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A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas by Peter Grybauskas

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Abstract

A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas. Peter Grybauskas. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2021. 176 pp. ISBN 978-1-60635-430-8. \$55.00 (hardcover)

must leave Middle-earth (117). Nonetheless, he is wrong in translating the name Galadriel as “Lady of Light” (121), since her name is glossed by Tolkien as meaning ‘Glittering Garland’ (*Letters* 423, #345). Moreover, the Girdle of Melian is no physical belt (118), but an immaterial spell.

Middle-earth, or There and Back Again is recommended both to scholars and to Tolkien’s readers. The efforts of the academicians behind the volume surely add up substantial contributions to the fields of Tolkien scholarship and the study of Mythopoeic literature, paving the way for future research.

—Giovanni Costabile

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A SENSE OF TALES UNTOLD: EXPLORING THE EDGES OF TOLKIEN’S LITERARY CANVAS. Peter Grybauskas. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2021. 176 pp. ISBN 978-1-60635-430-8. \$55.00 (hardcover)

THE WORLDS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN’S WRITINGS are vast, imbued with richly varied geography and history, and Tolkien is deservedly credited as a master of “world-building.” Readers of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* immerse themselves in a world made to feel all the more “real”—even in its otherworldliness, with its Dragons, Balrogs, Ents, and Elves—because of the meticulous detail with respect to places, persons, and events. However, as readers also notice, for all the hundreds of thousands of words devoted to the tale-telling in these works, there are also hints of so many other tales left untold, which nevertheless reinforce the powerful sense of Middle-earth’s reality. That is, the reason that *The Lord of the Rings* and other works are as enchanting as they are owes as much to what is not fully revealed as to the detailed descriptions and complex narratives provided in the text.

In his excellent study of this subject, *A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien’s Literary Canvas*, Peter Grybauskas takes up the daunting but exhilarating challenge to examine stories “untold” in Tolkien’s work. A senior lecturer in English at the University of Maryland, Grybauskas endeavors to explore “the frames, the edges, allusions, lacunae, the borders between story and un-story, gaps and spaces between vast Ages and miniscule periods in an ellipsis” (xvii). All of Tolkien’s readers have undoubtedly found tantalizing tidbits of “tales untold” of which they would like to hear more, such as Aragorn’s casual reference to “the cats of Queen Berúthiel” or the terrifying hints at the wars against Angmar during the Hobbits’s harrowing encounter

with the Barrow-wight. I am sure some wish that Tolkien *had* written full versions of many scenes he merely hints at or notes in passing, as when we learn only in “The Tale of Years,” an appendix to *The Lord of the Rings*, about Galadriel and the Elves of Lothlórien going into battle against the forces of Dol Guldur or King Brand of Dale and King Dáin Ironfoot fighting along the slopes of Erebor, while “on camera” our heroes are waging war in Minas Tirith, on the Pelennor Fields, and in the Battle of the Morannon. While Grybauskas does not provide an inventory of such occurrences (how could he? the list would be almost endless!), he does do an impressive job of categorizing and theorizing the untold tales and their relation to the stories “told” in the narratives.

Quoting an apt phrase from Tolkien himself, Grybauskas acknowledges a “fundamental literary dilemma” associated with the project, which is that “a story must be told or there’ll be no story, yet it is the untold stories that are most moving” (*Letters* 110, #96; qtd. in Grybauskas 1). Tolkien is here responding in a wartime letter to his son Christopher regarding Celebrimbor, who is at once a very obscure character from the distant past and, as the creator of many if not most of the rings of power (including all three of the Elven ones), arguably one of the most important characters for the backstory of *The Lord of the Rings*. (As Grybauskas notes, Celebrimbor’s name is mentioned, largely *en passant*, only three times in *The Lord of the Rings*.) As Tolkien writes, “I think you are moved by *Celebrimbor* because it conveys a sudden sense of endless *untold* stories: mountains seen far away, never to be climbed, distant trees (like Niggle’s) never to be approached—or if so only to become ‘near trees’” (*Letters* 110–111, #96). In a much later letter from 1963, reflecting on the “success” of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien reiterates this point:

Part of the attraction of The L.R. is, I think, due to the glimpses of a large history in the background: an attraction like that of viewing far off an unvisited island, or seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist. To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed. (*Letters* 333, #247)

I hasten to add, Grybauskas’s study does not destroy the magic at all, but rather illuminates the ways that Tolkien worked this storytelling magic so artfully. By examining the tales untold, the ways they influence the “main” stories, and the effects they have on the reading, Grybauskas makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Tolkien’s work.

A Sense of Tales Untold is divided into five main chapters, the first and last of which are more exploratory and ranging, while the three central ones focus on different “types” of untold tales, as Grybauskas identifies them, using distinct “tales” as exemplars. The book is thoroughly researched and elegantly written, and it is clear that Grybauskas is well-versed in all of Tolkien’s

published and unpublished writings, as well as in the vast archives of Tolkien Studies. The result is a compelling study, of interest to scholars and fans alike.

