

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

FRODO
LIVES



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 number of high-school and college students who have read *The Lord of the Rings* can tell you, one of the Tolkien people is just about the best thing a person can be.

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-heads, but there are more of them, and they give the lie to most of the melodramatic scandal that has emanated from the American campus within the past year. Look into the mirror of their emotion—the world of Tolkien—and you will probably find a clue to what today's students are really about; look into that mirror and you may even find the link that ties you to them.

The Tolkien movement is a long history of surprises, not the least of which is that the tales a quiet English scholar began writing almost 30 years ago to amuse his children have become the subject of so lively a contemporary American passion. As a youth Tolkien, who is now 74, loved languages and frequently amused himself by in-

venting his own. He pursued this linguistic passion at college, finally settling on philology, particularly the study of Anglo-Saxon and other medieval languages, as a career and Oxford as the place to study it. During this time, several languages had been growing in Tolkien's imagination, and he found that he could not resist inventing countries to go with them. In a matter of years these countries grew into a whole world which he called Middle-earth. Prodded by some of his Oxford colleagues, he finally wrote a book about this world. The book, published in 1937 with elaborate illustrations and maps by Tolkien himself, was called *The Hobbit*.

But, as Tolkien explains, once he had invented this world he could never quite finish with it. Middle-earth continued to grow in Tolkien's mind, and in 1956 he completed *The Lord of the Rings*, offering the admirers of *The Hobbit* a vastly expanded view of his unique creation.

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 not satisfied with merely reading, however; they proselytize, and their number steadily increases.

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.) At the Harvard Coop, the Tolkien books occupy an honored place next to the cash registers, where, like cigarettes, they are readily available in large quantities. But they are selling well in almost every college town in the country. "Somehow," says Ian Ballantine, publisher of one of the Tolkien paperback editions, "college kids have managed to get word to each other that this is the thing."

The Ballantine Books edition appeared in September, 1965, four months after that of its competitor, Ace Books, and within 10 months the two firms had sold more than a quarter of a million copies of the entire trilogy. This is a considerably faster sales rate than those of *A Separate Peace* or *The Catcher in the Rye*, other campus best sellers of recent years. In fact, it is a kind of explosion in the publishing world. The explosion is due mainly to the complete absence of any paperback edition of the Tolkien books for almost 10 years after Houghton Mifflin published the American hard-cover version in 1956; Tolkien's public had all this time to gather, like a crowd before the palace of a king, awaiting the bestowal of what they knew must come. By the end of 1965 almost every college student in the country had at least heard of *The Lord of the Rings*.

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 students 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 edition smelled great," one of them said recently)—tends to view the recent upsurge with a moderately patronizing eye, but none of them begrudges either the pleasure and excitement the books afford new readers or the enlarged income they have brought to Tolkien himself.

A constantly growing number of the Tolkien people (800 at last count) share their fanaticism as members of the Tolkien Society of America, which is devoted to the enjoyment and study of Tolkien and related subjects. Two magazines—one in California, one in New York—are published regularly in celebration of Tolkien's achievement.

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 tape a TV book-discussion show drove the show's directors into a mild frenzy with constant digressions about Tolkien. Two teachers of English at Minnesota's Mankato State College have announced a Tolkien Conference to be held there this October. At Reed College in Oregon a group of students has devoted several evenings to reading *The Hobbit*, word for word, over the college radio station. And at the recent meeting of the Tolkien Society a group called "Hobbits, Uninhobbed" gave a command performance, "featuring *The Orcs' Marching Song* and a couple of terrible voices," according to the meticulously edited *Tolkien Journal*. (Orcs are another breed of Tolkien creature.) This is more than mere enthusiasm; this is passion—uninhobbed, joyous passion.

Since the most dazzling quality of Tolkien's fantasy world is the abundance of its detail—the landscape and genealogy of Middle-earth are just as elaborate as the languages—one favorite activity of Tolkien fanatics is analyzing 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. Generally, however, the activity centers on indexes, dictionaries of the Elven languages, and translations of poems which appear in their original Elvish.

The books are essentially an adventure story, and this certainly accounts for part of the enthusiasm they generate. The adventure is founded on the well-known medieval convention of the quest, complete with hero (occasionally in armor), dragons of various sorts, treasure (or reward) at the end, and, although less important (the books are not very sexy), a smattering of fair ladies.

In *The Hobbit*, which is, according to the Tolkien people, a children's book—delightful, but not as sophisticated or profound as *The Lord of the Rings*—the quest involves traveling hundreds of miles to the Lonely Mountain and killing a fearsome dragon, Smaug, who smolders quietly in a subterranean lair, guarding his stolen treasure. 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 is persuaded to embark 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 comforts of his well-equipped hobbit hole, he struggles on through terrifying dark woods, encounters with huge spiders, battles with trolls and goblins—on to an enigmatic, hobbit sort of victory. (Bilbo does not actually kill the dragon himself; this job is left to a more heroic figure.)

