

Winter 12-15-1987

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Recommended Citation

Scull, Christina (1987) "*The Hobbit* Considered in Relation to Children's Literature Contemporary with its Writing and Publication," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 14: No. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol14/iss2/9>

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***The Hobbit* Considered in Relation to Children's Literature Contemporary with its Writing and Publication**

Abstract

Considers *The Hobbit* in relation to other children's books published during its composition and publication (ca. 1929–1937). Examines how *The Hobbit* was similar to and different from other fantasy of the period.

Additional Keywords

Children's fantasy—Great Britain—1929–1937—Relation to *The Hobbit*.; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Relation to children's fantasy, Great Britain, 1929–1937

The Hobbit

considered in relation to Children's Literature

Contemporary with its Writing and Publication

Christina Scull

This article considers *The Hobbit* in relation to children's books published from c. 1929, when Tolkien began his story, to 1937, the year of its publication. I am not trying to trace sources but to show in what ways *The Hobbit* was typical of its period and in what ways it differed, concentrating on contemporary fantasy. It is interesting that some authors have a turn of phrase that seems quite Tolkienian. Some works also show similarities to *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Silmarillion*.

The Hobbit, published on 21st September 1937, on the whole received quite favorable reviews. No one found it unusual and difficult to classify as reviewers and scholars have found *The Lord of the Rings*. *The Junior Bookshelf*, the British equivalent of *The Horn Book*, canvassed libraries in 1938 to compile a list of 50 good books published in 1937 and it reported that there was a striking unanimity as to the best six: *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea* by Arthur Ransome, *The Family from One End Street* by Eve Garnett, *The Hobbit*, *The Good Master* by Kate Seredy, *Tennis Shoes* by Noel Streetfield and *The Fifth of November* by L.A.G. Strong. So, *The Hobbit* was recognized immediately as a good book and sold well. But it did not win the newly established Carnegie Medal, the British equivalent of the Newberry. The Medal was won by Eve Garnett's *The Family from One End Street* because, at the time, this story of the large family of a dustman or garbage collector was seen as innovative, breaking away from the middle class traditions of British children's books. Bilbo, of course, was a very well-to-do Hobbit though the Dwarves, as miners, might be considered working-class. Perhaps, because mining is so much a part of the dwarf tradition one accepts it without question for the rather aristocratic Dwarves of *The Hobbit*. Certainly Thorin would have rejected any suggestion that he was working-class. Critics looking back today tend to find *The Family from One End Street* condescending; the characters are seen from the outside as rather quaint and colorful, and with no hint of resentment of their poverty. If critics today were awarding a medal in retrospect for the best children's book of 1937, *The Hobbit* would almost certainly be the winner. Significantly, considering Tolkien's later runaway success in the U.S.A. *The Hobbit* did win *The Herald Tribune's* prize for the best children's book published in the spring of 1938 for younger children.

The U.S.A. was far in advance of Britain in the development of children's libraries and in encouraging the writing of good books. The Newberry Medal and *The Horn Book* preceded their British equivalents by many years. *The Junior Bookshelf* in July 1937 reprinted an article which had previously appeared in *The Publisher's Weekly* by Grace W. Allen surveying the situation she had found on a visit to Britain. She was told that buyers did not usually expect to spend more than 3s 6d on a children's book since they could buy fat Annuals and Reward Books at that price or cheaper. These were usually printed on airfilled spongy paper which made them thick, suggesting good

value. The plates were often unrelated to the story and very worn. It is surprising that *The Hobbit* at 7s 6d sold so well as it was an expensive book in its time.

In the early part of the 20th century many people who were either primarily writers for adults or for the academic market produced one or a small number of children's books, for example: J.M. Barrie, A.A. Milne, Kenneth Grahame and John Masefield. Others produced new titles so regularly that they might be considered professional writers for children, these included Edith Nesbit, Beatrix Potter and Hugh Lofting and their number increased greatly in the 1930's with Arthur Ransome, Alison Uttley, Patricia Lynch, Geoffrey Trease, Eleanor Farjeon etc. His publishers would have liked Tolkien to belong to the second group, luckily for us he remained closer to the first.

Almost all children's books of the time were illustrated and Tolkien was not the only author to illustrate his own work. Among the author illustrators were Hugh Lofting, Arthur Ransome and Eve Garnett.

Another Professor besides Tolkien, Professor J.B.S. Haldane, published a children's fantasy in 1937. Haldane will be known to student of the Inklings as the man whose criticism of C.S. Lewis' space trilogy (*Professor Quarterly*, 1946) provoked Lewis' *A Reply to Professor Haldane* first published in *Of Other Worlds* in 1966. J.B.S. Haldane was born in 1892, the same year as Tolkien, obtained a first class degree at Oxford and served in the First World War. He was successively Fellow of New College, Oxford, Reader in Biochemistry at Cambridge, Fullerton Professor of Physiology at the Royal Institution and Professor of Genetics and Biometry at University College, London. He died in India in 1964. His sister was Naomi Mitchison, the writer, who corresponded with Tolkien and wrote one of the blurbs for *The Lord of the Rings*. His book *My Friend Mr. Leakey* was published in 1937 but like *The Hobbit* it had been begun many years previously, certainly as early as 1930. He probably made up the stories for the stepson he acquired when he married in 1926.

