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The
**MAGICAL
WORLDS**
OF THE
**LORD OF THE
RINGS**

*A Treasury of Myths, Legends
and Fascinating Facts*



DAVID COLBERT

THE MAGICAL WORLDS OF



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Legends and Fascinating Facts

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THE MAGICAL
WORLDS OF
THE LORD OF
THE RINGS

For
BRENDA KNIGHT
Galadriel
who thought of it

and for my editors
KIM WALTEMYER and AMANDA LI
who endured it

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INTRODUCTION

A FUNNY THING happened when the motion picture of *The Fellowship of the Ring* opened in December 2001. For years, while the three films of *The Lord of the Rings* ('LOTR' from now on) were being made, Tolkien fans worried that the books would be ruined. To tell the story in just a few hours, they said, favourite characters and scenes would be cut. Big ideas would be ignored. Only people who had not read the books would like the films.

But when *Fellowship* opened, the loudest clapping in the cinemas came from long-time fans. Along with the thrill ride of a great film, they understood many of the tale's deeper meanings. Knowing the story by heart, they filled in the gaps with their imagination.

Deeper meanings weren't obvious to the people who were new to Tolkien. They certainly liked the film; but many wondered why Tolkien fans make such a fuss about his brilliance. They didn't see any reason for the passionate debates that make Tolkien fans famous.

Their feelings are easy to understand. A computer graphic of a mountain can give a story a big setting, but it can't

explain big ideas like immortality and fate. It can't reveal how Tolkien draws names from forgotten languages, or characters from ancient legends.

Even close readers of *LOTR* struggle with those questions, because all sorts of strange sources inspired Tolkien. For instance, a single word from Anglo-Saxon – a language that hasn't been used for centuries – inspired him to write a long story about the early years of Middle-earth. (The word and its meaning are explained on page 143.) He also drew inspiration from legends told in faraway places, like the countryside of Finland. And he spent a lot of time making connections between the invented languages that are spoken in *LOTR*.

Tolkien had a big goal in mind when he looked into these ancient words and stories: He hoped to see the real events behind their first appearance. He thought that with enough digging, he might uncover an entire 'mythology' – one to rival the mythologies of cultures such as ancient Greece and Rome.

That's a lot for a reader to absorb. Still, with the right guide you can easily understand the many remarkable details in *LOTR*. That's the point of this book. It's written both for people who know the story and for those who have only seen the films. It doesn't assume you start with much knowledge; yet it takes you deep into Tolkien's world to tell the stories behind the stories. Throughout, you'll find Tolkien's own thoughts. Some are revealed in letters to friends and editors. Many, however, were explanations offered directly to readers, who began to write to Tolkien with questions within a few weeks of the first publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937. At the time, no one could have foreseen Tolkien's amazing worldwide

success. But even those early fans, casually picking up an unknown children's book, sensed that the story would be even more fascinating if they could find out something about the author and his ideas. You'll discover they were right.

Note: For those of you who haven't finished *LOTR*, or who are waiting for the final films, I've done my best to avoid 'spoilers' (statements revealing big surprises in the plot). A spoiler about the end of *LOTR* appears at the end of this book. You've been warned! – D.C.

THE AGES OF MIDDLE-EARTH

J.R.R. TOLKIEN CREATED a history for Middle-earth spanning thousands of years. His book *The Silmarillion* tells legends of the First Age, including how Arda (Earth) was created. In the Second Age, Elves make Rings of Power for the leaders of the Elves, Dwarves and humans; and Sauron forges the One Ring to rule the others. The One Ring is lost in the Third Age, and Tolkien's book *The Hobbit* tells the story of how Bilbo Baggins finds it. Shortly thereafter, the saga of *The Lord of the Rings* begins.

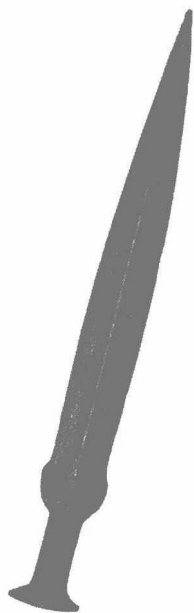
The Silmarillion, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are published in the UK by HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. Page numbers for *LOTR* refer to the 1994 one-volume edition.

WHY DID TOLKIEN MAKE BILBO DISAPPEAR?

