

# Middle Earth Enchants A Returning Pilgrim: WRITERS ON WRITING: Eternal Sense of Place *(New York Times, 30 Dec 2002)*

Like many children of the 50's I grew up on "The Lord of the Rings." Between 1961, when my mother first brought the series home from the college bookstore she managed, to 1970, when I graduated from high school, I read the books at least once a year, sometimes twice. Entire summers I sat on an uncomfortable wicker couch in the living room of our summer place, my legs straight out like those of a stick figure drawn by someone who hasn't the skill to make knees.

Maybe I'd glance up occasionally at the squares of sky through the windows; that seems to be all I wanted of outdoors and glorious summer weather. I had all the weather I needed in Tolkien's books. In a list I kept of books I read, the trilogy earned four stars, my highest accolade. The gray dust jackets with the black and red ring on the cover, the George Allen & Unwin edition, became tattered; the first volume, read more than the others, lost its jacket entirely and now stands undressed in red, immediately identifiable. Somewhere, buried in a trunk in the attic, lies Tolkien's autograph in Elvish script, sent to me when I, at 10, wrote the only fan letter of my life.

When I was 13 I read about the trilogy in The New York Times, and I was mesmerized, experiencing the same astonishment one would on finding a family member's name in a newspaper headline. How did they know about those books? I read with growing incredulity the analysis of the books as an allegory in which Sauron's ring represented the bomb, and wondered how a reputable paper like The Times could sanction such evident absurdity.

Outraged, as if someone I loved had been accused of committing a crime of which I knew he was incapable, I sought assurance. It couldn't be true, could it? What a cheap, ungentlemanly thing to do. To write about one thing but intend another? Tolkien wouldn't do such a thing -- not this chronicler of hobbits with the Elvishlike spelling to his surname and the mysterious extra R preceding it -- not my Tolkien. So I wrote to him again. This time a publishing assistant replied that Professor Tolkien had asked him to tell me "most positively that the ring does in no way represent the bomb."

I was gratified and perhaps repudiated symbolism longer in my literary career than I might otherwise have done (though I still haven't disabused myself of the conviction that there's something fundamentally unsavory about it). As is well known by now, Tolkien rejected the notion that anything in his Middle Earth represented anything else, and although it's evident that the book couldn't have come into existence without the two World Wars Tolkien experienced, in the first as a participant and in the second as the father of one, or without his love of a rural England that was being swallowed by suburbs, it may not tell us that much about the books or his creation of them to know that. We might just as well think of the World Wars and industrial

pollution as symbolic of the battle between the forces of good and evil in Middle Earth and the overrunning of the Shire.

Hearing a year ago that the books were being filmed, I began to read the trilogy to my 7-year-old son. I longed for him to form his own impressions before they were asserted by someone else's visual imagination, but he found it tedious going and was as restive as the guests listening to Bilbo's farewell speech when it threatened long-windedness.

We got bogged down in the Old Forest, right around the time Merry and Pippin get swallowed up by old man Willow. I recalled skimming that chapter myself in my younger rereadings and considered now skipping over passages of description. If I could get him to the Barrow Downs and the creeping hand, and then to Bree with Strider lurking cloaked in the shadows, he'd be hooked, but where to abbreviate?

Now a grown-up reader, I found myself astonished by the unflagging quality of the prose, the range of Tolkien's descriptive powers, by how integrally involved the plot is with the landscape. An Oxford don (or donness) comments in a recent film about Tolkien that although he is a great storyteller, he's no stylist. I didn't bridle at the remark, but that was before I reread the books. How many writers can write 15 pages describing a trek through a sinister forest without repeating themselves?

"They were on an island in a sea of trees, and the horizon was veiled. On the southeastern side the ground fell very steeply, as if the slopes of the hill were continued far down under the trees, like island shores that really are the sides of a mountain rising out of deep waters. . . .

"In the midst of it there wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, arched over with willows, blocked with fallen willows, and flecked with thousands of faded willow leaves. The air was thick with them, fluttering yellow from the branches; for there was a warm and gentle breeze blowing softly in the valley, and the reeds were rustling, and the willow boughs were creaking."

And it goes on like this, not for 15 pages, or 50, but throughout the trilogy, more words in English to describe place than most of us use in a lifetime.

One might spend a dissertation's worth of time attending to Tolkien's language, noticing how his morally valent verbs and adverbs animate the terrain; what's at once evident is that Tolkien is no mere storyteller, but belongs with those other English novelists whose work is so intimately involved with their settings that it's impossible to imagine the one without the other.

Think of "Sons and Lovers," "Wuthering Heights," "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" or "Wolf Solent": can one conceive of Heathcliff without the moors or Tess without the Wessex meadows? These stories are born of place, could happen only there. The landscapes themselves generate the drama. Only someone English could have written "The Lord of the Rings." A French, Spanish or

Italian version is not conceivable. Alain Fournier's "Grand Meaulnes" is as close to the spirit of Tolkien's adventure as I can think of from works on the Continent, and it's not very close.

This English sensibility about landscape, where does it come from? England is the land best known for standing stones and ley-lines, but were these imposed on the topography by their builders, or were they responding to something already in the place? There's a way of locating buildings quintessentially English, seeming to give form to what the terrain was wanting -- right there, on that hillock, in that dale -- to articulate. German castles towering at improbable heights proclaim how astonishing it is that they should exist, that humans built them; French chateaus affirm a serene orderliness; Italian villas and their grounds express a charming regret that humans should be so much better at ordering nature than she is herself.

The feeling of there being intention in place informs all of Tolkien's trilogy, and one needn't resort to calling "The Lord of the Rings" an allegory about industrial despoliation of the bucolic to recognize that one of the books' dominant values is care for the natural world. Elves leave as loveliness leaves; trees fight back against human assault, and in Middle Earth they are empowered to march against the despoilers, unlike in our earth, where they depend upon our good will and good sense. Tolkien reanimates the natural world for his readers, and this is one large source of his enduring appeal.

Rereading the trilogy (it's a year later, and we've now made it into the second volume; this time the book will pre-empt the movie), I've become aware how profoundly my own sense of place was influenced by those manifold, literarily un-self-conscious readings. When I got up from the couch and staggered stiff-legged outside, I saw my surroundings through a screen: the White Mountains, off to the east, are the Misty Mountains; I live in the Shire; the river on the way to town is the Brandywine, which we venture across once a week to grocery shop; the abandoned copper mines up the hill to the north are the mithril mines of Moria. . . . Or could it be the other way around?

Tolkien claimed not to have invented Middle Earth but to have rediscovered it, an oft-reported remark. He didn't, in other words, paint the world around us with a magic brush, he reminded us of the actual magic already there, against which, happily, the frail bark of symbol seekers will always founder. The griefs we have felt, he makes it clear, will be as nothing to those we'll feel if that world is one day gone.

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## Photograph

Kathryn Kramer is sharing the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy with her son. (Paul O. Boisvert for The New York Times)

