THE HOBBIT-FORMING WORLD
OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN

An aged Englishman's saga
of elves, dwarves and dragons has
suddenly become the hottest-selling item
in U.S. campus bookstores.

By HENRY RESNIK

Read the following paragraph carefully; then close your eyes and remember.

"They are (or were) small people, smaller than dwarves (and they have no beards) but very much larger than lilliputians. There is little or no magic about them, except the ordinary everyday sort which helps them to disappear quickly when large stupid folk like you and me come blundering along making a noise like elephants which they can hear a mile off. They are inclined to be fat in the stomach; they dress in bright colors (chiefly green and yellow); wear no shoes, because their feet grow natural leather soles and thick warm brown hair like the stuff on their heads (which is curly); have long clever brown fingers, good-natured faces, and laugh deep fruity laughs (especially after dinner, which they have twice a day when they can get it)."

All right. That was a description of hobbits, a race of "halflings" who originated in the mind of J.R.R. Tolkien, a retired Oxford don, and play a major role in his epic fantasy The Lord of the Rings. Could you begin to see them? Did you feel a warm, comfortable feeling as you thought about the prospect of two dinners a day—and no diets? Would you like to spend some time in a place where there is "less noise and more green"? If your answers to any of those questions is yes, you may well have a chance of becoming one of the Tolkien
people. And, as any of the steadily growing num-
ber of high-school and college students who have
to read The Lord of the Rings can tell you, one of the
Tolkien people is just about the best thing a person

In recent months, The Lord of the Rings

has been at the top of college best-seller lists across the
country, and although the Tolkien people wince
at the word “fad” as if it were sheer blasphemy, even
they will admit that their enthusiasm has gone—perhaps inevitably—beyond all reason. The
Tolkien people may be less noisy than the LSD-

The quest involves traveling hundreds of
miles to the Lonely Mountain and killing a fear-
some dragon, Smaug, who smolders quietly in a
subterranean lair, guarding his stolen treasure.
The quest is essentially an adventure story,

The Lord of the Rings is a 1,300-page trilogy.
Most Tolkien fans have read it twice; five times is
not an uncommon record. One woman who fell in
love with the trilogy when it was first published
lost count after her 30th reading. Tolkien fans are

According to a spokesman at the Yale Co-op,
The Lord of the Rings is selling better at Yale than
Lord of the Flies at its peak. (Lord of the Flies, a
novel by another Englishman, William Golding,
has had enormous popularity among students.)

Thus, the activity of Tolkien fanatics is analyz-
ing these details. People have invented alphabet games to go
with the languages; the two magazines publish
articles which deal with such subjects as “The
Hereditary Pattern of Immortality in Elf-Human
Crosses”; and one Tolkien scholar has even spelled
out an elaborate Freudian interpretation. Gen-
erally, however, the activity centers on indexes,
dictionaries of the Elven languages, and transla-
tions of poems which appear in their original Elvish.
The Lord of the Rings is, according to the Tolkien
people, a children’s book—delightful, but not as
sophisticated or profound as The Lord of the Rings

The Tolkien people are essentially a sub culpa

Although the Tolkien fans rarely show herding
instincts and never scream, they are driven by the
same subtle urge that produces water guns at the
first breath of spring, gives rise to the sudden,
unexpected yo-yo, and squeezes crowds of stu-
dents into telephone booths. The vanguard of the
Tolkien movement—those who purchased the
books when they were available only in hard cover
(or, better yet, in England)—“The English edi-
tion shelled great,” one of them said recently)—
tends to view the recent upsurge with a moder-
ately patronizing eye, but none of them be-

The Tolkien movement is a long history of sur-
prises, not the least of which is that the tale of

A constantly growing number of the Tolkien
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At the beginning of The Lord of the Rings, how-
ever, we learn that the ring can do a great deal more than make men (or hobbits) invisible. Sev-
enty-five years have passed, and the aging Bilbo
(advised by the friendly wizard Gandalf) has re-
luctantly allowed his nephew, Frodo, to be the

Buttons proclaiming that Frodo Lives (they refer
to the hobbit hero of the trilogy) are available in
either English or Elvish, one of Middle-earth’s
native languages.

