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***Journey Back Again: Reasons to Visit Middle-earth*, edited by Diana Pavlac Glyer**

Kristine Larsen
Central Connecticut State University

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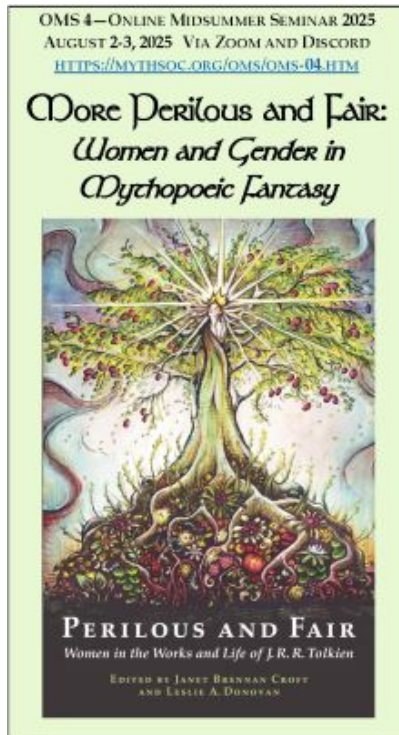
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***Journey Back Again: Reasons to Visit Middle-earth*, edited by Diana Pavlac Glycer**

Abstract

A review of the collection of essays *Journey Back Again: Reasons to Visit Middle-earth*, edited by Diana Pavlac Glycer.

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both—but he seeks to elevate the glory of running a good home. Being a housewife is as real a vocation as any nine-to-five career. Mrs. Beaver is met sewing with the kettle on, potatoes boiling, and—to be revealed later—a sticky marmalade roll already in the oven. She’s able to pack up for a long journey in a pinch, even if she does consider bringing the sewing machine. Bair cites a letter from Lewis to a Mrs. Ashton in which he sympathizes with her sense of housewifery as a Sisyphean enterprise, but Lewis ends by asking “What do ships, railways, mines, cars, government, etc exist for except that people may be fed, warmed, and safe in their own homes.” It is for the sake of the home that all the other enterprises exist (84-85).

Bair packs a lot in to his 125 pages, even if they are 4.5” by 7”. Perhaps the best comparison is to say it is like a more focused version of Joe Rigney’s *Live Like a Narnian* (which he cites frequently) or Charlie Starr’s *The Faun’s Bookshelf* (which he does not cite but should have).

—Josiah Peterson

JOSIAH PETERSON teaches Humane Letters and Economics at Chandler Preparatory Academy in Chandler, AZ. He previously coached debate and taught rhetoric at The King’s College in New York City. He earned his M.A. in Apologetics through Houston Baptist University, where he wrote his thesis on Lewis’s rhetoric under the advisement of Holly Ordway and Michael Ward. He has contributed to *The Journal of Inklings Studies*, *Sehnsucht*, *The Lamppost*, VII, and *Touchstone*. He lives in Mesa, AZ with his wife and three kids.



JOURNEY BACK AGAIN: REASONS TO VISIT MIDDLE-EARTH. Edited by Diana Pavlac Glycer. Altadena: Mythopoeic Press, 2022. 163 pp. 9781887726290. \$11.95 pbk.

IN HER FOREWORD TO THIS RELATIVELY SLENDER VOLUME, Janet Brennan Croft calls this an “ambitious project,” explaining it as a “conversation in book form, where the authors of the papers work as both individuals and as a creative community, writing back and forth to each other while finding new insights to contribute to the many-decades-old field of Tolkien studies” (i). Indeed, many of the essays contain multiple footnotes directing the reader to related points in other chapters in the book. The ‘academic family’ type feel of the volume is reflected in editor Diana Pavlac Glycer’s preface, inviting the reader “to walk alongside us, to revisit Middle-earth, and to discover details you might have missed” (iv).

Glyer should be well-known to readers of *Mythlore* as the author of *The Company They Keep* (2007) and *Bandersnatch* (2016), works focused on the famed academic community, the Inklings (including Tolkien and Lewis). This volume—clearly a labor of love—grew out of her position as Professor of English in the Honors College of Azusa Pacific University, with the essays written by students from the 2020 class of the Honors College. While the subtitle is “Reasons to Revisit Middle-earth,” the work more narrowly focuses on *The Lord of the Rings* rather than the wider legendarium (with limited exceptions).

