

10-15-2009

Amanda McKittrick Ros and the Inklings

Anita G. Gorman

(emeritus), Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania

Leslie Robertson Mateer

The Pennsylvania State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gorman, Anita G. and Mateer, Leslie Robertson (2009) "Amanda McKittrick Ros and the Inklings," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 28: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol28/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



Amanda McKittrick Ros and the Inklings

Abstract

On the connection between Amanda McKittrick Ros, frequently hailed as one of the worst writers to ever set pen to paper, and the Inklings, who would compete to see who could read aloud from her *oeuvre* the longest with a straight face. Considers Ros's lasting appeal and the peculiarity of her genius.

Additional Keywords

Inklings; Ros, Amanda McKittrick

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



AMANDA MCKITTRICK ROS
AND THE INKLINGS

ANITA G. CORDAN AND
LESLIE ROBERTSON DATEER

Picture this: We are in the years after World War II. The Inklings have been friends for a long time. J.R.R. Tolkien is no longer reading the manuscript of *The Lord of the Rings* to his mates. C.S. Lewis has also stopped reading his own work during the Inklings' Thursday night meetings. Now their gatherings focus on conversation. From time to time one of the Inklings reads aloud a poem, perhaps one of his own, perhaps not, and discussion follows. And once in a while, C.S. Lewis opens a copy of Amanda McKittrick Ros's novel *Irene Iddesleigh* and challenges the members to see which of them is capable of reading the longest "without breaking into helpless laughter" (Carpenter 225-26).

Now picture this: It is 1898. Miss Louie Bennett of Dublin, along with two of her friends and an engineer named Burkitt, has sent English humorist Barry Pain a copy of *Irene Iddesleigh*. Pain reviews the novel in the magazine *Black & White*, ironically giving his review the title "The Book of the Century." Amanda McKittrick Ros is not amused and retaliates with a vituperative attack on Mr. Pain in her next novel, *Delina Delaney*. Soon Delina Delaney dinners are the rage in London, with guests reciting Mrs. Ros's prose and sometimes playing an "Amanda game" wherein one poses a question and another answers "in keeping with the mood and spirit" of Amanda McKittrick Ros's unintentionally hilarious books (Loudan 52).

And finally a third scenario: It is 1907, and we are in Oxford. An Amanda Ros Society is now presenting weekly readings from her works. With only one copy of *Delina Delaney* to share among them, some of the members copy scenes from the novel in order to "amuse" friends and family (Loudan 92). Clearly, when C.S. Lewis opened that copy of *Irene Iddesleigh* in 1947 in order to provoke laughter among the Inklings, he was not performing an original or isolated act. Rather, he was part of a long-standing tradition of hilarity at the expense of a woman whom Nick Page in his seminal work *In Search of the World's Worst Writers* labeled "the greatest bad writer who ever lived" (261). Nor was this the first time C.S. Lewis and his friends had laughed at Ros's writing. In a letter to his brother, Major Warren Hamilton Lewis (Warnie), dated

November 19, 1939, Lewis reports that he, Charles Williams, Gerard Walter Sturgis Hopkins, and Charles Wrenn were together and “falling into the mention of it by chance, read about half of *Irene Iddesleigh* right through” (C.S. Lewis 294). Lewis and his friends completed the reading on November 24 “with great enjoyment and some instruction” (297), though he does not say what this instruction entailed. And on November 28, 1946, Warnie Lewis recorded in his diary that at a “pretty full meeting of the Inklings” John Wain “won an outstanding bet by reading a chapter of *Irene Iddesleigh* without a smile” (W.H. Lewis 197).

Who was Amanda McKittrick Ros, and why have people been laughing at her for over one hundred years? According to Jack Loudan, her biographer, Ros was a “mass of contradiction. [...] She was a Puritan whose language could be unbelievably shocking. At times she was tolerant and kindly, at others she could see no point of view but her own” (180-81).