Tolkien incorporated his interests in northern sagas and legends into his stories, and Haldane incorporated his interest in science into his fantasies. One story, recalling that of Dick Whittington, tells of a plague of rats in London Docks and how Jack, the youngest of four sons, is the only one able to get rid of them. He does not use a cat but bakes iron filings into biscuits, which are then left around for the rats to eat. Then seven huge electro-magnets are activated and all the rats are pulled into pits and drowned. He points out that before switching on the magnets it was necessary to fasten all metal objects securely and nobody could wear boots or shoes with nails in them.

Most of the stories deal with the author's encounters with a strange modern magician called Mr. Leakey. There are no child heroes for the reader to identify with, not even a small size Bilbo Baggins as a

substitute. In the first story the author is invited to dine with Mr. Leakey and is given a fantastic meal. An octopus, Oliver, serves the meal making excellent use of his eight arms. Mr. Leakey pours soup from his top hat, and Oliver catches fish in mid air. Fruit trees grow on the table to provide the dessert. The fish is grilled by Pompey, Mr. Leakey's tame dragon.

Meanwhile I heard a noise in the fireplace, and Pompey came out. He was a small dragon about a foot long, not counting his tail, which measured another foot. He had been lying on the burning coals, and was red-hot. So I was glad to see that as soon as he got out of the fire he put a pair of asbestos boots which were lying in the fender on to his hind feet.

He waddled along rather clumsily on his hind legs, holding up his tail and the front part of his body. I think the asbestos boots made walking rather difficult for him, though they saved the carpet, and no doubt kept his hind feet warm. But of course dragons generally walk on all four feet and seldom wear boots, so I was surprised that Pompey walked as well as he did. I was so busy watching Pompey that I never saw how Oliver caught the turbot, and by the time I looked up at him again he had just finished cleaning it, and threw it down to Pompey. Pompey caught it in his front paws, which had cooled down a bit, and were just about the right temperature for grilling things. He had long thin fingers with claws on the ends; and held the fish on each hand alternately, holding the other against his red-hot chest to warm it. By the time he had finished and put the grilled fish on to a plate which Oliver handed down Pompey was clearly feeling the cold, for his teeth were chattering, and he scampered back to the fire with evident joy.

"Yes," said Mr. Leakey, "I know some people say it is cruel to let a young dragon cool down like that, and liable to give it a bad cold. But I say a dragon can't begin to learn too soon that life isn't all fire and flames, and the world is a colder place than he'd like it to be. And they don't get colds if you give them plenty of sulphur to eat. Of course a dragon with a cold is an awful nuisance to itself and everyone else. I've known one throw flames for a hundred yards when it sneezed. But that was a full-grown one, of course. It burned down one of the Emperor of China's palaces. Besides, I really couldn't afford to keep a dragon if I didn't make use of him. Last week, for example, I used his breath to burn the old point off the door, and his tail makes quite a good soldering iron.

I can't quite see anyone using Smaug, even as a young dragon, to cook his dinner or as a soldering iron. Tolkien knew this book because he mentioned Pompey in the unpublished lecture on *Dragons* which he gave to children at the University Museum, Oxford, on 1st January 1938. He said that he did not think Pompey was a real dragon, not a genuine specimen; he would rather consider him a sort of fire spirit or salamander from his need for outside heating, whereas true dragons didn't need to live in flame as their fire arose from a maleficence within.¹ Tolkien was not all

that impressed with this book as in a letter, December 14th 1937,² he remarks about the publication of *The Hobbit* "We are not in Pembroke expected to descend to the level of J.B.S. Haldane. Not that I think I have -- except in the matter of illustrations."

Another story tells how the author accompanied Mr. Leakey on certain business visits and was given a cap of darkness to wear which made him invisible. The scientific mind takes over and Haldane analyses what it was like to become invisible.

I put it on, and at once my arm disappeared. Everything looked slightly odd, and at first I couldn't think why. Then I saw that the two ghostly noses which I always see without noticing them were gone. I shut one of my eyes, as one does if one wants to see one's nose more clearly. I felt my eye shut, but it made no difference. Of course now that I was invisible my eyelids and nose were quite transparent! Then I looked to where my body and legs ought to have been, but of course I saw nothing. I got a horrid giddy feeling and had to catch hold of the table with an invisible hand. However I steadied myself and looked straight in front of me, and quite soon I was able to walk round the room easily enough.

Bilbo only realized he was invisible when Gollum did not notice him and he had no difficulty in walking.

