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J. R. R. Tolkien is one of the most beloved and enigmatic writers of the twentieth century, yet surprisingly little is known about the personal life of the author of *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. After a traumatic childhood, Tolkien experienced the bloody trenches of World War I, then lived most of his life as an Oxford scholar in a cloistered academic community. In this fascinating illustrated biography, author Daniel Grotta examines how much of Tolkien's personal experience fired his incredible imagination and led to the creation of Middle-earth and its inhabitants. This edition features full-color illustrations by the Brothers Hildebrandt, whose conceptions of Middle-earth and its denizens have brought Tolkien's life's work to vivid life for legions of fans around the world.

J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle Earth Details

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From Reader Review J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle Earth for online ebook

Tom Schulte says

I was reading this while waiting for my doctor to give a regular physical exam. He remarked that he had read it and recalled that it portrayed Tolkien a very Christian. Indeed, it does and thus neatly dovetails Tolkien with fellow Inklings, like C. S. Lewis.

However, this biography is much more than that. I especially like this 1975 work for clearly indicating how the master philologist needed to create The Hobbit and LOTR in order to flesh out the Elvish tongue. It was language and the handmade myth that truly compelled him.

"As Tolkien worked on Elvish, he discovered some very important principles that were later to lead him into writing both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. As he created his language, he realized that language presupposed a mythology. In his view, language developed from a desire to relate experience, and not merely to convey information. To tell the past is history; but explain the past, and to make it meaningful to the present, is mythology. Suddenly, Tolkien realized that Elvish was useless as a language unless it too had a mythology, or a meaningful history to explain its origin and justify its existence."

Thus, this mytho-philological imperative led to the development of Middle-earth's people, stories, and sorrows. He constructed his myths to fully invent the Elvish language.

Also, definitely, the author makes convincing arguments that Tolkien's youth and moving from South Africa to a transforming Sarehole in England had much more to do with the birth of The Hobbit and LOTR than WWI or even WWII. Also, I had no idea "dwarves" was a thoroughly defended misspelling.

This book gives such detail on England in South Africa (Orange Free State), Oxford and English university history and systems as well as copyright laws between England and America that the book has very much a microhistory feel, making it feel modern like it belong on the shelf next to Mark Kurlansky, etc.

East Bay J says

I found this book in a pile of free stuff while walking around my neighborhood. Published in 1976, three years after Tolkien's death, this bio was written without the support of the family. This means Grotta did not have access to Tolkien's papers, which was quite in keeping with Tolkien's dislike of bios. That being understood, this is a nice little summary of Tolkien's life, light on details but you get the gist. The degree of the reader's interest in the subject matter will likely determine the level of enjoyment. Grotta touches on some analysis of Tolkien's writing, possibly informed by Randal Hemls 1974 study, *Tolkien's World*. This is more like a well researched fan bio than a proper biography but not a bad read. No pictures (Booooo!) but the Hildebrandt painting of Tolkien bullshitting with a dwarf is priceless.

Josep Marti says

A decent book, but I can't understand why the author would publish it if the family told him not to. Well, I

can (\$\$\$), but it's not very nice at all. A good read though!

Crazy Uncle Ryan says

I really enjoyed reading this book. I have been a fan of Tolkien's writings for years but after reading this I have become just as much a fan of Tolkien himself. He was a fascinating man with a very interesting life.

Chris Kelly says

I wanted to enjoy this book.

I did not.

My gripes with this book can be split into two types - issues with content and issues with editing.

In terms of content, the author seems to have a strange and inconsistent view of Tolkien. He is described as being "lazy" in one chapter and shown to be a diligent and hard worker in another. He is noted as being both indifferent to criticism and as being incensed by criticism at various points. I have learned since finishing that the author had published this book without the help, and indeed, against the explicit wishes of, the Tolkien family (there is one point in the book where the author laments about having been blacklisted by Tolkien's friends who, he says, were forbidden to talk to him by the Tolkien family). I wonder how much of the book is factual and how much was hearsay evidence collected from tertiary sources. I also wonder just how familiar the author was with Tolkien's work as he makes a number of errors regarding the people and places of Middle Earth (eg: mistaking Moria for Mordor, using Numenor and Dunedain interchangeably, etc).

In terms of editing, the book fails on numerous occasions. There are typos and grammatical errors abound. Many of the footnotes do not match up with the text (for example, one page has three marked notes in the body of the text, but has only two footnotes at the bottom of the page). On at least one occasion, the book refers to a quote that is actually included on the wrong page; the quote itself is pasted into the middle of a paragraph which has nothing to do with it. Most egregious are the large blank spaces throughout the book that are noted as "left blank due to legal considerations". I'm not sure how any of this was able to get past an editor (was there even an editor?).

There are better (authorized!) biographies of Tolkien out there. Go read one of those instead.