Amanda often made claims about her life that were typical of her tendency to embellish. It is known that she was born in 1860 near Ballyneinch, County Down, Northern Ireland. It has also been confirmed that she was christened Anna Margaret McKittrick, though she claimed that her mother actually named her Amanda Malvina Fitzalan Anna Margaret McLelland M’Kittrick. Amanda Malvina Fitzalan was the name of the main character in Regina Maria Roche’s *Children of the Abbey*, a novel Amanda loved as a child.¹ Later, when she added the surname “Ross” after marrying Andy Ross in 1887, she altered the spelling to “Ros,” partly, Loudan suspects, because “she knew of a family of ancient lineage called de Ros in Co[unty] Down” (26).

Amanda taught school for a few years before settling in Larne with her husband, a railroad stationmaster.² She lived most of her life in Larne and completed most of her works there, but it was also in Larne that she developed her intense hatred of lawyers, critics, and even certain clergy. Her unreasoning wrath found its way into nearly all her works, whether relevant to the story or not. She was known to take her arguments to the streets, waving banners or accosting townspeople if she felt she had been wronged (Loudan 107-108). The two books of poetry published in her lifetime, *Poems of Puncture* and *Fumes of Formation*, contained poems that vividly and descriptively attacked lawyers, as only Amanda could.

¹ Today *Children of the Abbey* is best known for being mentioned in Jane Austen’s *Emma*. It was one of the simpleminded Harriet Smith’s favorite novels. Perhaps Ros should have been reading Austen.

² Amanda’s husband paid for the publication of *Irene Iddesleigh* as a tenth anniversary present to his wife (Corwin). Whether he should be blamed or praised for his generosity is not for us to say.

Why did the Inklings enjoy ridiculing Amanda? There are at least four reasons: the plots of her novels; her characters; her themes or the lack thereof; and her unique style. What else could there be?

Let us begin with her plots. Amanda wrote three novels, two of which were published in her lifetime.³ *Irene Iddesleigh*, *Delina Delaney*, and *Helen Huddleson* are all love stories; traditional enough in outline, they are stories of young, virginal women of low or dubious birth, who become the objects of obsessive love by rich men of high or noble birth. If the women are able to maintain their virtue and chastity to the end of the novel, despite many hardships and temptations, they triumph by marrying the men they love.⁴ It is there that any relation to a mundane or consistent storyline ends.

Amanda's stories are nothing if not entertaining, yet their plots lack Aristotelian probability and necessity. In *Irene Iddesleigh*, for example, the eponymous heroine, the adopted daughter of Lord and Lady Dilworth, is married to the kindly, rich, and much older Sir John Dunfern. Unfortunately, her heart really belongs to her tutor, Oscar Otwell. In a delirium after giving birth, Irene inadvertently confesses her love for Oscar and her hatred of her husband, who punishes her treachery by locking her in what is repeatedly called the "room of correction" or "room of death" (67). After a year's imprisonment, flight, an alliance with her lover, his suicide, and poverty, Irene returns to her husband. Alas, he is dead, and, rejected by her son, Irene crawls away to perish on the grounds of her childhood home. The plot reeks of melodrama.

Or consider the plot of *Delina Delaney*. Delina's suitor is the local nobleman and heir, the young and handsome Sir Gifford. After convincing Delina to run away with him, Sir Gifford decides that the rustic Delina must train in the arts of high society before she can take a place next to him in the exalted position of his wife, so he hires the cruel Madam-de-Maine, a French divorcée, to tutor her. Madam-de-Maine, however, has designs on the young heir herself and will not stand to lose him to the young fisherman's daughter. After running away from her cruel tutor, Delina eventually finds a position as a nurse in a hospital. Coincidentally, she cares for a young lord who is still grief-stricken at the loss of his bride-to-be; he, of course, turns out to be Sir Gifford. After Madam-de-Maine tries to poison Sir Gifford, both she and Delina are put on trial for the crime, and Delina, oddly enough, is declared guilty and put in jail. Later, in America, Madam-de-Maine, now known as the socialite Florence Fontaine, becomes ill and confesses to Lord Gifford that she is really his cousin, Lady

³ Posthumous publications include *St. Scandalbags*, a ten-thousand-word essay attacking critic W.B. Wyndham Lewis; *Donald Dudley: The Bastard Critic*, the first episode of an unfinished work that Ros often referred to as *Six Months in Hell*; and a collection of letters under the title *Bayonets of Bastard Sheen* (Hogan 576).

