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## ***J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe: Context, Directions, and the Legacy* edited by Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus**

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*Beyond Bree*

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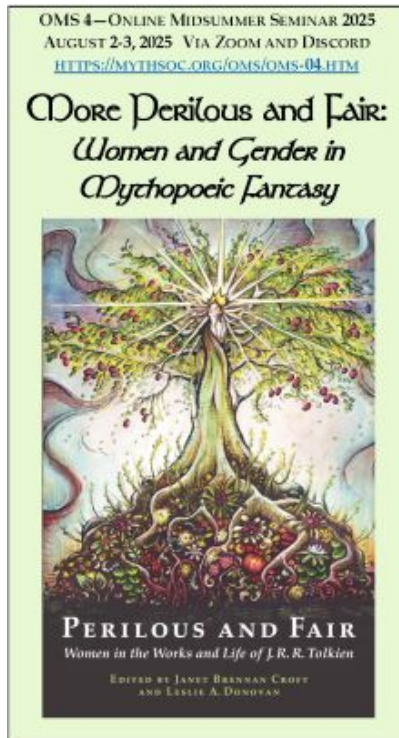
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summaries of plots and characters, texts like *American Gods* or *The Sandman* series are so complex that brief synopses do not provide enough background to fully appreciate his stories or her textual analysis of them. Still, Carroll's book could serve as a useful guide for teachers hoping to introduce their students to medieval literature through Gaiman (or, conversely, to Gaiman through medieval literature). And, for those already familiar with some of Gaiman's works, Carroll's well-researched medievalist readings should offer some satisfying new perspectives.

—Kris Swank

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**J.R.R. TOLKIEN IN CENTRAL EUROPE: CONTEXT, DIRECTIONS, AND THE LEGACY.** Edited by Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus; Routledge Studies in Speculative Fiction. New York & London: Routledge, 2024. 188 p. ISBN 9781032525563. \$170. In English.

**T**OLKIEN FANDOM TENDS TO FOLLOW A PATTERN: discovery; formation of discussion groups; fan activities such as costuming, role playing, the publishing of newsletters, fan fiction and art; then deeper research into Tolkien's life and sources; and as fans grow older, studies of Tolkien (and fantasy) in academia. Concurrent with fandom is the attitude of the literati and academia toward Tolkien: unawareness; deliberate ignoring; disparagement or dismissal; and as fans grow more numerous, studies of Tolkien (and fantasy) in academia, often under the rubric of popular culture or such. In non-English-speaking countries, translation and English studies play a role. But the details of how fandom and academic recognition are expressed vary according to the culture and politics of the country and the date by which Tolkien's work is introduced.

Recently, we have accounts published in English of Tolkien fandom in Iberia (Spain and Portugal) in *Nólë Hyarmenillo*; in Italy, *How to Misunderstand Tolkien* (both reviewed in *Mythlore* #143) and a few essays in Italian in *Tolkien: Uomo, Professore, Autore*; and now in *J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe*.

The purpose of *J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe: Context, Directions, and the Legacy*, as editors Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus state in their

Introduction, is to give the history of Tolkien fandom in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia (the extensive Polish fandom is not treated here); to provide a historical basis for future studies; and to consider fantasy in general. (Don't be put off by the florid language of the Introduction; the rest of the book is in plain English.) The book is divided into three Parts: Part I, Hungary (two essays by Gergely Nagy); and Part II, two essays each on the Czech Republic (by Janka Kasckova and Tereza Dědinová) and Slovakia (by Jozefa Pevčíková, Eva Urbanová, and Jela Kehoe). While fandom and fan activities are named, the emphasis here is on literary history: citations in journals, fanzines, and translations, in order to serve as a bibliography for future Tolkien studies. Part III, the Legacy, covers "Studying Fantasy after Tolkien: Legacies and Contemporary Perspectives," which will be described later.

The three defining eras for Tolkien fandom in Central Europe are: government under communism, after the fall of communism (in 1989), and after the release of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films, beginning in 2000. These films, along with the *Harry Potter* series and others, galvanized interest in Tolkien in particular and fantasy in general. Nor did communism always end abruptly: there was a gradual loosening before the fall.