One errand is to deal with a moneylender who has been oppressing poor people. Mr. Leakey says that the moneylender calls himself Mr. Macstewart but that isn't his real name, which is quite horrid, full of z's. The feeling of certain sounds or spellings being beautiful or ugly is similar to Tolkien's as is the idea that wicked people use ugly sounds. Several people have in recent years criticized Tolkien for suggesting that any particular letter could express evil.

Nick Ott in *J.R.R. Tolkien: This Far Land* says the invented language of *The Lord of the Rings* operates on Xenophobic lines, and that the letter "z" seems to be especially wicked. As such attacks on Tolkien usually come from the left-wing it is amusing to note that Haldane was a communist when Mr. Leakey was published.

In another story a rather modern fairy who kept a shop told him of an old dragon fight. After the dragon's fire had gone through the knight's armour like a burglar's blowpipe through a tin can, the knight took her advice and wore an asbestos suit and used two fire extinguishers. He killed the dragon.

This brings me to an interesting point. Dragons were not uncommon in children's literature of the period but they were usually treated as figures of fun or in a mock heroic way, rather as Tolkien treated them himself in *Farmer Giles of Ham* which was also probably written in the 1930's. This trend began with works such as Kenneth Grahame's *The Reluctant Dragon*, 1898. That dragon did not want to live the usual active dragon's life fighting knights and devouring damsels, he wanted peace and quiet so that he could write poetry. Edith Nesbit wrote several similar stories from 1899 onwards.

An example of the dragon as a figure of fun occurs in Noel Langley's *The Tale of the Land of*

Green Ginger, 1937, a spoof eastern fairy tale about Aladdin's son Prince Abu Ali and his rivals the Persian Prince Tintac Ping Foo and the Arabian Prince Rubdub Den Thud. On one of his journeys Abu Ali meets a Green Dragon and a conversation takes place which shows the dragon as scheming as Smaug but on a completely different level, much closer to Chrysophylax.

"You'll forgive me, I'm sure," said the Green Dragon at once, "but I don't recall having met you before. Strangers in these parts?"

"Yes," said Abu Ali, "And what is more, lost."

"Lost, ha?" said the Green Dragon with a show of deep concern. "Imagine that! Still, that's the way it goes. Here to-day and there to-morrow. Where were you making for?" He looked affectionately at the Donkey, and the Donkey drooped his ears and smiled back uneasily. "A pleasing Donkey you're sitting on. Tasty, I should say off-hand; and plump."

The Donkey smiled even more uneasily, and the Green Dragon smiled even harder back.

"I'm looking," said Abu Ali hastily, feeling a little anxious for the Donkey, "for the Magic Phoenix Birds, and any information you could give --"

"The Magic Phoenix Birds?" interrupted the Green Dragon. "Why, of course! I know exactly how to find them! How fortunate we met!" And here he eyed the Donkey again, and was noticed by Abu Ali to lick his lips. "Very fortunate indeed!"

"Then would you be kind enough to direct me?" asked Abu Ali. "If it's not asking too much."

"No, no! Indeed it's not asking too much!" the Green Dragon assured him warmly. "I'll be delighted! It's the least I can do in return!"

"In return for what?" asked Abu Ali, faintly alarmed.

"In return for eating your Donkey, with a lettuce salad and tomato sliced thin," said the Green Dragon as coolly as you please.

Eventually a fight ensues but not quite on traditional lines

He gave a sudden pounce, but Abu Ali skipped neatly out of the way and ran behind a tree.

"Wait!" he called urgently. "Pause! Consider! You're over-excited!"

"No," returned the Green Dragon, creeping toward him again, "I'm hungry!"

He made another pounce, and caught the side of his head against the tree.

"Ouch!" he said, sitting back on his heels and rubbing his ear tenderly. "Need you go behind a wretched tree?"

Abu Ali peeped round the trunk warily.

"Do you still want to play?" he asked. "If not, I'd like to be going on."

For an answer the Green Dragon turned his head away indifferently, and began to whistle, as if he were no longer interested.

There was a pause, and then he looked back again.

"What?" said the Green Dragon in elaborate surprise. "You still there? I thought

you'd gone ages ago." "No, you didn't," returned Abu Ali with spirit. "You thought I'd come out from behind this tree, so you could jump at me."

"Come out from behind that tree," the Green Dragon invited in new honeyed tones.

"No," said Abu Ali.

"Come on!" wheedled the Green Dragon. "What are you frightened of? A dear old Dragon like me? What nonsense! Come on out!"

"No," said Abu Ali.

"Thunder and Treacle!" said the Green Dragon in a fury, and made another sudden pounce, missing again but tripping himself against a root. "Wait till I getcha, that's all! This is a fine way to treat a Dragon! I'll teach you! Making me look undignified! Come here!" and he made another pounce at Abu Ali, and missed again.

In M.T. Candler's *From Seven to Eight*, 1937, seven year old Roger is convinced that

... there was a dragon in the bathroom.

The noises that came from the bath when the water ran away could only be made by a dragon, he was sure; a dragon who disliked having water suddenly pouring out over him, who showed his dislike by screeching and gurgling, and who might one day come right out.