⁴ *Irene Iddesleigh* is the tragedy of the three and does not end happily.

Mattie Maynard, the intended bride he rejected after he met and fell in love with Delina. On her deathbed, Lady Mattie/Madam-de-Maine/Florence Fontaine confesses to the poisoning, as well as to a host of other crimes, including two murders. On the strength of the confession, Delina is freed from jail and finally married to Lord Gifford.

Unfinished at the time of Ros's death, *Helen Huddleson* was published in 1969, edited with a final chapter by Jack Loudan. *Helen Huddleson* introduces two lovers for our heroine, one good and one evil, but aside from this, the basic storyline is similar to that of *Delina Delaney*. Poor, beautiful and virtuous Helen must endure kidnapping by the dastardly Lord Rasberry and many other hardships before she is eventually united with her true love, Maurice Munro. Amanda also experiments with chronology in *Helen Huddleson*. The story begins in the middle, with the introduction of a young girl named Helen Potter who listens to the tale of Helen Huddleson told by Maurice Monroe, who is in despair because he fears she is dead. At this point, Amanda abandons the character of Helen Potter and takes up the story with Helen Huddleson. In fact, Helen Potter is never mentioned again; Jack Loudan, believing he was acting on Amanda's intentions, brings her back in the final chapter.

In all of Ros's novels, coincidences and improbabilities abound. Characters jump back and forth to America, Australia, and Canada in barely a paragraph, while short trips on the railroad can last for pages; recall that Amanda's husband was a stationmaster. Long-lost characters bump into each other in the most unlikely of places. Chronology and limitations of time are almost ignored, especially in *Helen Huddleson*, where, in the space of what seems to be a week, Maurice Monroe moves to Australia, settles in, and becomes "owner of the State Bank" (26). Amanda was also the master of the diversion, and the more irrelevant, the better. Sometimes her diversions are innocent, though baffling. In one memorable scene, the dastardly Lord Rasberry is trying to talk Helen Huddleson into marrying him. When she replies that she loves another and is set to sail to him, Lord Rasberry inexplicably begins a long tale about his sister, Cherry Rasberry, who married the Duke of Greengage, whose father moved to Toronto and died, and whose remains needed to be returned to Ireland. The tale involves dreams and storms, the eventual sinking of a ship, and the loss of Cherry before Lord Rasberry finally gets back to the task at hand and pulls out a pistol to lend more support to his marriage proposals. At other times, Ros's diversions have a sharp point: Why, for instance, did Lord Gifford feel it necessary to abruptly interrupt his passionate proposal of marriage to Delina to read a pamphlet lying on the ground? Because that pamphlet was written by a critic. Lord Gifford, enraged that someone had the effrontery to criticize "the talented pen" of a playwright, launches into a three-page rant about the evils of critics, Amanda Ros's own nemeses.

In addition to improbable and melodramatic plots, Amanda McKittrick Ros failed to create characters that are credible, dynamic, or developed, and the motivations for their actions are hardly subtle. Secondary characters often die in the most abrupt and melodramatic ways. Delina Delaney's father dies suddenly after a night out helping shipwreck victims. Delina's mother falls over dead when she hears Delina has eloped. Lord Gifford's mother, informed that her son might be considering a bad marriage, goes spectacularly insane, then dies. Faithful servant Joss Danvers is shot by Madam-de-Maine, who then stands over his bloody corpse and sings a song apparently composed just for the occasion. When Delina's guilty verdict is read in court, mass mayhem ensues—and people die. C.S. Lewis mentioned in a letter to his brother that the characters in *Delina Delaney* "are such primitive savages that it would be quite sinister if the absurdity of the presentation were not always resolving the whole thing into laughter" (C.S. Lewis 294).