A panel of students assembled in Baltimore
recently to talk about Tolkien show the
dire ways in which shows have developed into a mild frenzy with
constant digressions about Tolkien. Two teachers of
English at Minnesota’s Mankato State College
described a Tolkien Conference to be held
there this October. At Reed College in Oregon a

The quest falls to an unsuspecting hobbit, Bilbo
Baggins, who would much rather stay at home
where he can be sure of six solid meals a day than
be off fighting dragons; he embarks on the
journey, however, by a friendly wizard named
Gandalf and a boisterous company of dwarves. Gradually the hobbit’s inner courage emerges, and although he frequently longs for the

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is part of the language. The landscape and genealogy of Middle-earth are just

As a youth Tolkien, who is now 74, loved
languages and frequently amused himself by in-

The Lord of the Rings

The Hobbit. (Ores are another breed of Tolki-
creature.) This is more than mere enthusiasm;
this is passion—uninhibited, joyous passion.

Since the most dazzling quality of Tolkien’s

was due mainly to the complete absence of any paper-
back edition of the Tolkien books for almost 10 years after Houghton Mifflin published the Amer-
can hard-cover version in 1966. Tolkien had
had all this time to gather, like a crowd before the

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venting his own. He pursued this linguistic pas-

son at college, finally settling on philology, par-
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Titanic languages, as a career and Oxford as the

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keeper of the ring. But one day Gandalf comes to the Shire (the idyllic country very much like rural England, where generations of hobbits have lived) to tell Frodo that he may no longer keep the ring; he has discovered that it is the ancient creation of Sauron, an evil wizard, and so great is the power of the ring that if Sauron can ever find it, he will rule the world. Sauron has already dispatched his nine henchmen (glimped only as shapeless abstractions of evil) in search of Frodo's ring, and they are getting close.

Gandalf calls a council of hobbits, dwarves, men and elves to discuss the problem. The only solution, he announces, is to destroy the ring by returning it to the mighty fire in which it was forged, the fire that burns in the Cracks of Doom in the heart of Mordor, Sauron's fortress-like country. Everyone seems to agree that Frodo is fated to bear the ring, he reluctantly consents, and a fellowship of nine is named to accomplish the seemingly impossible task. On their quest hangs the fate of Middle-earth.

What follows is a series of struggles, battles, wars, tests and horrors so numerous and grand that they have prompted one critic to call The Lord of the Rings the only "true epic of our time." Finally, the ring is destroyed, and peace comes to Middle-earth.

The easy answer to why The Lord of the Rings appeals so strongly to high-school and college students is that to them the ring represents the power of destruction which threatens and haunts them—the bomb. This sort of easy thinking raises problems, however. First, apparently all the Tolkien people have rejected the allegorical interpretation as pointless and uninteresting (possibly prompted by Tolkien's own distaste for allegory). Second, high-school and college students seem rarely to think about the bomb these days, much less construct allegorical connections concerning it. ("We're more worried about the draft," says one.) The younger Tolkien fans, in fact, claim they read the books for the sheer "fun" of it. A Columbia freshman speaks eloquently for his fellow fanatics: "I'd be downcast if there were a social meaning." Yet here there is a certain division among the Tolkien people. The older ones readily grant that the books are a powerful and hopeful affirmation about man, filled with philosophical import, but even they do not think this is a good reason for reading the books.

To all readers, however, the world of Tolkien seems to offer a delicious, vintage-wine sort of escape.

"I read it during Christmas vacation," comments a teacher of English at Long Island's Adelphi University, "when I'd had about all the reality I could stand."

"Middle-earth is a beautiful place to visit," the Columbia freshman says, his eyes beginning to cloud with reminiscence, and "I go there as often as I can."

Some of the high-school and college people are willing to admit, when pressed, that they admire certain values presented in The Lord of the Rings. "The elves attract me most," offers the Columbia freshman. (In Tolkien, elves are not "little people"; they are as big as men, twice as beautiful and infinitely more noble.)