Then one evening the gnome Dickory, who lives in the clock, takes him down the plug hole and they find an enormous greenish-reddish dragon, curled up asleep near a maiden who has been tied to a tree by her wicked uncle because she would not marry his son. By chance the uncle gets shut up in Dickory's large umbrella. Roger fights the dragon who has three lives.

Roger kills the first two lives, the second in the traditional way by holding his sword upwards as the dragon tries to crush him, but he is unable to take the third life until Dickory thrusts the umbrella containing the wicked uncle into the dragon's mouth and the horrible taste makes the dragon belch out so much fire and smoke that it cannot see Roger who then proceeds to cut off its head. Tolkien had desired dragons with a profound desire and his dragons are not tame or figures of fun. They are figures of power and perilous to meet.

One of the most interesting books of 1937 to compare with *The Hobbit* is *Josephine: A Fairy Thriller* by Geoffrey Mure who had been a Fellow and Tutor of Merton College, Oxford, since 1922, and Lecturer in Philosophy since 1929. According to Priscilla Tolkien, Mure was a friend of her father's long before Tolkien went to Merton in 1945. They were members of the same learned dining society. *Josephine* was written as a bedtime story for his seven year old daughter Janet, who, indeed, constantly intervenes, commenting and asking questions. In *Amon Hen 44* both *Josephine* and *The Hobbit* are mentioned in an interesting article by Roger Lancelyn Green.

During my first term as an undergraduate at Merton College, two Oxford dons published children's books: J.R.R. Tolkien, the Professor of Anglo-Saxon, *The Hobbit*, and *Josephine: A Fairy Thriller* by the philosopher Geoffrey Mure of my own College. Knowing Mure and his delightful little daughter

Janet to whom the story was told, I naturally took more interest in *Josephine*, and invented games based on it to entertain my first child-friends, the daughters of the Senior Tutor and his wife who were personal friends of my parents. But my personal favorite soon became *The Hobbit*, though it was not appreciated so much by my young friends, (who, of course, were close friends of Janet and her parents) and when a wizard was needed (the role which I was called upon to assume) Snagaraguus was chosen rather than Gandalf.

Josephine is invited to visit Fairyland by two fairies, Roger and Sylvia, names chosen by Janet. The wicked wizard Snagaraguus is planning to steal the sovereignty spell so that he can control Fairyland. Some people have criticized the authorial presence in *The Hobbit* but that is quite mild compared with what appears in *Josephine*.

Apart from the author's comments there are also Janet's interjections. She decides Josephine's age, points out inconsistencies such as that if fairies could fly they did not need a bridge to cross the river to the fairy palace and objects at the end of chapters either that it is not yet bedtime or that her father has broken off in a moment of crisis. In his introduction to the Unwin Hyman 50th Anniversary edition of *The Hobbit* Christopher Tolkien says that his brother Michael remembered Christopher questioning his father about any inconsistencies in *The Hobbit*. Christopher must be pleased that his father did not include his interpolations in the text as Mure did Janet's. I have chosen the following extract as an example because it also gives an interesting insight into Mure's fairies: --

Josephine looked round at the party. Sitting round a gold table on what looked like toadstools made out of precious stones were about twenty people -- if you call Fairies and Elves and Gnomes people. The Elves and the Gnomes were rather alike. They both had pointed chins, snub noses, and beady brown eyes. But the Gnomes had skins as dark as walnut-juice, and brown beards, and they looked much older than the Elves, who had no beards and were nearly as white-skinned as the girl-fairies.

[Janet: Elves are the same as boy-fairies. Me: Oh, yes, of course -- I forgot. Well, they weren't quite as like the Gnomes as I said. Janet: Pooh!]

Tolkien of course, had used Gnomes, Fairies, Elves successively as the names for the same people. Mure's fairies have no similarity to Tolkien's elves of *The Silmarillion* but perhaps just a little to the song singing elves we meet at Rivendell in *The Hobbit* and those in the *Father Christmas Letters*. Their clothes are all very pretty -- Roger wears a green coat, green tights and a green cap with a peacock feather, Sylvia a lovely white silk frock all shimmering with silver spangles and three silver stars in her golden hair; the skirt droops when she is sad. Queen Titania's dress was woven of the frost patterns you see on windows when it freezes and trimmed with china blue icicles.

Most fairy dresses are made by a firm of spiders called Archane and Co. owned by a fat money spider Mr. Spinero, who is a caricature of a dress designer, talking in the most affected way: no frightening spi-

ders here unlike *The Hobbit*. Mure's fairies are small but not minute. Josephine aged eight is a little taller than Titania. Josephine, who is a personification of Janet, plays an important part in saving Fairyland as might be expected. The Fairies, on the whole, are rather ineffectual in dealing with crises but, rather like Bilbo, Roger and Sylvia develop during the course of the book, begin to think and act sensibly and bravely and contribute as much as Josephine to the destruction of the evil Snagaraguus.

