
Spring 3-15-1989

Tales Newly Told

Alexei Kondratiev

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



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

Recommended Citation

Kondratiev, Alexei (1989) "Tales Newly Told," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 15: No. 3, Article 10.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol15/iss3/10>

This Column 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 Summer Seminar 2023

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

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Williams, Tad. *The Dragonbone Chair*.

Tales Newly Told

A Column on Current Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

To-day, twenty years after the peak of the Tolkien craze, publishers may be a little less ready to advertise new works of fantasy with lines like "in the tradition of J.R.R. Tolkien" or "Not since *The Lord of the Rings*...". There may also be a slowing-down in the production of exploitative, low-quality Tolkien imitations, of *The Sword of Shannara* type. Yet Tolkien's achievement remains like a mountain in the path of all aspiring fantasists, an unescapable feature of the environment that must be dealt with and cannot simply be ignored or gone around. Just as, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Wagner's music was a phenomenon that all composers had to meet as a challenge – whether they imitated it, rejected it wholly, or re-synthesized its elements into a new style – so in our time anyone who claims involvement with the mythopoeic aspect of literature needs to be aware of the terrain that Tolkien – in both theoretical and practical terms – has charted.

Even in the early phase of Tolkien's impact on the fantasy scene there were some writers – writers as utterly different as Joy Kilmer and Stephen R. Donaldson – who attempted to put his lessons to use. Instead of just swallowing his mythology and its empowering symbolism whole, as many fantasists were doing, they isolated and understood the techniques that made them work and applied them to the creation of wholly new secondary universes strongly charged with their authors' individual world-views and experience. And there are signs that now, after a generation of Tolkien criticism and the posthumous publication of so much more of Tolkien's writing, revealing in ever greater detail the processes by which his mythopoeic talent expressed itself, many more fantasists have come to a mature relationship with his work, able to learn from his model without letting the power of his vision overwhelm their own. One recent example of just such a "Tolkienian" fantasy that does not slavishly follow Tolkien is Tad Williams' *Sorrow, Memory and Thorns*, of which the first part, *The Dragonbone Chair* (DAW, 1988), has been published.

I must say that I had doubts about Tad Williams' ability to fly so close to the candle-flame of Tolkien's work without getting burned. His previous novel, *Tailchaser's Song*, was an uncomfortably close imitation of *Watership Down*, substituting cats for rabbits (incidentally, it helped point up the true originality of a book like William Horwood's *Duncton Wood*, which was also, on the face of it, a *Watership Down* "remake," but had a soul all of its own). Yet *The Dragonbone Chair* is, happily, no successor to *The Sword of Shannara*. There are obvious Tolkienian elements

in the plot – a rightful king in exile, magical swords, the shadow of "Elder Days" on the events of the present, an adventurous quest involving disparate personalities – but they are used only for their archetypal value, and are articulated in a way that recalls *The Lord of the Rings* only distantly, leaving the author's own ideas plenty of room to develop. One of the distinctly *un-Tolkienian* features in this subcreated world is the all-pervasive influence of religion: the kingdom of Prester John, which extends over most of Osten Ard (Eastern Earth?), is committed to the Aedonite faith, a close parallel to Christianity which coexists (in seeming peace) with various forms of paganism. Religious practices play a major role in defining the cultural backgrounds of the characters.

Tolkien's achievement remains like a mountain in the path of all aspiring fantasists, an unescapable feature of the environment that must be dealt with and cannot simply be ignored or gone around.

The hero of the tale is Simon, an orphaned teenager who lives in the Hayholt, the giant castle which is at the political heart of Osten Ard. "Mooncalf," as his superiors call him, describes Simon rather well: he is an unfocused, undisciplined youth, prone to dreaming and evading responsibilities. He does, however, become apprenticed to the magician Morgenes Ercestres, and a relationship develops between the two rather like that between Wart and Merlin in *The Sword in the Stone*. For about the first third of the book the story progresses in a slow-paced and meandering fashion, following Simon's explorations of the Hayholt (like a benign Gormenghast), realistically depicting the inner stages of his adolescent growth, and picking up hints of the crisis to come. Despite its somewhat static quality, this section contains much of the book's finest writing.

The crisis strikes at last, and the pace of the plot speeds up. Prester John has died, leaving two sons, the emotionally warped Elias (his father's favorite and heir), and the introspective Josia. Through the machinations of the demonic priest Pryrates the rift between the two brothers takes on a violent and irrevocable character, bringing about the death of Morgenes, and forcing Simon to flee the castle. After a harrowing initiatory journey alone through caves and wilderness, during which he witnesses terrible things, Simon is befriended by the little troll-shaman Binabik, who (using delightfully fractured language) con-

tinues his education. Soon it becomes obvious that Pryates has tampered with deep strata in the history of Osten Ard, releasing the power of the storm king, ancient ruler of the pre-human Sithi (Sidhe?), who hate mortals. The world is about to be utterly changed by elvish onslaught, and Simon is destined to be in the thick of it.