This work’s intent is to pique the interest of the Tolkien reader, rather than necessarily breaking new ground in Tolkien research, a fact noted in the Epilogue (rather than the Introduction, resulting in a great deal of confusion during my initial read-thorough). The basic argument is that one’s first casual reading of *The Lord of the Rings* is similar to an iceberg, only hinting at the considerable depth that lies beneath. The authors hope to convince the reader to return to the work—one they might believe they know inside-out—with fresh eyes, inviting the reader to search for connections they may have previously missed (certainly a laudable goal). In her 2021 *Mythlore* review of the original edition, Megan N. Fontenot tellingly declared it a “truly charming defense” but noted it “covers a lot of familiar ground” (188). Originally published in 2020 by Azusa Pacific University Press, this Mythopoeic Press edition makes the work available to a wider audience.

Without seeing the first edition it is unclear to this reviewer how many of the essays have been updated (and to what extent), although there are a handful of clues (both to the affirmative and negative). Perhaps most telling is the large number of essays that enthusiastically thank David Bratman (the indexer and apparently an outside reader for this volume) for pointing out connections or observations that the authors missed, strengthening the arguments of many chapters. While it is gratifying to know that Bratman had a positive influence on the volume, it certainly speaks to Fontenot’s point, as well as reflecting the somewhat narrow lens that some of these authors use in their analysis. For as Fontenot pointed out in her original review, the work “rather clearly envisions a reader who identifies as Christian,” as reflected in the original edition’s back cover description of the student authors as “mature Christian scholars” (Fontenot 190). The second edition makes no overt mention of the authors as “Christian scholars,” although a cursory review of their brief contributor bios in the back of the book leads one to a similar conclusion.

It is notable that in revisiting their essays for the second edition many of the authors apparently did not take advantage of the opportunity to update and augment their use of secondary references. The result is that many essays are light on references, including the standard works that one would expect to come across in similar works; indeed, many of the cited works were already

dated in 2020 and are even more so now. While one must keep in mind the comment in the Epilogue that this work relies far more heavily on anecdotes and examples (one might say case studies) than finely crafted original arguments, it is still true that an up-to-date bibliography and proper references to a variety of secondary works adds to the overall effectiveness of a scholarly work.

Jensen A. Kirkendall kicks off the volume with an introduction that draws upon both Tolkien's famous lecture "On Fairy-stories" and the hobbits' time with Tom Bombadil, arguing for the essential nature of storytelling. Kirkendall includes the rather outdated perspective that fantasy "tends to be relegated to fiction that is merely entertaining and recreational but not sophisticated, edifying, or of literary merit" (2), an argument that has been effectively shattered thanks to decades of Tolkien scholarship. He sets the overall stage for the individual essays as collections of related examples, with each chapter offering a central reason why *The Lord of the Rings* is worthy of multiple readings.

Kirkendall continues his argument in the book's first formal chapter, "A Narrative Quest," cleverly using the example of the curious fox who briefly comes upon the three hobbits sleeping in the woods (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* I.3.71) to frame his argument. In his words, the "degree of attention and energy" that some readers complain are required to complete the thick novel are, in reality, central reasons why the work is so worthy of not only completing, but multiple readings (5). Focusing on the narrative structure of the work, Kirkendall keys in on four of Tolkien's storytelling techniques: perspectives, detours, discoveries, and vitality. For example, Pippin's encounters with the *palantir* and experiences in Minas Tirith (including his respective interactions with Sauron and Denethor) provide central examples of Tolkien's use of focalization (filtering the scene through one particular character). The multiple detours throughout the book (which might merely be seen as frustrating trivialities) are pointed out to instead represent important opportunities for intersections between the characters, central to the interlace structure notably discussed by Richard West in 1975. It is curious that a discussion of lore-masters includes Aragorn, Gandalf, Saruman, and Denethor but omits Elrond. The Ents and the Old Forest provide examples of the vitality inherent in the land itself, although this section is relatively lacking in detail as compared with the rest of his points. Taken in total, this chapter provides a utilitarian set of examples to deliver its point, and is one of the strongest pieces in the work.