Snagaraguus' allies the Bad Gnomes and their country Bad Gnomeland have a considerable similarity to Tolkien's goblins and orcs and to Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Bad Gnomeland was a thoroughly nasty country of banks and sand-dunes and scrubby little bushes. The rather earthy sand was a dirty grey, and when it wasn't a muddy paste it blew in your face. The bushes and the spiky grass had a blackish, scorched look.

The last gleam of daylight had gone, and a mist had risen from the dirty yellow river which crawls sluggishly through Bad Gnomeland like a sick snake. The torches were set in a rough half-circle, and the mist reflected their red glare overhead like a kind of ceiling. The smoke curled up and hung; to Roger and Sylvia it looked just as if an invisible painter were decorating the ceiling with a horrible black border-pattern of slowly twisting shapes.

The treatment of the blindfolded Roger and Sylvia by their captors the Bad Gnomes makes Thorin and company's treatment by the goblins of the Misty Mountain seem quite bearable.

That was the beginning of a terrible journey. Walking till they slipped and fell in the mud, and then being jerked up again by invisible hands that pinched cruelly and dug spiky nails into them, the Fairies struggled along, following the pull of the rope on their wrists. Sometimes they were dragged through sharp grasses which cut their legs; sometimes through icy water which splashed in their faces and made them catch their breath; sometimes over banks that they bumped into unawares. When that happened the Bad Gnomes whooped with glee, as they hauled them up to the top and then watched them roll helplessly down the other side.

Yet while they are the prisoners of the Bad Gnomes Roger and Sylvia have an experience which looks forward to that of Frodo and Sam in Mordor.

"Oh, Roger, look!" exclaimed Sylvia, who had turned round towards the barred end of the dugout. Below the lid of clouds which covered Bad Gnomeland there was a narrow space of clear sky. The mist had gone, and the full moon was just showing an edge of gold above the earth. Slowly she floated up, till the whole brilliant round of her shone clear above the horizon. For a minute or so she hung like a bright medal on a strip of blue velvet, and in her radiance even grim, scrubby Bad Gnomeland looked beautiful.

Tolkien almost certainly knew of *Josephine* for his

daughter Priscilla had a copy of the book. I do not suggest that this is a direct influence on the scene when Frodo and Sam see a star in Mordor but that it shows the experience shared by men who served in the nightmare of the trenches in the First World War.

Josephine, lost and astray, sees lights and follows them, they disappear and reappear and are actually will o' the wisps but the scene is similar to that of the dwarves and the feasting elves. She goes to seek help from the friendly giants and on the border of Giantland she meets two giant customs officers, one of whom speaks with a Cockney accent, and the other with a Yorkshire accent. At the time local accents were considered amusing, which is why Tolkien gives the trolls cockney accents. Today this is seen as patronizing. The Yorkshire one smokes a huge curly pipe. Smoking was far more acceptable in the 1930's than it is today.

We are told that bad Gnomish came out like a rush of horrid noises which all sounded to Josephine like very naughty words. When Janet asks if they were, Mure replies "only some of them. Bad Gnomish always sounds like that." Another writer who thought that the language of evil people would sound ugly! The sovereignty spell is inscribed with minute runeform letters.

We learn that Snagaraguus the Black Wizard is one of five brothers the others being the White, Grey, Pink and Brown wizards. The White wizard is a tall and dignified old man in a white cloak leaning on a white staff. He has a thick white moustache and white hair shaggy as a lion's mane. He advises Titania and helps overthrow his wicked brother. There is probably no connection but these five wizards, each of a different color do have some resemblance to Tolkien's Istari.

Josephine is fun to read, the story is good and keeps one's attention but it is spoilt by some of the excessively delicate and pretty details which delay the story. Whole chunks could be cut out without destroying it, which certainly could not be done to *The Hobbit*. But, like Tolkien, Mure is not afraid to involve his characters in really frightening situations and magic is not used lightly as a *deus ex machina*, they have to think and act bravely and decisively to achieve success.

Sir James Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough* and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge had a book for children, which he had written jointly with his wife, published in 1937. Although one might think him at least as deeply immersed in mythology and folklore as Tolkien, this does not show up in the book. *Pasha the Pom* tells what happened when a sedate family undertook to take care of a mischievous Pomeranian puppy called Pasha. Also in 1937 appeared *The Jumping Lions of Borneo* written by J.W. Dunne, philosopher and Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society for his children Christopher, 7, and Rosemary, 5. Nobody realizes that these lions can jump higher and further than any kangaroos and when they are captured and put in a zoo they jump out of their enclosure at night and cause havoc. They communicate with other animals using the universal language, the one which is known to all animals, the one which human beings used to speak once, although now they cannot even hear it. This does seem to parallel some of Tolkien's ideas.

This seems a suitable place to mention another animal story. Rayner Unwin has admitted that, while

he liked *The Hobbit* very much, his favorite book in 1937 was *Dan the Dog Detective*. That was actually published in 1934 so he was probably thinking of the sequel *More About Dan* by George Wright 1937. Dan is the leader of a gang of stray dogs. When there is sheep worrying in the neighborhood the gang comes under suspicion so they keep watch and find the culprit. They have a feud with the cats who are stealing the best bits from the dustbins. Not quite in the same class as *The Hobbit*.