As for her themes, well, what are they? That good prevails? Not always. That evil is punished? Not always. That character counts? Maybe. No particularly interesting ideas may be inferred from her plots or characters or the voice of the narrator. What, then, impelled C.S. Lewis and his mates to read aloud from Ros's work? Yes, the improbable plots, silly characters, and nonexistent themes may have played a role, but were those enough to captivate the Inklings and to give rise to Delina Delaney dinners and Amanda Ros societies? After all, many writers have written improbable plots about improbable people, and these writers have enjoyed short-lived reputations, if any reputations at all. Yet Amanda lives on. She lives on mainly because of her incomparable prose.

Amanda adored alliteration, as when she wrote that "corners of horror shelter themselves within the castles of the queenly, the palaces of the powerful, the monuments of the mighty, and the cottages of the caretaker" (*Irene Iddesleigh* 62), or when she created the names of her characters, heroines such as Irene Iddesleigh, Delina Delaney, and Helen Huddleson, and supporting casts of people with names such as Oscar Otwell, Marjory Mason, Maurice Munro, Mabel Moag, Henry Huddleson, and Barney Bloater.⁵

⁵ In *Helen Huddleson*, Ros goes beyond alliteration to name some of her characters after edible delights, with a gardener thrown in for good measure: Lord Rasberry [sic], Madam Pear, Lily Lentil, Helen Potter. This is probably not an attempt at allegory.

Like Samuel Johnson, Amanda McKittrick Ros preferred to write lengthy sentences using parallel structure; unlike Johnson's, Ros's prose often fails to convey clear thought. Johnson famously said of John Dryden, "He delighted to tread upon the brink of meaning, where light and darkness begin to mingle; to approach the precipice of absurdity, and hover over the abyss of unideal vacancy" ("John Dryden"). Ros occupies a similar neighborhood, without Dryden's magnificence, and she falls into that abyss. Consider this sentence from *Irene Iddesleigh*:

He was tempted to invest in the polluted stocks of magnified extension, and when their banks seems swollen with rotten gear, gathered too often from the winds of wilful wrong, how the misty dust blinded his sense of sight and drove him through the field of fashion and feeble effeminacy, which he once never meant to tread, landing him on the slippery rock of smutty touch, to wander into its hidden cavities of ancient fame, there to remain a blinded son of injustice and unparalleled [sic] wrong. (115)

Thomas Beer, in his introduction to the 1927 American edition of *Irene Iddesleigh*, quotes this single sentence of eighty-seven words in order to demonstrate that Ros "abandoned the intelligible in discussions of the commonplace," that her "style has the final merit of concealing thought and plot" so that the reader's "mind rocks along in an amiable delirium" (x).

Just as she treads on the brink of meaning, Ros also treads on the brink of malapropism. Neither as obvious nor as funny as the original Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals*, Ros nevertheless dazzles the reader with word combinations that are unexpected and sometimes absurd. In one short passage in *Helen Huddleson*, Maurice Munroe pines that "I am – a poor miserable compilation of juiceless fabric" while he "gazed at Helen Potter with sorrow-stuffed eyes" (33). Her metaphors sometimes qualify as the mixed variety. Consider, for example, this sentence from *Delina Delaney*: "He had not the remotest guess that the bomb of strife, so artfully prepared by the tongue of levelled indignation, would thus explode by the force of high-bred egotism" (qtd. in Ormsby 69); do tongues prepare bombs, and does egotism cause them to explode? Here is another sentence from *Delina Delaney*:

The sweet memory of past utterances trembled through him like an electric shock, and sent a diametrical streak of deep red, round which rested a paler-coloured circumference of natural shade, proving pleasingly effectual on his ghostly cheek, that served as a striking background. (qtd. in Ormsby 65-66)

"Sweet memory" conflicts with "electric shock," and the "diametrical streak" gives a jarring effect to "circumference," causing the reader to have difficulty picturing how the "deep red" and the "natural shade" somehow rest on the "ghostly cheek."