Jordan F. Mar centers her chapter, "Unexpected Worth," on the premise that the average reader has not thought too deeply about various aspects of the Fellowship's experiences. Specifically, she claims that Tolkien "surprises readers with Sam's deep emotion" (25) concerning the items he

discards from his pack during the ascent of Mount Doom, including his pots and pans. However, a counterargument could be effectively made that the true surprise would be for a reasonably careful reader to be shocked at this point in the novel. Mar argues that Sam's appreciation for ordinary objects and everyday pleasures may reflect Tolkien's experiences in World War I, including the misplacing of his supplies during a wartime transfer between military divisions. However, is it truly fair to compare Tolkien's loss of vital supplies (including his boots and bedding) to Sam's active decision to part with his cooking supplies (no matter their sentimental value) in the hopes of improving their odds of successfully reaching the summit? Similarly, the hidden value of kingsfoil is used as an example of the power of everyday objects, while overlooking the important point that it is Aragorn's connection to the plant as the true king that allows its full power to be realized.

Perhaps the most unexpected presumption of extreme obtuseness on the part of the reader is the claim that "One can focus so much on Frodo as the main Ring-bearer that the impact of faithful Sam Gamgee can be overlooked" (29); simply Googling "who is the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*" makes it rather obvious that Sam's importance is *not* frequently overlooked. While the chapter's main argument—that the novel invites the reader to celebrate the power of the ordinary—is certainly true, it could have easily been framed without claiming that the average reader would miss these details.

Britta E. Bunnell's essay "The Community Quilt" treads familiar ground, the importance of friendship and fellowship (for example, between the Inklings and between Gimli and Legolas). A highlight of this essay is the book's first acknowledgment of the influence of Tolkien's knowledge of the relationships between privates and batmen with officers in World War I, a point that should have been brought up in the previous chapter. Bunnell is also the one author in this collection who most obviously elected to revise their essay for this edition to take into account wider points of view. In her 2021 review, Fontenot pointed out that Bunnell's description of the male friendships "emphatically shuts the door in the face of queer interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*" (190). A footnote in the new edition acknowledges that "Conversations surrounding some of Tolkien's characters being queer, including Sam and Frodo, have continued to be relevant and are increasingly discussed" (49n48). Bunnell cites Danna Petersen-Deepröse's presentation at the 2021 Tolkien Society Summer Seminar on Tolkien and Diversity in acknowledging that "queer" has a broader definition beyond what Bunnell calls "sexual expression" (49n48) before offering the alternate point of view, courtesy of C.S. Lewis, that "kisses, tears and embraces are not in themselves evidence of homosexuality" (quoted in Bunnell, 49n48). While the footnote ends with the seemingly neutral statement that "Both sides of the argument are thought-provoking, and the value of inclusivity and

readers personally identifying with characters should not be undermined or forgotten" (49n48), the relegating of the issue to a footnote perhaps sends a different message.

In contrast, a second criticism in Fontenot's 2021 review (related to race) is addressed within the body of the revised essay. As Fontenot points out, Bunnel's essay "praises the racial reconciliation that takes place through Legolas and Gimli, but does not address the fact that in Middle-earth, many races (usually the ones described by Tolkien using racist/racialized stereotypes and slurs) are ultimately excluded from the 'community' that is otherwise celebrated in the text" (190). Bunnel quite directly addresses at least part of this criticism (without citing it): "Although the relationship between Legolas and Gimli is admirable, it raises the question of why their reconciliation was necessary to begin with" (43). After acknowledging that Middle-earth "has been critiqued regarding Tolkien's design of hierarchies and races" Bunnel makes the curious statement that "One race, the elves, are described as the most beautiful, being virtuous, immortal, and of light-skin" (43). The cited source of this information is a 2017 book chapter by Dallas John Baker; a reading of Baker's work in turn (which specifically calls Tolkien's elves "light-skinned" [124]) reveals that the original source of the claim was the "Elven characteristics" page of the Tolkien Gateway website (accessed by Baker in 2017); this webpage does not currently mention the skin color of Elves.¹ This episode is disconcerting on several levels; firstly, it demonstrates the importance of carefully reviewing secondary sources before citing them as gospel, and, perhaps more importantly, it not only echoes, but appears to give credence to, the long-standing presumption that the "good" characters in Tolkien's world (and in High Fantasy more broadly) are unequivocally "coded as White" (Young 89).

Another issue is a claim by Bunnel that Dimitra Fimi's seminal work *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* states that "Elves developed from fairies into angelic beings who Tolkien favored" (Bunnel 43). In actuality, a careful reading of the page cited from Fimi's volume (42) instead reveals that she was explaining how "in popular belief fairies were repeatedly linked with fallen angels." While these 'rookie mistakes' are perhaps understandable given the authors' early stages in their experience with Tolkien scholarship, the rather heated arguments concerning Tolkien and racism over the past few years (including the well-documented backlash against the Tolkien Society's Diversity seminar [Reid 1]) have clearly demonstrated the need to be more precise and mindful in our discussions of these important issues.