In *On Fairy Stories* Tolkien regretted that the idea of fairies as diminutive was a leading one in modern use. There is plenty of what he called 'flower and butterfly minuteness' in contemporary children's books. A typical example is *By Aerial to Fairyland* by Winifride Woodcock 1937. Susan Jane meets a spider, again not frightening, who slings up an aerial and listens in to the broadcast of twilight talks from Fairyland. He invites her to listen in with him and gives her a pair of headphones made of two acorn cups joined by twisted convolvulus stems. Here is a sample of what she hears.

Susan Jane heard a beautiful voice like the sound of a sunken bell tossed by the waves of the sea.

'We call you, dear land-folk, from our playground on the shore. Our evening revels have begun. The Moon is making a silver pathway over the water to our feet. Many Sea-Sprites have begun to dance along the glinting Moon-Way. This is the hour when Moon-Beam Fairies come to join us. Oh! The merry times we have on starry nights!'

'But before we frolic, much has to be done. Each Sprite has been busy in the twilight hour. Some have rescued stranded baby crabs; others have tenderly put back strands of sea-weed, torn aside by eager boys and girls. These children have played here during the long-daylight hours. Shallow pools of delight have been tidied and cleared, sea-urchins put back in their houses, and all living creatures have been looked after.'

Some writers were more successful even when writing about delicate beings. In 1935, Stella Gibbons, who three years previously had written *Cold Comfort Farm*, wrote a children's fantasy called *The Untidy Gnome*.

The story takes place in Norway where the Pine Tree Elves kidnap the eldest daughter of a woodcutter in an attempt to stop him felling trees. Tolkien might have felt some sympathy with them. The Field Fairies try to rescue her. The Elves and Fairies are typically diminutive -- about as big as the little finger of your right hand, and yet there is a certain aura about them. When Gerda first met Fand the Princess of the Field Fairies they are told

Gerda never forgot the strange, cool touch of the Fairy's tiny hands, and the feathery brushing of her wings; it was one of the few fairy things she remembered long years later, after she was grown up, and when she was an old, old woman with grandchildren of her own, she would tell them about it, and how unearthly and sweet it felt.

At one point Fand sings songs about the wind blowing over the grass and enchanting the hearts of Mortals -- here there is a genuine echo of Faerie.

Several children's books of the period show the influence of Celtic mythology.

Patricia Lynch began a long series of children's books in Irish settings with *The Turfcutters Donkey* 1934. This includes a magic pool in which Seamus and Eileen, two children, can see what they wish looking forward to the Mirror of Galadriel and a ride on an unfriendly eagle's back for Seamus. The children go back by the Road of Dreams into the time of the heroes of Ireland, meeting first Finn and his companions and then the Fírbolgs and the Dananns. The Road of Dreams idea which we know from *The Cottage of Lost Play (Book of Lost Tales, Part I)* was a theme which occurs in the work of other writers in the early 20th Century.

Another interesting story is Ella Young's *The Unicorn with Silver Shoes* 1932 which recounts a series of adventures experienced by Ballor's son. The characters include Manannan, King of Faeryland, his son Angus, the Pooka and several Kelpies. She wrote the book for two children. There is one story where Ballor's son and his friend Flame of Joy are far from home and seek help from the Cat of Cruachan who agrees to help them if they can answer some riddles. Though the Gollum chapter probably was written before this book was published there is a great similarity in that in each case success in answering riddles is to be rewarded with help in escaping from a difficult situation.

"Try me with a question," said Flame of Joy.

"I will," said the Cat, "what is that you find without seeking, seek without finding, and carry about with you because you cannot be rid of it?"

"Let me think," said Ballor's Son, "it's a riddle like what the First Lord asks when I'm lonesome in the evenings. There is only one true answer to a riddle!"

"It is a riddle," said the Cat, "and if one or other of you can answer it, I will take you across the mountain of the Silver Unicorns."

"What is it that one finds without seeking?" repeated Flame of Joy, clasping his head with his hands and rocking to and fro as he sat, "what is it one finds -- Perhaps it is the Pooka, one always meets him where no one would expect him."

"It is not the Pooka," said the Cat. "Maybe it is the wind," said Flame of Joy.

"It is not the wind," said the Cat. "I have it," shouted Ballor's Son. "I know the answer. It's like a riddle the First Lord gave me once...."

"I know the answer to that riddle. The one true answer:

"A thorn in the foot!"

For this reply the Cat takes them part of the way and they take their leave

They climbed to their feet in the space between his broad shoulders.

"We thank you, noble Cat of Cruachan, Jewel of Two Worlds," said Flame of Joy, "for the help that you have given to us. May your shadow -- golden in one World, ebon in the other -- never grow less!"