Chapter 1, "Tolkien and the 'Fundamental Literary Dilemma,'" ably introduces the concept of "untold tales" and the practice of somehow including them in the stories that are told. Grybauskas demonstrates how Tolkien was influenced by such texts as *Beowulf* in subtly revealing the vast richness of a world seen only partially by the limited perspective of a narrator. This leaves the reader with an "impression of depth," as Tolkien had called it in his famous essay "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," thus enriching the fictional world whose history and geography is now rendered implicitly larger than the principal story can disclose directly.

As noted, any attempt to list examples of untold tales in Tolkien's writings would quickly become tediously long if not impossible to finish. Grybauskas isolates three different "types" or categories that serve as useful models for thinking about how such "untold tales" add depth to our understanding of Tolkien's storytelling: the *allusive web*, the *faded tradition*, and the *omission* (21–24), and Grybauskas devotes Chapters 2, 3, and 4 respectively to these "types," each using an exemplary event or untold tale to illustrate it.

Thus, in Chapter 2, Grybauskas examines the allusive web that constitutes our understanding of the Last Alliance, the culminating event of the Second Age and great precursor to the War of the Ring, in which armies of Elves and Men besiege Mordor and Isildur ultimately takes the One Ring from Sauron. The Last Alliance takes place nearly 3,000 years before the events of *The Lord of the Rings*, so it is not surprising that its history is among those "great matters grown dim" in the intervening centuries. Grybauskas shows how Tolkien artfully includes allusions to the events, "each crumb tantalizing and whetting the appetite for more, conjuring that potent sense of rooted antiquity and thick-webbed story that he so admired in works like *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (26). Through this masterful technique, Tolkien manages evoke a historical event absolutely essential to the plot of *The Lord of the Rings* while also allowing it to remain a tale untold.

In Chapter 3, Grybauskas delves into the tragic history of Túrin Turambar to illustrate the ways that a faded tradition operates in Tolkien's work. Prior to the publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977, few readers could have known much about this character from the First Age, and Grybauskas points out that Túrin's name appears only twice in the main text *The Lord of the Rings*, each time as merely another "hero" (alongside Beren, for example). Yet the story of Túrin is one told and retold by Tolkien over and over again in his unpublished writings, starting from his juvenile effort to write *The Story of Kullervo* (where Túrin is modeled on a character from the *Kalevala*) until his late attempts to complete his tales of the Eldar Days, as seen in the posthumously published *The*

Children of Húrin. As Grybauskas observes, “[i]n size and scope, intricacy and immediacy, Túrin’s story is the closest rival to *The Lord of the Rings* in Tolkien’s oeuvre” (51). Hence, in this chapter Grybauskas examines a wealth of material unpublished in Tolkien’s lifetime, rather than connecting breadcrumbs within the text of *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*.

Similarly, but here leaving Middle-earth’s history entirely, Chapter 4 focuses on *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son* in order to discuss Tolkien’s outright omissions, “the epitome of untold tales” (85). Tolkien’s fascination with the incomplete *Battle of Maldon* verse led him to write his own contribution to its story in the form of dramatic verse. Grybauskas argues that Tolkien’s makes an explicit omission—removing the reference to Totta as the poet, which he does by literally “crossing out” the lines in the manuscript—that actually makes the work more powerful, such that it “rewards attentive readers” (89). Grybauskas links this intentional omission to Ernest Hemingway’s famous “Iceberg Theory” of fiction, whereby the visible “tip” is only a small portion of the story itself, and the author deliberately leaves that bulk unseen but somehow implied, such that it “should be felt but not seen” (93). Arguably, given the vastness of his legendarium and the relatively little of its tales he was able to complete, Tolkien’s entire corpus exemplifies Hemingway’s model.

Finally, in the concluding Chapter 5, Grybauskas looks at the legacy of Tolkien’s untold tales. Here he examines not only the emergence of *The Silmarillion* and “the rise of the prequel” (99), but also the incalculable influence that Tolkien’s tales, told and untold, have had on fantasy literature, films, and video games. A brief Epilogue first eulogizes Christopher Tolkien, whose indefatigable efforts over the nearly 50 years following his father’s death have provided us with such a rich store of tales, before invoking the promise of further explorations of Tolkien’s work for readers today: “We have explored the depths—not exhausted them. And we still do not know what became of the Entwines” (122).

A Sense of Tales Untold is a superb study, and it is also particularly timely. With the debut of Amazon Prime’s billion-dollar franchise, *The Rings of Power*, later in 2022, we will undoubtedly witness even more attention to Tolkien’s untold tales, as that series promises to adapt, and extrapolate from, various tales of the Second Age only barely sketched out in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*. One key event from the period likely to be depicted will be the forging of the rings of power by Celebrimbor, and we can only hope that seeing this “mountain” of a character up close and in person will not, as Tolkien feared, “destroy the magic.”

— Robert T. Tally Jr.

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