Aside from being a vivid introduction to Middle-earth and its creatures, *The Hobbit* is significantly linked to *The Lord of the Rings* through an incident in Bilbo's travels: he flees at one point to an underground cave, the secret lurking place of a despicable creature called Gollum, who had sought refuge there long ago after murdering his brother for the possession of a beautiful ring. Bilbo discovers this ring in the cave, and it rescues him from Gollum by making him invisible.

At the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, however, we learn that the ring can do a great deal more than make men (or hobbits) invisible. Seventy-five years have passed, and the aging Bilbo (advised by the friendly wizard Gandalf) has reluctantly allowed his nephew, Frodo, to be the

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 (glimpsed

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 (some admittedly 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.

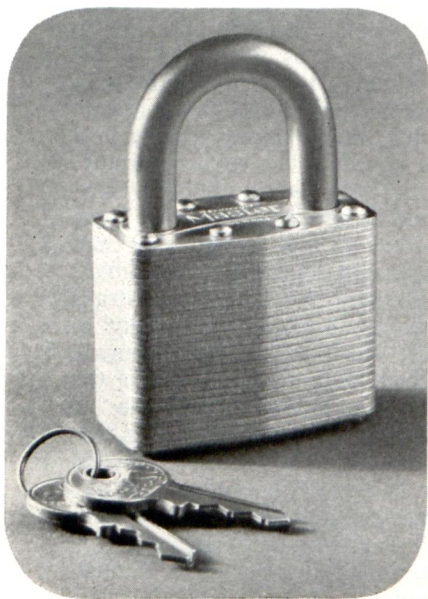
But none of the Tolkien people have observed an important quality in themselves which may explain the explosion better than any other single factor. The majority of them are unified not by a need to find ethics in a hopeless modern world or a desire for escape or a passion for myths and languages (although 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 unite 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-

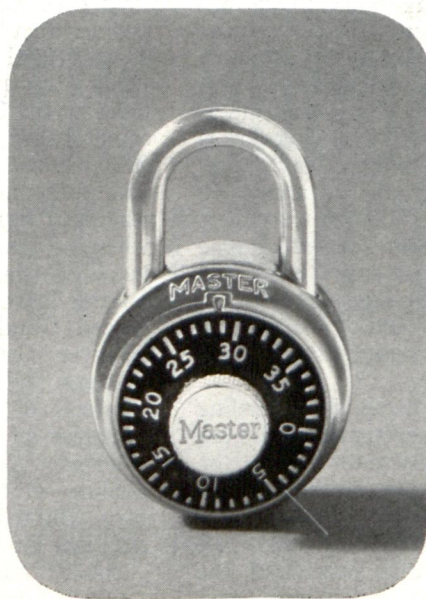
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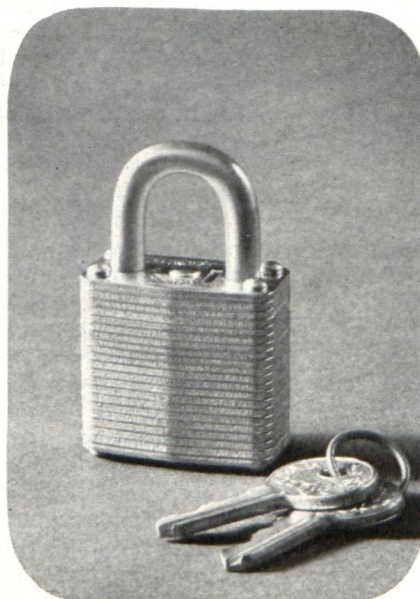
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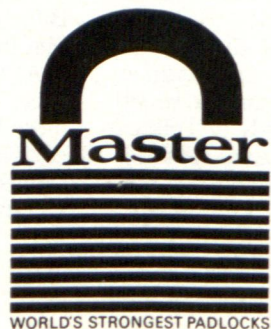
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WORLD'S STRONGEST PADLOCKS

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 was sufficiently hobbitlike to share his enthusiasm, and for a time Dick limited his proselytizing to leaving announcements that "Frodo lives" on blackboards, bulletin boards 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 understand 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 new poster "Bilbo Baggins 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-lore, learn Elvish. Frodo, 159 Marlborough, 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, *Entmoot*. (Translation: a gathering of ents; the oldest, wisest, and in many ways noblest of all Tolkien's creatures, they strongly resemble trees.)

Diana Paxson, a 23-year-old graduate student of the University of California at Berkeley, has found an outlet for her Tolkien enthusiasm in the *Elves, Gnomes and Little Men Science-Fiction and Fantasy Chowder and Marching Society*, a fandomish group centered in San Francisco. Last September Diana and a group of friends honored the mutual birthday of Bilbo and Frodo with a party, serving malt cider and "hobbit cookies." Diana

plans to spend two years as a Peace Corpsman teaching English in Ethiopia—"I'm attracted by its ancient civilization." In the university's recent Ugly Man Contest, Diana reports, Gollum placed eighth, "coming in ahead of Carol Doda, the famous 'top-less dancer.'"