Part I: Tolkien in Hungary. The communist government of János Kádár was less repressive than other socialist regimes. Children's literature and science fiction, as they were not intended to be taken seriously, were loosely regulated. And men of learning who had fallen afoul of the regime and could no longer publish could still make a living as translators, sometimes working under pseudonyms. Thus Tibor Szobotka translated *The Hobbit*, which was published (as a children's book) in 1975. (*The Lord of the Rings* was anathema to all communist governments because the heroes came from the West.) Ádám Réz began the translation of *The Lord of the Rings*, but died before completing it; it was hastily finished by Árpád Göncz and published in 1981, a translation notorious for a mistaken pronoun which had Merry killing the Witch-king. Árpád Göncz would later become Hungary's first freely-elected president. (Intellectuals are more likely to hold public office in Central Europe than in the United States.) Tolkien fandom began to develop. But *The Lord of the Rings* was still considered a fairy tale.

After the fall of communism fantasy literature proliferated, but it tended to be dark and cynical. So when *The Silmarillion* was published in 1991, it was considered old-fashioned and conservative. Interest in Tolkien soared after the release of Peter Jackson's films. Scattered Tolkien societies were consolidated into the Hungarian Tolkien Society, Tolkien began to be taught in academia (still as a fairy tale)—Gergely Nagy, author of these essays, was very active in both efforts. Translations were published of Humphrey Carpenter's *Tolkien: A Biography* (2001), much of Tolkien's Middle-earth material, many of

his lesser works, and some secondary literature. (Though the complete *History of Middle-earth* is still not translated.) Hungarians learned about Tolkien and *Beowulf*.<sup>1</sup> Fans also demanded consistency in terminology, and gradually Tolkien's works came under the same publisher. Today the Internet also provides much information. But Hungarian Tolkien scholarship is still not known worldwide.

Part II: Tolkien in Czechoslovakia and its Succeeding Countries. The history of Tolkien fandom in Czechoslovakia is somewhat different. After the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I, Czechia and Slovakia united in 1918 for mutual protection. (They would separate in 1992.) The Czech west tended to be more urban, industrialized, and educated than the Slovak east, which was more agricultural and deeply religious. However, as the Czech and Slovak languages are similar, and news broadcasts and the like were given in both Czech and Slovak, many people knew both languages. This would later affect translation.

Government under communism was harsher in Czechoslovakia than in Hungary, so Tolkien's works circulated in secret, underground *samizdat* publications. *The Lord of the Rings* spoke of freedom and hope. One who read these publications was Václav Havel, the last president of post-communist Czechoslovakia; others also became active in government. But this early history was not recorded; it remains part of oral tradition.

Viktor Krupa translated *The Hobbit* into Slovak in 1973; it was translated into Czech (as a children's book) in 1979. But the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* waited until 1990-2 (after the fall of communism) for Czech,<sup>2</sup> and 2001-2 (after the films) for Slovak. Curiously, a short (12 minute), not very accurate animated film of *The Hobbit* was made in a Prague studio in 1966.<sup>3</sup>

After the fall of communism English literature entered Czechoslovakia, fantasy flourished, young Czechs (and Hungarians and Slovaks) formed fan clubs and circulated newsletters.<sup>4</sup> (Tolkien's work was still considered childish

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<sup>1</sup> The Finnish *Kalevala* was familiar to Hungarians, because Finnish and Hungarian share the same language group (Finno-Ugaric), but *Beowulf* was little known.

<sup>2</sup> The Czech translation of *The Hobbit* is by František Vrba, though attributed to Lubomír Dorůžka—see Part I: Hungary, about men of learning working as translators. The Czech *Lord of the Rings* used the *samizdat* translation by Stanislava Pošustová-Meňšíková.

<sup>3</sup> The story is that Americans Gene Deitch and William L. Snyder owned the rights to the film adaptation; rights which would soon run out unless something was produced, hence a quickie using a Prague animation studio. A longer film was never made (67). This little film can be viewed online.