In addition, Ros employs dangling modifiers from time to time, or, in Jack Loudan's words, she "has an extraordinary manner of beginning a sentence with a phrase that belongs to the previous sentence and is unrelated to the subject it governs" (49). Here is an example from *Irene Iddesleigh*: "On entering the chamber of sickness one morning with a new bottle of medicine, sent direct from London, Sir John raised himself slightly on his left elbow and made inquiry about his son" (136). Sir John cannot enter a room with medicine and also raise himself on his left elbow at the same time. He is on his deathbed; the person entering the room is Madam Fulham, mentioned in the previous sentence.

In a 1928 essay titled "Euphuës Redivivus," Aldous Huxley compared Ros's style to that of John Lyly. Though Huxley doubts that Ros ever encountered the work of the Elizabethan Euphuists, he concludes that Ros "arrived independently at precisely the same state of development as Lyly and his disciples" (137); in any society, Huxley asserts, early attempts at literary language "are always productive of the most elaborate artificiality" (138), and it takes centuries before writers recognize "that art [is] possible without artifice" (138). Ros, "an Elizabethan born out of her time, is still under the spell of that magical and delicious intoxication" characteristic of the Euphuists (138). Both Lyly and Ros share a love of Latinate vocabulary, parallel structure, alliteration, and long, involved sentences.

Huxley preferred to analyze rather than ridicule Ros. He represents a minority. Other Ros critics have ridiculed the risibility of Ros's remarkable ruminations, with some incurring Amanda's anger in return. Barry Pain and Thomas Beer have already been mentioned. D.B. Wyndham Lewis in a review of the Nonesuch edition of *Irene Iddesleigh* in the *Daily Mail* (17 November 1928) stated that he was "going to be extremely careful about this superb book," then spent time lambasting Ros's descriptions of Sir John Dunfern's sagging pants, even referring to Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (qtd. in Loudan 57). Mark Twain, in a 1905 letter to a Mr. Horner thanking him for a copy of *Irene Iddesleigh*, wrote, "Many years ago I began to collect 'hogwash' literature, and I am glad of the chance to add to it the extraordinary book which you have sent me" (qtd. in Loudan 161).

The "highest praise one can give" Amanda McKittrick Ros, according to Jack Loudan, is to call her unique, "without a literary antecedent or successor" (175). The final word on Ros's style belongs to Barry Pain, who also had the first word: "It [*Irene Iddesleigh*] is a thing that happens once in a million

years. There is no one above it and no one beside it, and it sits alone as the nightingale sings. The words that would attempt to give any clear idea of it have not been invented" (qtd. in Loudan 54).

Since the Inklings were a group of writers who read many works in search of both inspiration and entertainment, can we say that Ros influenced the work of the Inklings? Perhaps Ros's work was a kind of "negative influence, that is, a situation where one work is created in deliberate opposition to another" (Glyer 37). The Inklings certainly did not influence Ros, nor did she influence them, except perhaps in this respect: Each time they read aloud passages from her work, perhaps C.S. Lewis and his friends made a mental note to write novels different in every possible way from those of Amanda McKittrick Ros.