Baggins,
Bilbo

AT THE START of *LOTR*, Bilbo Baggins puts on the Ring so he can disappear from his birthday party as if by magic. Soon after, it seems, he disappears from the story just as suddenly. We see him again only briefly, and when we do, we learn he has been spending his time reading old Elvish books and writing. If you haven't read *The Hobbit*, you might not realize he was quite an adventurer himself. The sword Sting, so deadly to Orcs, was his. He fought giant spiders and a dragon. In fact, none of the events of *LOTR* could have happened without him: He was the one who found the Ring in Gollum's cave.

So why isn't he the hero of *LOTR*? How did our beloved Frodo come into the story?



WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

Actually, in Tolkien's first attempt at *LOTR*, Bilbo *was* the main character. The story was going to be another Bilbo adventure, to satisfy readers of *The Hobbit*. The idea was that Bilbo had spent all his fortune from the first adventure and needed to look for more.

Eventually Tolkien decided the story would be more serious. But that created a problem. It didn't fit with Bilbo, who is often a fun-loving prankster. For instance, his speech at his birthday party in *LOTR* is filled with jokes. Then he leaves behind gifts with notes that tease his family and friends.

Had it been Bilbo's task to return the Ring, readers would have expected the same comic adventure they had enjoyed in *The Hobbit*. They would have been disappointed. So to create a new mood, Tolkien shifted Bilbo aside.

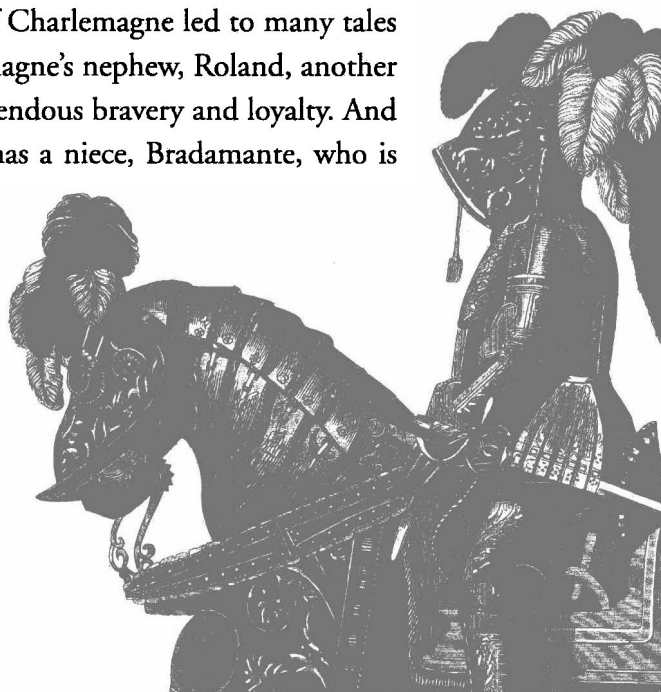
EXIT BILBO, STAGE LEFT

That's when Tolkien introduced a new character, Bilbo's son. But that didn't work perfectly, either. Why would Bilbo let his son face danger? How would Tolkien explain where the son is during *The Hobbit* – or, more difficult, Bilbo's wife?

Tolkien says *LOTR* is a translation of an ancient book that started as Bilbo's private diaries. He called this book the *Red Book of Westmarch* – similar to an important ancient book in our world. The Welsh legends of King Arthur and others are found in the *Red Book of Hergest*, written in the 1300s.

Tolkien eventually found the answer in legends. Both history and literature have many examples of important uncles and nephews. This goes back to early times, when custom required that uncles play the role of guardian, in case a father died early (as often happened then). In legends, these nephews often become as great or greater than their uncles, and inspire stories of their own. King Arthur's nephew is Sir Gawain, the shining example of what Arthur desires in Knights of the Round Table: honour, wisdom, loyalty and courtesy. The legends of Charlemagne led to many tales about Charlemagne's nephew, Roland, another knight of tremendous bravery and loyalty. And Charlemagne has a niece, Bradamante, who is

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is one of many Old English and Middle English poems Tolkien translated into modern English.



also a great knight. She rescues her beloved, Rogero, from a dark wizard. The hero of *Beowulf*, an Old English poem that was an important source for *LOTR*, is the nephew of a king. He slays monsters no one else can defeat, and becomes king himself.

These favourite stories gave Tolkien the explanation he needed. Bilbo's replacement became a younger cousin, with the official status of nephew and heir.

See also:

Baggins, Frodo

Beowulf

Gollum

It may have hurt Tolkien to retire Bilbo, but for the generation of fans who had already read *The Hobbit*, nothing less would have been convincing. It was time for a new hero. Enter Frodo.