Mark E. Jung's "Restoring Broken Fellowship" focuses on the novel's portrayal of leadership, especially through the example of Aragorn in his role of

¹ https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Elven_characteristics

“restoring broken connections” (57). Again, this is openly presented as a list of examples rather than an advanced argument. As the shortest essay, it could have easily been strengthened by further references to the extant secondary literature, for example Kayla Beebout’s 2018 *Journal of Tolkien Research* article “‘Few Have Gained Such a Victory:’ A Defense of Boromir in *The Lord of the Rings*” in the section concerning Aragorn and Boromir.

“Navigating the Weight of Evil” by Hana Paz makes some interesting points about the thorny issue of evil in Tolkien’s writings. As a well-trod road with no definitive, agreed-upon destination in Tolkien Studies, the nature of evil is always open to analysis by a fresh set of eyes. Inexplicably, Paz waits until she is well into the essay to bring up Tolkien’s famous statement concerning his disbelief in “Absolute Evil” (*Letters* 350, #183) and the observation during the Council of Elrond that “nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so” (*LotR* II.2.261). She also simplifies her argument by largely ignoring Sauron’s relationship with Melkor (relegating it to a brief footnote directing the reader elsewhere). I found her discussion of Ungoliant particularly interesting; however I must agree with Fontenot’s earlier review that overall “some of this chapter’s claims are dubious” (189), referring to Paz’s argument that “Shelob’s very existence shows that there is something of goodness that remains” (76). But ignoring the elephant in the room when it comes to the nature of evil—Orcs—certainly lessens the overall impact of the essay. It would have been interesting to see how she would have incorporated them into her list of examples.

The title of Anna K. Dickinson’s essay “Making the Risky Choice” does not give away much information concerning its subject: how pity and mercy are incorporated into *The Lord of the Rings* (and our Primary World), using Gollum as the primary example. Little of the extensive secondary literature on the topic is included, including how Tolkien’s faith is reflected in his incorporation of pity and mercy within his works. The lack of an acknowledgement of the fundamental connection between Gandalf and Nienna is unfortunate; despite the fact that this collection is openly focused on *The Lord of the Rings*, there are numerous mentions of the wider legendarium in a number of the essays. The essay does end with a finite and focused conclusion, reminding us of the “real danger of taking the fates of others into our hands” (95).

Jacob Bradley continues the theological themes in “Providence at Work.” As advertised, his essay investigates the role of providence in *Lord of the Rings*, beginning with the example of the eagles rescuing Sam and Frodo from Mount Doom. As in other essays, there are simplifications of the complex mythology (and theology) of Middle-earth and the drawing of conclusions that are presented as definitive when the secondary literature clearly demonstrates that there has been (and continues to be) considerable debate about particular interpretations. An example is Bradley’s apparent claim that the Valar are

definitely responsible for the prophetic dreams given to Faramir and Boromir concerning the One Ring. More perplexing is the overly simplistic description that the phial of Galadriel “shines with a light like the stars” (104) when Tolkien quite pointedly noted that in the phial “is caught the light of Eärendil’s star,” a far more significant source of light even within the confines of *The Lord of the Rings* itself (Tolkien, *LotR* II.8.367). In contrast to the overall ‘community’ ethos of this volume, Bradley seems to contradict (or at least ignore) the points of the previous essay, focusing on the presumed role of providence rather than pity and mercy in Gollum’s role in *LOTR*.

One of the most frustrating essays was penned by self-described “passionately interdisciplinary” (154) Applied Mathematics/Honors Humanities graduate Joshua Harbman. The essay “An Enchanted World” largely sets scientific (“disenchanted”) and religious worldviews in opposition with each other (or at least science and spirituality, perhaps narrowly defined as Christian spirituality) (114). Drawing heavily from Tolkien’s poem “Mythopoeia,” Harbman argues that Tolkien warned against a disenchanted worldview, which the author equates with the modern scientific perspective. Instead of holding to his central argument that a mixed viewpoint (science plus wonder) is more powerful (which would have been both interesting and more original), he succumbs to several common pitfalls of Tolkien vs. science surveys.