Tad Williams' elves are wonderful, yet also problematic. In their early appearances in the plot they are immensely powerful and numinous presences, beautiful yet terrifying, like the elves in Scandinavian folklore, much more feral and dangerous than their counterparts in *The Lord of the Rings*. As Simon's adventures bring him closer to them, however, their stature lessens with familiarity, and the Tolkienian sources of many of their character traits become uncomfortably obvious and obtrusive. The Tolkienian leitmotiv of beautiful elvish things passing away, of the hour of Men being at hand, is quoted here with jarring effect, however appropriate it may be to the story's context. Yet, even so, the Sithi escape being mere copies of Tolkien's elves, the author's personal feeling – even if it has its sources in Tolkien's work – gives them their own life.

There are precedents for most of the other elements in the plot as well. The central focus of the narrative is the reunion of three magic swords (named in the work's overall title), and the collection of a group of talismans is a fantasy plot-device that has been used by writers as different as Susan Cooper and Fred Saberhagen, not to mention its appearance in folk-tales. Yet each of the swords has such a well-defined and archetypal character (Sarrow, the Storm King's sword, is a twin of Elric's Stormbringer, though both have ancestors in folklore) that their role in the plot comes to seem profoundly necessary rather than

gratuitously derivative. The owl-witch Geloe lives in a bird-legged hut, like the Russian Baba Yaga, is a very different character. The Storm King is in much the same position as Sauron in this story, yet his personal history recalls that of Feanor in many respects, making him an object of pity as well as of fear, and preventing us from seeing him as a simple "Dark Lord." Thus elements from very many – often recognizable – sources are orchestrated into a new, consistent whole that transforms the significance of each one. This is a common, and respectable, method of storytelling.

The work's most annoying failure occurs, interestingly, in an area very close to the heart of mythopoeia as Tolkien practiced it. Tad Williams has understood the fundamental role language – in all its dimensions – plays in the suspension of disbelief in "fairy drama" and has proceeded, like Tolkien, to build his universe on a linguistic framework. He makes languages – and the cultures they express – interact much the way they do in our own history. Thus Erkyndlandish and Rimmerspakk are both Germanic languages, meant to suggest Old English and Old Norse respectively. Nabbanai is (more or less) a Romance language. Hernystiri is a mixture of Celtic elements, with most of the recognizable words drawn from Gaelic, though there is no attempt to recall genuine Celtic grammar and pronunciation. There are hints of other languages spoken on the outer fringes of Osten Ard. Yet, having introduced such potential richness, the author then, in his appended "Guide to Pronunciation," tells us that all these languages, despite peculiarities in orthography, are essentially pronounced "like modern English"! To give one of the languages the same phonetic system as modern English would have been within the bounds of credibility; to claim that *all* of these disparate languages are, though they use different spelling systems, sounded in much the same way is to prevent the suspension of disbelief. Worse, in his discussion of the languages of the trolls and the elves, which *do* use non-English sounds, he postulates that these sounds are "unpronounceable" by his readers and declines to discuss them in detail. How utterly unlike Tolkien's careful exposition of Quenya and Sindarin phonetics! Although the average reader of Tolkien may indeed wind up pronouncing the Elvish languages "like modern English," he is always aware that they have an existence of their own, quite independent of English standards, and that, if time and effort were applied, they can be learned like any foreign language. The creation of languages is an art in which there are no half-measures, and Tad Williams fails to convince us that he *believes* in his languages as much as he should, that he has thought them through to the necessary extent, or indeed that he trusts his readers' intelligence and curiosity quite enough.

Yet, all in all, it is an honorable failure. His characters are living breathing people whose fate interests us. One looks forward to the continuation of the epic of the three swords *Sarrow, Memory and Thorn*.

OTHER SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS

MYTHOPRINT is the Society's monthly newsletter featuring meeting information, news of the Society and its interests, reviews, editorials and discussion reports. 20 pages 7 x 8.5". \$7 for 12 issues 3rd Class delivery in the USA and Canada; \$10 for overseas surface mail; \$10 1st Class delivery in USA and Canada; \$14 for overseas Air Mail. Send subscriptions to: Orders Dept., 1008 N. Monterey St., Alhambra, CA 91801 USA.

MYTHIC CIRCLE is a fantasy fiction quarterly which also includes art, letters, and poems. 50 pages 8.5 x 11". 4 issues for \$11, or \$3.50 for the current issue. Write to: P.O. Box 6707, Alhambra, CA 91003 USA.

TOLKIEN JOURNAL

Complete sets of *Tolkien Journal*, numbers 1-15 (excluding #12, which is the same as *Mythlore* #5) are available for \$27, plus \$4 shipping. Write to Orders Department, 1008 N. Monterey St., Alhambra, CA 91801.