"May the wind bear you lightly," said the Cat of Cruachan.

These wishes are similar to Gandalf's farewell to the eagles. "May the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks" and the elf king's farewell to Bilbo "May your shadow never grow less."

Later when they are still far from home they meet the cat again and he asks another riddle

"What is it," said the Cat, "that goes with equal swiftness over land and sea, carries no rider, and leaves no track of its running?"

When Flame of Joy gives the correct answer 'the shadow of a cloud' the takes them the rest of the way home.

I have not discovered any fantasy which relies on the Nordic traditions as Tolkien's *The Hobbit* does. It is not only the country-side with its black forests and mountains, nor the characters-dwarves, Beorn, elves rather than fairies, but the whole atmosphere and ethos exemplified in Fili and Kili's deaths defending Thorin. It is this reworking of old traditions in a new way which is one of the most original aspects of *The Hobbit*. It has an atmosphere and air all of its own.

There were other fantasy classics published in the 1930's and each has the same mark of individuality, of creating something new or of telling something old in an entirely new way. Mary Travers produced *Mary Poppins* 1934 and *Mary Poppins Comes Back* 1935. The superfluous and magical nurse Mary Poppins is redeemed from perfection only by her vanity. The film was delightful to those who had not read the books but as one who had grown up with the originals I felt it did not approach them in any way. Hugh Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle* stories appeared over many years from 1920 until the 1950's. Dr. Dolittle successfully achieves what Tolkien in *On Fairy Stories* called 'one of the primeval desires that lie near the heart of Faerie, the desire of men to hold communication with other living things.' In *Dr. Dolittle* several humans learn animal speech as they would a foreign language which is perhaps not quite the same as the 'magical understanding by men of the proper language of birds beasts and trees' referred to by Tolkien nor the same as the speaking eagles, ravens and thrushes of *The Hobbit*. On the other hand Dr. Dolittle learns the languages and studies them exactly as a philologist would learn and study various human languages. He is as engrossed in animal languages as Tolkien was in the human languages which interested him. Tolkien actually mentions a made up language or code called 'Animalic' in *A Secret Vice* but this was not an attempt by his friends to speak to animals but using animal names as a code for other words. Many of Dr. Dolittle's animals were very domesticated like Beorn's doing household chores.

Beorn spoke to his animals in a queer language like animal noises turned into talk. In *The Voyages of Dr. Dolittle* the Doctor makes some funny clicking noises with his tongue and in response Dab Dab the duck housekeeper brings a light. It is, perhaps, not surprising that Priscilla Tolkien said that her father very much approved of the Dr. Dolittle books. He would no doubt have liked to study animal languages with Dr. Dolittle.

John Masefield's *The Box of Delights* 1935 is a very complex book incorporating many fantasy ele-

ments including visits to the past using a magic box which can also reduce you to a diminutive size or enable you to travel with great speed. It is a unique work spoilt only by the last page in which the whole is revealed as a dream, a mistake Maselfield did not make in his earlier *The Midnight Folk*.

A character as individual as Mary Poppins is Worzel Gummidge who appeared in books by Barbara Euphan Todd in 1936 and 1937. Worzel Gummidge is a cantankerous old scarecrow who is ingenious in appropriating anything he wants and completely unable to see any point of view except his own. He also has the habit of interpreting any statement quite literally. The following has the flavor of the first encounter between Bilbo and Gandalf. Worzel Gummidge is asked by someone:

"And now, can you tell me which of these roads would take me to Scatterbrook?"

Susan clutched John's arm as she waited for the answer, -

"None of 'em will -- nor any other road neither."

"But I am staying in Penfold, and was told it was only a short walk from there to Scatterbrook."

"Ooh aye!" agreed Gummidge. "So 'tis."

"Then which road shall I take?" The little man's voice sounded quite impatient.

"You'll not take any road, not if I can help it. That's what I'm here for to stop people takin' roads or anything else either."

"I beg your pardon --" the little man put up one hand to his ear. He sounded unbelieving and yet rather annoyed too.

"And beggin's not allowed neither."

Now I am going to finish by looking at a book which is just a little earlier than the others and which was definitely an influence on *The Hobbit*, that is *The Marvelous Land of Snergs* by P. A. Wyke-Smith, 1927. Tolkien wrote to W.H. Auden on June 7th 1955 that his children liked *The Hobbit* well enough but not any better than *The Marvelous Land of Snergs*.

They are sometimes hard up for a reason for a feast, and then the Master of the Household, whose job it is, has to hunt for a reason, such as its being somebody's birthday. Once they had a feast because it was nobody's birthday that day.

The story is about a series of adventures shared by two children Sylvia and Joe, and a Snerg called Gorbó. It might seem that the children are intended to be the true heroes of the book but they are mischievous and thoughtless and do not grow wiser during the story. Gorbó who starts out even more thoughtless and is indeed reprimanded by his king for lack of care of the children actually becomes far more responsible and thinks about what he is doing, so that in some ways his part in the book recalls that of Bilbo and the children that of the Dwarves. At one point they pass through a wood which has much in common with Mirkwood.