For example, the author largely conflates science with technology, ignoring Tolkien’s careful distinction between “pure (real) natural science” which “desires knowledge” as opposed to the technological desire for “possession or domination” (*Letters* 287, #153). It is doubly unfortunate because in this same letter Tom Bombadil is specifically described as the “exemplar” of this viewpoint, whereas Harbman ignores this important distinction in his discussion of Bombadil and enchantment. Other letters clearly argue against Harbman’s narrow viewpoint, for example a 1956 letter to Michael Straight Tolkien where elves are said to “represent, as it were, the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Humane nature,” especially in their “devoted love of the physical world, and a desire to observe and understand it for its own sake and as ‘other’ [namely] as a reality derived from God in the same degree as themselves—not as a material for use or as a power-platform” (*Letters* 341–2, #181). Similarly, a 1969 letter to Camilla Unwin explained that “Those who believe in a personal God, Creator, do not think the Universe is in itself worshipful, though devoted study of it may be one of the ways of honouring Him” (*Letters* 562, #310). In a footnote Harbman does admit that “some argue that the laboratory has actually been an enchanting, not disenchanting force” (115n100), but this is too little, too late. Again, many of these pitfalls could have been avoided with a cursory consultation of the secondary literature.

The final chapter, “The Road to Recovery” by Wyatt Zeimis, again reflects a list of examples rather than a cogent argument; while the contributors are open about this limitation in their focus, in some instances (such as this one) it is particularly frustrating to the reader who is perhaps expecting a more argument-based structure. Zeimis’s theme is that “over the course of their journey, the hobbits experience one of Tolkien’s most important theories: recovery. [...] Although it may not be obvious at first, *The Lord of the Rings* guides both the hobbits and the reader on a road to recovery” (124). Again, there is very little acknowledgement of the secondary literature, a limitation that is most keenly obvious when Zeimis makes the point that Frodo comes to realize that “despite returning home, it will no longer be familiar because he is not the same hobbit who set out from the Shire many months prior” (134). Not only is this a vast understatement of the depth of Frodo’s significant physical and psychological trauma, but again it fails to acknowledge that this is, indeed, a very well-traveled scholarly road. For example, Bernhard Hirsch’s 2014 *Tolkien Studies* paper on this topic is included in the volume’s overall bibliography, but does not appear to have been cited in this particular chapter.

The epilogue makes it clear that this was a very personal project, a journey in which, like the hobbits, the authors have been changed and their eyes opened by the experience. Despite the limitations of this volume, the lover of *LOTR* may find this quick read a pleasant counterpoint (or at least diversion) from some of the more critical modern analysis of Tolkien’s works, and remind even the most seasoned scholar of why they came to love the work in the first place. Hopefully these young scholars will continue exploring Middle-earth, and will branch out beyond the comfort of the Shire (their individual points-of-view and preconceptions) and enter into the wider world of Tolkien Studies, including critical lenses and theoretical frameworks that are very different from their own. I believe they, like the hobbits, will find it a most worthwhile adventure.

—Kristine Larsen

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KRISTINE LARSEN is an Astronomy Professor at Central Connecticut State University. She is the author of *Cosmology 101*, *Stephen Hawking: A Biography*, *Particle Panic*, *Science, Technology and Magic in The Witcher*, and the forthcoming *The Sun We Share: Our Star in Popular Media and Science*, and co-editor of *The Mythological Dimensions of Doctor Who* and *The Mythological Dimensions of Neil Gaiman*. Her Tolkien scholarship has been published in a variety of books, as well as *Tolkien Studies*, *Mallorn*, *Silver Leaves*, and *Amon Hen*.



J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE HOBBIT*: REALIZING HISTORY THROUGH FANTASY. Robert T. Tally Jr. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 101 pp. \$22.99 (pbk).

“IN A HOLE IN THE GROUND THERE LIVED A HOBBIT”; these words, penned in the weary hours by Oxford University professor J.R.R. Tolkien would not only launch his literary career, but bring forth an entire genre of literature (*Hobbit* 9). *The Hobbit*, published in 1937, quickly became a bestseller, and with the followup novel *The Lord of the Rings*, published in three parts between 1954 and 1955, an enduring popular culture phenomenon was born. Yet readers are quick to note the difference in tone between *The Hobbit* and Tolkien's later Middle-earth works; Tolkien himself would come to regret many of the literary choices made in *The Hobbit* that critics felt cemented it as a children's novel, in stark contrast to the high fantasy seen in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. Much has been written on the topic of Tolkien's legendarium, with the last decade presenting a golden age for Tolkien studies bolstered by the popularity of adaptations such as Peter Jackson's films and the Amazon Prime series, *The*