and Saruman (Inc.), as well as confusing them with the Palantir of Sauron. (They are probably only Middle-earth apples.) However, this interpretation makes them very clearly worth being distressed at.

Alas, I may judge too hastily. This truly wonderful cover may very well be Symbolic, meaningful only to those who know.

Sincerely,
Helen Fox
4528 Middleton Lane
Bethesda, Md. 20014

Dear Mr. Plotz:

The letter from John Plotz and your reply establish opposite (at least lexically) attitudes towards The Lord of the Rings; I think there is room for a third attitude. The primary quality of the work is, I think, its tone of reality. If it is escape literature, from what does one escape? Not from any human problems of good or evil, surely. Théoden is a good example of the human realism that is basic to all the Tolkien's characters. An old man, he is rather easily persuaded that he has lost all his strength. When Gandalf shows him that the world is not, in fact, all dark, and when the wizard tells him there is a small but real hope of defeating Sauron, Théoden regains his courage. He is still an old man, not as well able to conduct battles as Éomer and Strider are. And Théoden recognizes his own folly in having believed Wormtongue. He seems ideal, however, because he does not spend any time lamenting his folly or giving useless explanations. Having decided he has been wrong, he immediately and forever leaves his error and turns avidly to useful action. None of his actions are those of an "escape" character; they are those of a human being who has the courage to accept reality, even the realities of his own errors.

Indexes and inquiries into names may not interest everyone, but they are helpful aids if one is working with The Lord of the Rings. Having recently completed a dissertation on the trilogy, I applaud the index; it would have saved me--and there will be others--weeks of time. The Lord of the Rings is a very important literary event; according to all the principles of literary action, it could not have occurred in the 1950's, but it did. It is a difficult work to study critically, simply because it is so large and so concisely written. Indexes and other such aids are, of course, secondary to the major critical questions The Lord of the Rings evolves. Nevertheless, these factual inquiries should be done and made public.

Very truly yours,
Mrs. Laird H. Barber
310 West Fifth St.
Morris, Minn. 56267

POLICE DEPARTMENT
City of New York

Dear Mr. Baggins:

It has come to our attention that much of the recent civil strife has been the work of some recent immigrants called "Yrchs" or "Orcs", directed by several mysterious leaders known only as "Nazgul". These people, according to independent evidence, seem to be in the service of a central figure identified as Sauron, alias "The Eye of Mordor", formerly a henchman of one "Morgoth, the Enemy".

It is our belief that one man, working in an undercover capacity through an organization familiar with the tactics and capabilities of these Yrchs, namely your organization of Hobbits, could move against these characters, particularly against their goon squad, the Uruk-Hai.

Therefore, please accept into your organization

Alan Joyce
308 W. 109 St., Apt. 7
New York 25, N.Y.

He is skilled in the techniques and problems of Ring-use, and in the Quenya language and alphabet. Please enter Mr. Joyce in your organization as soon as possible so that he may officially begin his campaign of subway scribbling.

Sincerely yours,
Barliman Butterbur

Dear Frodo,

I have recently come across your address from a friend and rejoice in the news that YOU ARE STILL ALIVE. At one time in my varied past I was in grave danger of passing away with the elves. At that time I found the concrete world of neurosurgery crowding into all my being so that only objective reality was considered valid. Two years ago while in the midst of a most de-personalizing period of training my wife introduced me to you, and Sam, and all your friends. The impact was to immediately and permanently liberate me from the cold confines of neurosurgery. Although an imposter, utilizing my name and form, is still learning this craft, thanks to you I am free to constantly search for evidence of Middle-earth artifacts in the hospitals of New England. So far I have succeeded in finding at least one, and possibly two neurosurgeons who definitely have hobbit blood in them. This is truly unusual!! As you must know, most neurosurgeons are descendents of orcs who have been elevated to the role of aide de camp to Sauron. There are many nurses, aides, and various technicians who also have great sympathy for hobbits if not actual blood kinship. All in all, the world of a hospital definitely is a place where the struggles of Middle-earth still are going on.

Thus, it is with great pleasure that the news of your survival reached me! This letter is written in hopes that you might send me a button with "Frodo is Alive", written in elven of course, so that I could give my wife a token of your continued good health. Thus, I am enclosing a self-addressed envelope along with a dollar to handle whatever inconvenience the sending would cause you. I have used the name of my former self on the envelope to avoid confusing the bureaucrats who run the hospital mail room, but I remain, with great warmth of heart,

Your most humble and obedient servant,

A lover of Ents.
(Peter Carney, M.D.
Hartford Hospital
Hartford, Conn. 06115)