But it was getting dark; the sky was now hidden by a roof of matted leaves, and on all sides and above them the thick smooth branches twisted and crossed and locked together. The air was damp and smelt of mould and old moss, and there was a horrid silence. A great leather-skinned bat flickered

past them, almost brushing against Sylvia's hair' so that she ducked and gave out a little squeal.

Gorbó at last swarmed up one of the bigger trees and, after a lot of struggling, managed to force his way out through the leaves, disturbing numbers of bats that came flopping and wheeling about. Joe had to put his arms round Sylvia's head and hide it as well as he could until the foul things had gone to settle elsewhere. A minute or two later, Gorbó came sliding down.

"It's all right," he said. "I couldn't see much else but leaves, but I saw the sun so I know which way to go now. The sun is just over" -- here he stopped and thought and scratched his head. "Yes, I think it's over that way. You see I got twisted round a bit coming down."

They followed him again, working their way over and under the branches. After a time he stopped and thought again, and then began climbing and creeping in another direction -- it was all climbing and creeping now. Then he stopped and looked at them in dismay. The horrible writhing grey trunks surrounded them on all sides like an ugly giant net, in a gloom so deep that their shapes were lost to the eye a dozen yards away. Gorbó, the clever one, the woodsman, had done this thing. They were lost.

Feeling responsible for the dangers which waylay him and the children as a result of this escapade Gorbó does everything he can to bring the children safely home, even searching fearfully at night for mandrakes for a witch who had promised to help them. On reading the book one feels that Gorbó could easily have been a cousin of Bilbo.

Having looked briefly at children's literature contemporary with *The Hobbit* one can see certain similarities and common interests. Fantasy was not uncommon but few treated it as seriously as Tolkien. This is perhaps due to his incorporation of the Nordic influences into the story. Norse sagas and legends with their awareness of impending Ragnarok have always seemed more serious, closer to the deeds of ordinary men than those of the Greek and Roman cosmology and legends. Other children's books have simplistic good and evil. Tolkien in his debate on the dragon's treasure shows the sort of conflicting claims with which we are all too familiar today in places like Palestine and Cyprus and Ireland. Unfortunately such problems are not easily solved but Tolkien and Bilbo do their best. In Victorian times deathbeds had been plentiful in children's books but the deaths of Thorin, Fili and Kili are unusual for their time. *The Hobbit* starts out as a good children's book but as Tolkien gets further into the story, the influence of mythology which he had been creating for many years gives the book a more serious thread and it becomes a great children's book.

Notes

- I am grateful to John Rateliff for telling me about this lecture and allowing me to use his notes; also to F.R. Williamson, Executor of the Tolkien Estate for permission to include the quotation.
- The letter is printed in full in "J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Hobbit* Drawings, Watercolors, and Manuscripts," Patrick & Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, 1987 (c. 1987 Marquette University)

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continued from page 17

eradicating, and not less tempting to the characters for all that. Alas, the later work seems to have more plausibility on its side; between the two books lies the dark chasm of the two world wars and the present threat of nuclear annihilation. It is amusing but also somewhat shocking to perceive that Stoker in 1897 just did not imagine that evil could be so evil, or that so many souls as Tolkien imagines could sell themselves into a state so negative and self-contradictory. Indeed, the nightmare of modern civilization has deepened.

On the brighter side, the sweet dream is sweeter, since Lorien and Valinor are more idyllic and grander than the domestic happiness achieved by Mina and Jonathan, pleasant though that was. The very desperation also adds a note of hope, since just as the acts of Frodo's true personality continued to affect the outcome of the quest even after it had capitulated to the Dark Lord personality, so could ours. Entanglement in evil does not prevent a character's good acts from intertwining with a Providential pattern to produce a good result. So, no matter how deep the nightmare gets, we still all have our motives to keep on our journey through Middle-earth, with Elbereth and Luthien the Fair firmly in mind, and a friend nearby to hold our hands when we reach convulsively for that Ring.

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continued from page 48

the swordsmen Istvan Di Vega. Sword and Sorcery, in the Robert E. Howard tradition, is a much-maligned genre today; and it can indeed inspire the shoddiest kind of commercial fantasy, yet in its celebration of individual bravery and endurance in the face of darkness it has roots in the sagas and epics of the ancient world, and it cannot be separated from the history of Fantasy literature as a whole. Paul Zimmer (like Howard at his best) is clearly in tune with the heroic philosophy that gives life to such stories, and willing to put some stylistic effort into expressing it. He makes much use of discreet alliteration and metric prose (I am sensitized to this, perhaps, by having heard the author read aloud from his work on many occasions): in some passages the writing is overdone and falls short of the mark, but in others it is strikingly effective. There is, in the descriptions of physical combat, a sensuality, grace and precision which I have found in no other writer. It is indeed fortunate that the heroic fantasy genre, with its many inherent limitations, should have a modern exponent of this stature.