<sup>4</sup> Many of these fanzines, such as *Aurin*, *Elanor*, *J.R.R. Tolkien* (Hungarian); *Imladris*, *Thorin*, *Palantír* (Czech); and *Athelas* (Slovak), which were collected by Gary Hunnewell, are now housed in Tolkien Collection at Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI.

and escapist by the literati.) Today the fantasy genre is well established in both countries.

Translation of *The Lord of the Rings* and other works into Slovak was delayed because many people could read Czech. It took the release of Peter Jackson's films to spark interest among Slovak publishers. A second translation of *The Hobbit* was released in 2002, *The Lord of the Rings* in 2001–2, *The Silmarillion* in 2003, *The Children of Húrin* in 2007, etc. Today most of Tolkien's Middle-earth books have been translated, but not Humphrey Carpenter's biography. And *The Lord of the Rings* was dramatized on radio in 2001–3. As usual, Tolkien was ignored in academia and literary journals, but was widely discussed within fandom. Today, fantasy has gone mainstream, and there is some recognition in academia, especially in translation studies (see Jela Kehoe, below), film studies, and religious studies.<sup>5</sup>

In her essay Jela Kehoe compares “translation knots” in the two Slovak translations of *The Hobbit*. How are names rendered? How is non-standard English represented? And what to do about specifically English items, such as the food served at the Unexpected Party, when there are no gastronomic equivalents of “scones” and “pork pie” in Slovakia? Substitute a local dish or keep the English term? Much for the translator to consider.

Part III deals with Tolkien's legacy, “Studying Fantasy after Tolkien.” As noted, fantasy is now very popular in Central Europe, and has become an accepted part of life. Not only Peter Jackson's films, but *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, *The Witcher*, and others have proved influential. There are three essays in this section:

Martina Vránová, who attempts to define Young Adult Literature and Fantasy Literature in “Growing Up in Fantasy: Inspecting the Convergences of Young Adult Literature and Fantastic Fiction,” by using *Looking for Alaska* by John Green as an example of Young Adult literature, *The Witcher* series by Andrzej Sapkowski as an example of traditional fantasy, and the *Miss Peregrine* series by Ransom Riggs as a combination of the two. She concludes that both genres often share similar themes (such as the quest and coming-of-age), and that fantasy is particularly well suited to Young Adult fiction. These stories are part of “Tolkien's Legacy”: her essay has little to do with Tolkien.

For “One Does Not Simply Teach Fantasy: How Students of English and American Studies in Hungary View the Genre and Tolkien's Legacy,” Nikolett Sipos polled students of English and American Studies at the

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<sup>5</sup> Slovakia is heavily Roman Catholic. As Tolkien was Roman Catholic, this would enhance his appeal. Four of the contributors to this collection are associated with the Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia.

University of Pannonia, Veszprém, and the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest. He asked, How do they view the fantasy genre? Do they consume fantasy (in any form)? What is their opinion of Tolkien's work? Is it outdated? How does it differ from more modern fantasy? And finally, "Is there a need for learning more about this genre at universities?" (152). The general opinion is that Tolkien's works are still relevant (they are real classics, about good and evil), more people have seen the films (or seen the films first) than read the books, and that fantasy should be taught at university. As for fantasy in books, films, and games, students cited *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *Harry Potter*, *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones*, *The Witcher*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Marvel Universe films, *The World of Warcraft* and *The Elder Scrolls* games, and more.

David Levente Palatinus writes on "From Niche to Mainstream? Screen Culture's Impact on Contemporary Perceptions of Fantasy." As can be deduced from above, films, TV, and streaming play a big role in Central European fantasy. Small countries do not have the capability for big budget productions. Good vs. evil (in Tolkien, *Harry Potter*) or good with evil (*Game of Thrones*), urban fantasy, horror, romance—all types are popular. Visuals are important. Social media plays a role. Rather than studios targeting a specific audience, these shows create an audience—and now there is much to choose from. Fantasy is no longer a niche genre.

And Tolkien's works started it all.

This is an interesting and worthwhile contribution to Tolkien fandom studies. Pity it's too expensive.

—Nancy Martsch

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