Dave Wilson, who lives in Cambridge, Mass., and publishes *Broadside*, a coffeehouse-folk-music magazine, says: "The sort of people who take to Tolkien have some love for themselves and love for their fellowman. Anyone who likes the trilogy can't be all bad." One wall in Wilson's apartment is decorated with a drawing entitled "Disgruntled Dwarf Debating the Desirability of Entering Upon the Desolation of Smaug"; another displays a large, diamond-shaped construction of wood frames and colorful thread called a God's-eye. "It's a re-

strongest qualities.) And there is the golden-haired sylph of a girl at Radcliffe, who as a child played in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, imagining that she was in Middle-earth, whose friends were the trees ("I had other friends too"), and who used to read the books "on Friday nights before I went to bed so I could sort of draw it out and savor it over the weekend." Hobbits can be found in every major city and college town across the country; apparently the only thing one needs to look for is passionate devotion to *The Lord of the Rings*, and there one will also find the hobbit spirit.

The fount of this spirit is an outspoken, pipe-smoking father of four (the oldest is now 48, the youngest 36), who enjoys long hikes in the country and who tends to be excessively modest about his literary achievements. W. H. Auden has illustrated

At times, however, Tolkien becomes as bold and plucky as Frodo when confronted by the Shadow of Mordor. In Tolkien's case the Shadow is not Sauron but what he considers the cant and ignorance that have surrounded his creation. He has frequently voiced his contempt for the various scholarly theses about *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, considering most of them "rather vain efforts." (Tolkien approves of the alphabet-seekers and genealogists, on the other hand, finding their efforts part of a highly amusing game.) He also views with distaste the idea that he is some kind of antiquated medievalist, burying himself in a fantasy world because he finds the present so unbearable. "My opinion of current affairs is not as depressed as some people's," he says. "I should say I'm a bit frightened that the Greeks hadn't got something in the saying that those whom the gods wish to destroy they first drive mad. Our modern world is like the tower of Babel—wild noise and confusion. But I think that a little history cures you. Living at the end of the sixteenth century would have been just as bad, but there weren't so many people around." He grants that "certain things that were good, were beautiful, were more nourishing to the human person," have been sacrificed to machines. "But I don't think you can refuse knowledge; I don't think there's a way out."

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 chillier, more menacing landscapes of Middle-earth, and he makes no secret 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."

What place will the hobbit from Oxford be given in literary history? The distinguished American essayist Edmund Wilson maintains that the trilogy is no more than "an overgrown fairy story, a philological curiosity." In general, however, critics agree that *The Lord of the Rings* will outlast our time. "There are very few works of genius in recent literature," writes critic Michael Straight. "This is one."

A good many people still have not yet read *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, but the time cannot be far away when not having read it will be, in most literary and academic circles, tantamount to complete boorishness. Already the signs of such attitudes can be seen. At a cocktail party given recently in Greenwich Village a well-read woman in her late twenties exclaimed to a group of friends, "I saw a sign in the subway near N.Y.U. the other day—'Judy and Phil love J. R. R. Tolkien.' Now what do you suppose that means?" Her friends could only look on with deep sympathy. □

Hazel by Ted Key



"Hut-two-three-four! Hut-two-three-four! . . ."

ligious article of a native American church," Dave explains. "As long as the eye of God is on you, no harm can come to you."

Others who show signs of pure hobbit include Alexis Levitin, a graduate student in English at Columbia and publisher of a new literary magazine called *The Quest*. In his master's thesis on Tolkien Levitin stresses the deep Christian spirit of *The Lord of the Rings*. He talks volubly, sitting on the floor of his small living room, footnoting his observations with references to volumes quickly snatched from nearby shelves, pausing to think, then resuming the conversation with an explosive "but" or "and." His arms whirl windmill-fashion as he reaches for more books to prove his point, and there can be no doubt that Alexis Levitin is the fastest hobbit alive. (Speed is generally alien to hobbits, of course, but determination is one of their

this modesty in recalling that for years most of the people who knew Tolkien at Oxford had no idea he was writing about Middle-earth; finally the late C. S. Lewis, a noted novelist-philosopher-critic and one of Tolkien's closest friends, persuaded him to send *The Hobbit* to a publisher. Many Tolkien scholars suggest that without Lewis's constant prodding, *The Lord of the Rings* would never have reached print. Tolkien himself has called his books on Middle-earth merely a philological game (he has also denied that he called them anything of the kind), and he dismisses the possibility of their being a "classic," saying that the very idea of a living man writing a classic seems somehow wrong to him. He recently told an American friend that he is still working diligently away on the *Silmarillion*, his next book about Middle-earth, adding dourly, "if any of the *Silmarillion* is worth publishing."