The most sophisticated evaluation of the fad inevitably turns, however, to the imaginative scope of Tolkien's world. The poet W. H. Auden, one of Tolkien's most prominent American admirers and a former student of Tolkien's at Oxford ("He was a marvelous lecturer; he made things so exciting that you wanted to learn"), believes that the greatest strength of the books lies in Tolkien's ability to create myths. But myths do not have universal appeal. "Either one loves the books," Auden says, "or one doesn't." Tolkien's power of imagination seems to be, at any rate, the single element which all the Tolkien people praise, whatever their terminology.

But none of the Tolkien people have observed an important quality in themselves which may explain the explosion better than any other single factor. The majority of them are unified not by a need to find ethics in a hopeless modern world or a desire for escape or a passion for myths and languages (although these may explain their initial attraction to the books); rather, they share the hobbit spirit—the pluck, the taste for adventure, the joie de vivre. And above all, the total commitment to their goals (once they decide to have goals) that unites them all.

Richard Plotz is a leader among American hobbits. The Harvard-bound 17-year-old from Brooklyn read the trilogy about two years ago and im-
TOLKIEN'S WORLD... mediately prodded his classmates to join him. "You want to discuss them with people," he says, "and talk about the good times you've had running around Middle-earth." Apparently, however, none of the classmates were sufficiently hobbitlike to accept his enthusiasm, and for a time Dick limited his proselytizing to leaving announcements that "Frodo lives" on blackboards, bulletins, and walls. One day, however, he noticed some Elvish writing on a poster in the Columbia University subway station. At the time, he couldn't identify Elvish, and when he had studied it sufficiently to attempt a translation, he returned to Columbia only to find that the poster was gone. Someone had written on the master poster "Frodo lives is probably a fake," and someone else had crossed out part of this, substituting "two fakes." The following week Dick saw "Down with Saruman" (one of the bad wizards), and at this point he joined the fray by crossing out "Saruman" and substituting "Gandalf." There was a running conversation in that subway station for weeks." Dick remembers. "I decided I had to find out who else was doing it. I put up a notice: Tolkien Club meets at Alma Mater statue, 2:00, February 27th." Six students showed up. No one knew who anyone else was, but we talked for an hour, just standing there in the cold; it was twenty degrees." The thrill of this encounter urged Dick to further action, and he placed the following ad in The New Republic: "Join Tolkien Club. Discuss Hobbit-loric, learn Elvish. Frodo's in the 15th floor, Brooklyn, N.Y." The result was 70 letters and the Tolkien Society, whose members now represent 44 states and a number of professions, though most are either students, teachers, scientists or psychologists. The society is evenly divided according to sex, but only about one third are adults. "I believe in the books," says Dick Plotz. Unlike a large number of Tolkien people, Plotz is not a science-fiction fanatic. Since fantasy is closely allied with science fiction, and since both Ballantine and Ace are leading science-fiction publishers, the members of "fandom" (the name that science-fiction fans use to describe themselves corporately) were quick to adopt The Lord of the Rings. The fandom people were also quick to spread the message across the country, for many of them publish mimeographed records of their activities and ideas called "fanzines." By now most of the fanzines include regular articles on Tolkien, and one fanzine publisher, a 17-year-old Californian named Greg Shaw, initiated the second Tolkien publication, Ent and Moot. (Translation: a gathering of ents; from the roots of the word "moot.""

Tolkien was born in South Africa. His father died when he was four, and his mother brought the family back to her native Birmingham. "I found I had for the countryside of England both the native feeling and the personal wonder of somebody who comes to it," he says. He readily admits that the Shire of his trilogy has its roots in the English countryside and that Middle-earth itself is simply his own view of Europe. Tolkien's long acquaintance with Norse and Germanic myths has inspired the chiller, more menacing landscapes of Middle-earth, and he makes fun of having deliberately shaped the two major interests of his life—rural England and the northern myths—to his own literary purposes. "In The Lord of the Rings," Tolkien says, "I have tried to modernize the myths and make them credible."