WORKS CITED

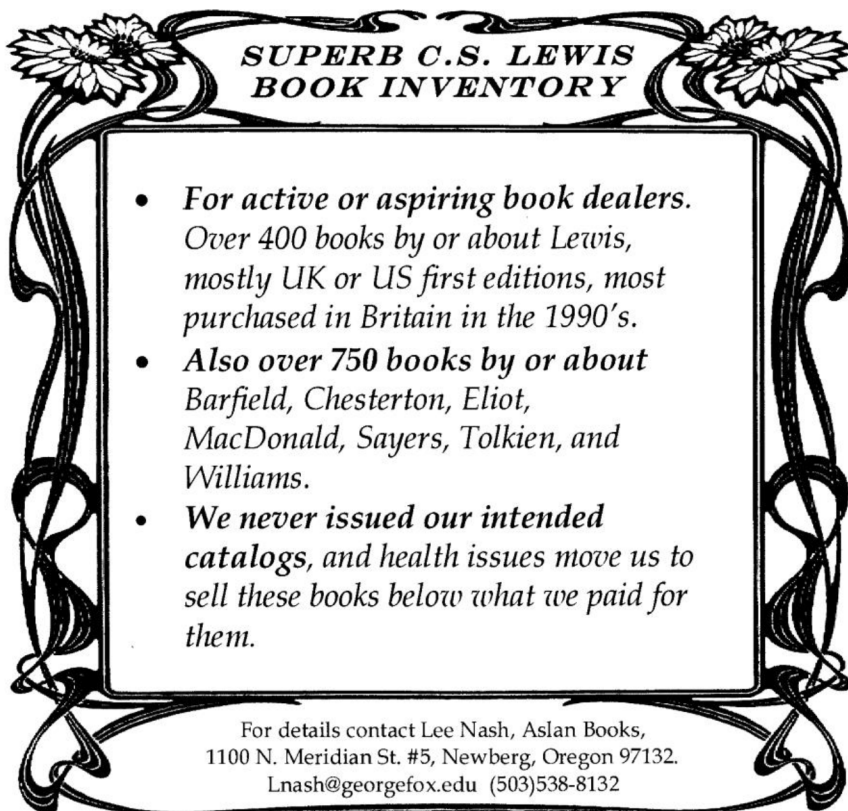
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their Friends*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979.
- Corwin, Miles. "Words to Remember." *Smithsonian Magazine* June 2009: 92. 31 July 2009. <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/The-Last-Page-Words-to-Remember.html>>
- Glyer, Diana Pavlac. *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State UP, 2007.
- Huxley, Aldous. "Euphues Redivivus." *On the Margin: Notes & Essays*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1928. 134-40.
- Johnson, Samuel. "John Dryden." *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Lives of the Poets*. Vol. 1. 29 Feb. 2008 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext06/8jpt110.txt>>.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis. Volume II: Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931-1949*. Walter Hooper, ed. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.
- Lewis, W.H. *Brothers and Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis*. Clyde S. Kilby and Marjorie Lamp Mead, eds. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982.
- Loudan, Jack. *O Rare Amanda! The Life of Amanda McKittrick Ros*. 2nd ed. London: Chatto & Windus, 1969.
- Ormsby, Frank, ed. *Thine in Storm and Calm: An Amanda McKittrick Ros Reader*. Belfast: Blackstaff, 1988.

Page, Nick. *In Search of the World's Worst Writers: A Celebration of Triumphant Bad Literature*. London: HarperCollins, 2000.

Ros, Amanda McKittrick. *Delina Delaney*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1935.

—. *Helen Huddleson*. Edited and with a Final Chapter by Jack Loudan. London: Chatto & Windus, 1969.

—. *Irene Iddesleigh: A Novel by Mrs. Amanda M'Kittrick Ros*. With an Introduction by Thomas Beer. New York: Boni & Liveright, 1927.



**SUPERB C.S. LEWIS
BOOK INVENTORY**

- *For active or aspiring book dealers. Over 400 books by or about Lewis, mostly UK or US first editions, most purchased in Britain in the 1990's.*
- *Also over 750 books by or about Barfield, Chesterton, Eliot, MacDonald, Sayers, Tolkien, and Williams.*
- *We never issued our intended catalogs, and health issues move us to sell these books below what we paid for them.*

For details contact Lee Nash, Aslan Books,
1100 N. Meridian St. #5, Newberg, Oregon 97132.
Lnash@georgefox.edu (503)538-8132



The Mythopoeic Society is pleased to announce

The 41st Annual Mythopoeic Conference

From the great epic poems of ancient Greece and ancient India to the Book of Revelation and the Poetic Edda; from John Milton and William Blake to J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams; from Philip Pullman to Neil Gaiman and beyond, conflict amongst and against the gods has been a perennial theme in mythology and mythopoeic literature.

Scholar Guest of Honor



Janet Croft is editor of *Mythlore*, one of the premier periodicals on the Inklings and fantasy literature. She has published many articles and three books on J.R.R. Tolkien, including *War in the Works of Tolkien* (2005).

Author Guest of Honor



Tim Powers is a science-fiction and fantasy author. He has received numerous awards and nominations for his works, including the World Fantasy Award for his novels *Last Call* (1992) and *Declare* (2000).

Southern Methodist University

Dallas, Texas

July 16-19, 2010

www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/41