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Greetings

Peter Beagle

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Greetings

GREETINGS

They vary greatly, the particular books that you like to have around, the books whose feel and smell and physical presence are somehow comforting and necessary. I know several people who are that way about the collected works of Ayn Rand; and then there are the Henry Miller acolytes, the Ronald Firbank people, and those who seem to move forever in the musky world of the Alexandria Quartet. Whatever the books, they are usually either in mint condition or worn down to the essentials, and they are seldom loaned out. Psychiatrists would say that their owners have made a transference to them, but a savage might believe that the life of the individual had become bound up with the actual being of the book.

My personal books are almost all fantasies, with a few debatable exceptions like John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor and some of Vladimir Nabokov's novels. The Circus of Dr. Lao, by Charles G. Finney, belongs in this group; and so do James Thurber's three short books, The White Deer, The Thirteen Clocks, and The Wonderful O. St-Exupery's The Little Prince occupies a sort of fringe position, flawed by its sentimentality; but E. B. White's Stuart Little and Charlotte's Web are charter members, as are The Crock of Gold and The Wind in the Willows. There are others. I will remember them five minutes after this essay is in the mailbox.

Since this is being written as a tribute for J. R. R. Tolkien's birthday, it would be proper to say that The Lord of the Rings stands at the head of my private pantheon. Proper, but not entirely correct. Its one rival for supremacy is T. H. White's The Once and Future King. I feel obligated to mention this because there isn't any T. H. White Society, nor any buttons, magazines, or scholarly papers, nor any birthday observances. There was only a wretched musical comedy, an even baser movie cartoon, and a government project called Camelot, designed to co-opt revolutions in Latin America. May the fates preserve Professor Tolkien from such recognitions; from Disney and the State Department!

But about The Lord of the Rings. As far as I know, the book will not stop bullets, cure diseases, ward off any of the demons of our time, compel true speech when sworn upon, guarantee returned love if given as a gift, nor--sadly--admit the reader into the world it chronicles, however many times he reads it. Yet there is magic in it, and protection. I have loaned out my copy once or twice, and nothing really catastrophic happened, but I felt uneasy and observed--as by a great Eye--and I don't think I'll do it again. It's just safer to have the book nearby.

Happy birthday, Professor Tolkien. You have made magic.

--Peter Beagle

