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The Counsel of Elrond: First Encounter with Tolkien

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

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The Counsel of Elrond: First Encounter with Tolkien

"When the morning stars sang together -- " The stars, we now believe, are fiery nuclear furnaces, and any songs they may sing are borne on the winds driving forth out of them: unless the phrase means the planets Mercury and Venus, that use the solar wind itself as their throats, or else sing by their light low in our eastern skies....

"-- and all the sons of God shouted for joy -- " Who were they? What do they mean? In this single line, if you think about it, lies an entire universe of concepts, questions, emotions, and therefore stories. There are many more such phrases, more facts and myths and possibilities, than any one of us can ever know.

THE COUNSEL OF ELROND

FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH TOLKIEN

GLEN GOODKNIGHT

Each one of us has memories of what it was like to read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings for the first time, especially if that experience was a number of years ago. Part of that remembering involves a contrasting of our own lives then and now and also the state of Tolkien appreciation.

I encountered Tolkien as a high school student in the very late 50's. My only real experience into private reading for pleasure had been Science Fiction, besides a good assortment of children's books in childhood. I owe much to Science Fiction; on it I cut my intellectual and imaginative eye teeth, but only to a certain point. When the other students in my high school Science Fiction club discovered Tolkien with fiery enthusiasm, I was reluctant. First, I was told I should read a book called The Hobbit, a "children's book." This was mildly offensive and demeaning. At that age, one took their reputation in hand to be seen entering the children's section of the public library, opening themselves to open division and silent opprobrium. Yet this was only the preparatory initiation for the next and, it was reported, a greater experience. Second, I was told I could then read something called The Lord of the Rings, a story so long it took three volumes to tell. This appeared as a heavy charge-- I usually limited myself to short stories, anthologies, and novellas - but the unabated enthusiasm and ongoing conversation of my fellows impelled me to take the plunge.

To recall my initial reactions to LoTR is akin to retelling a long, detailed dream heavy with unconscious implications after one has been awake for several hours. Not since the uplifting to a new consciousness and appreciation of life, nature, aesthetics and the life of ideas at around the age of 14, had anything so gripped me. I was fired by both the desire to exercise the imagination and a feeling that life might hold more than I had scarce dared hope before. Here was nourishment to the character, romance, the deep abyss of time, and a feeling that life held real meaning - though hidden for the time being - beyond the turmoil and chaos that so many experience in adolescence.

Now, the three volumes, even with the detailed appendices, did not seem nearly enough. I was hungry for more. I tried several other fantasies: The Well of the Unicorn and The Worm Ouroboros, but they were hardly the same. They certainly had imagination, but little warmth or satisfaction; I found no hint of joy "beyond the walls of the world." After the feast Tolkien provided, Science Fiction generally was like saltine crackers. About a year later, I did discover C. S. Lewis. Perhaps there was more Tolkien hidden away in the Public Library. After exhausting the card catalog, I turned to the Reader's Guide and other similar reference guides.

"Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" was discovered, which was mostly over my head, although I certainly wouldn't admit it. Further delving brought me at last to something called "Leaf by Niggle" in the Dublin Review, January, 1945. By great good fortune, the Los Angeles Central Public Library had this arcane volume. It was on "reserve," but I was able

to take it out to the patio next to the children's room. There in the gathering twilight, with sparrows contesting and singing in the shrubbery and trees, and traffic noises muffled by the surrounding walls, I read of Niggle's adventure for the first time. Its eucatastrophic joy intrigued and puzzled me, but its appeal and implications has never escaped me.

Thus my early experience with Tolkien was before the pop-culture explosion of the mid-sixties, the availability of paperback editions, ongoing organizations, publications, and the myriad of critical and reference books. Then, far more than now, one felt he knew a secret that could be shared with very few others. It was a wistful, lonely feeling, that in my case eventually led to the formation of The Mythopoeic Society in 1967.

Whether one has encountered Tolkien with these adjunct and multifaceted resources or not, I believe the primary and most fundamental interaction is with the imagination of the individual and the profound vision Tolkien has given. Without that, the other things serve as an elaborate frame around an empty center.

After the first encounter many do return repeatedly, even though we have not forgotten the original impact, for refreshment and to discover new things. This is the case for myself with The Silmarillion. In 1978, after twenty long years of false rumors and waiting, I eagerly read it in a short time. For many, this work has proved nearly undigestible read at a fast pace. It needs slow, careful reading several times to savor this very bitter-sweet book. Now that Unfinished Tales has been printed, I find myself going back to The Silmarillion for more relaxed reflections and clarifications. What an amazingly rich book it is. I missed much of its import in that first hurried, impelled reading.

I think it is fairly certain that The Lord of the Rings will always be the most popular of Tolkien's works. It is far more like a novel than the others. Its drama and dialog draw the reader into a more personal interaction; one feels one is participating with the action and unfolding plot. The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales generally read more like ancient historical accounts, surely as Tolkien intended.

Years ago I made the analogy that whereas The Hobbit was like looking through a keyhole onto Middle-earth, with The Lord of the Rings it was like opening the door for a much more comprehensive view. To extend the analogy, now with The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales, we are provided a startling mountain-top panorama.

I am fairly sure we may see more Tolkien fragments published in the future. What new riches and insights will be found? The waiting will surely be vexing, but what new encounters will meet and interact with our enlarged vision then?