Alison says

In my opinion, one of the most important qualities a biography can have is to be written by a biographer that admires their subject but is still aware and unafraid of the subject's faults. It gives the book balance and makes the story feel like a more complete picture, and this book has that quality. Biographies that are all praise or all fingerpointing are never fun to read. Of course, I read about people like Tolkien and Curie, so, you know, not exactly controversial figures in the first place. Anyway, this book does provide that balance and I enjoyed reading it very much both on the subject matter and the writing. I was expecting it to be a little hard to read because it was written in the 70s, but that is not so. If you enjoy Tolkien's books, this is a good source for further research about his life.

Peter says

Freelance Journalist Daniel Grotta's 1991 edition with pictures by Greg and Tim Hildebrandt, of Grotta's biography of J.R.R. Tolkien, is worth reading if a reader finds Tolkien, The Hobbit, and the Lord of Rings interesting. Grotta does not really gear his biography for readers who have not read Tolkien's works, so a person will probably only be interested in this biography if they have read The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. One item of note: when Grotta first was researching J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle Earth, in 1975, a feud developed between Grotta and one of Tolkien's sons, Christopher Tolkien, who manages J.R.R. Tolkien's estate. Christopher tried to stop the Grotta's biography being published because Christopher had authorized the biographer Humphrey Carpenter to write the authorized biography of Tolkien. Grotta claims that he wrote his biography of Tolkien to show "how Tolkien's personal life related to his magical, almost miraculous transformation of imagination into literature." This statement of Grotta combined with the feelings of the Goodreads reviewer, Josep Marti is probably right that Grotta wrote the biography over Christopher's wishes to make money as the first published biography of Tolkien. That being said Grotta's biography of Tolkien is well done and more readable than I thought the book would be. I understand why Christopher was angry with Grotta, but Tolkien, as portrayed by Grotta, has no "skeletons in his closet" and Tolkien comes across mostly as he once described himself as "a hobbit in all but size."

Antoine says

Like many Tolkien fans of the seventies, Grotta wanted Tolkien-the-man to be some sort of flower child, and had difficulty understanding or sympathizing with the deeply conservative, Roman Catholic philologist that JRRRT actually was. The result, and that the fact that Grotta seems more interested in making a buck than doing his homework, makes for lousy biography.

X says

Why did I not get the edition with pictures? I think that would have helped my rating a lot. Much of the information is common Tolkienite knowledge now, but it probably was not when the book was written. Unfortunately, it is an "unofficial" biography, written not only without the consent of the Tolkien family, but against their express wishes that it not be written, and I think a lot the the information is guesswork and conjecture.

Lynn Joshua says

I was not impressed with this book. The author makes a lot of mistakes in describing the LOTR and Hobbit books. He confuses Mordor and Moria. He also seems to give the impression that Tolkien was lazy. I don't know how someone who was a respected and brilliant professor of languages at Oxford, created a whole world with several different languages and histories and wrote best selling books while caring for a wife with ill health and 4 children can have time to be lazy... !

The author was denied access to family papers from the Tolkien estate, as they had given the biographical

rights to someone else. You can tell he holds a grudge against the Tolkien estate for this, and you can tell he especially dislikes Christopher Tolkien.

The only part I really enjoyed was the description of life at Oxford during the Inklings era.

Laurie says

I checked this gorgeously illustrated volume out from the library and then it promptly got buried until today when I saw it was due and had been renewed the max number of times. I spent an hour skim reading the second half and found it to be a well-written, interesting and insightful look at Tolkien's life and the creation of his masterpiece.

Bethany Phillips says

This is an enjoyable read. I liked learning about the person who created Middle-Earth. He is one of my favorite authors.

It was neat that to learn how JRR Tolkien grew up and how he was a soldier in the first world war and I really enjoyed learning about him.

I liked how we got to see how he started to create the world of Middle-Earth and how the history of middle earth came to be.

It was neat to learn about a favorite author and it made me wish that I could have meet him. It was a really fun read.

Nicholas Whyte says

[http://nhw.livejournal.com/1030238.html#cutid2\[return\]\[return\]](http://nhw.livejournal.com/1030238.html#cutid2[return][return])It is two-thirds the length of Carpenter's book, and one third the quality. Grotta admits rather grumpily (indeed, perhaps even peevishly!) that he was not given much access by the Tolkien family, but is gracious enough to recommend that the interested reader should get Carpenter's book as well - I doubt if Carpenter would have or indeed should have returned the compliment! For the non-British reader he offers perhaps a bit more external perspective on what England was like in the early twentieth century, and he has more of the detail on the Ace vs Ballantyne affair, but he makes several annoying errors of detail which make it difficult to really trust the rest of his findings. Also the book is irritatingly repetitive in places. I would hesitate even to recommend it for the completist.

Apryl Anderson says

(27.12.1993), I really enjoyed this biography. Here's the story of a genius who knew the importance of the simplicity of a good story. His pretense was that language is created in order to really its own creation myth. And following that concept, he created the myth to support his own Elfin language.

Also found the ideas concerning the need for fantasy very relevant.

“After establishing the need for and the appeal in our society, Tolkien preceded to analyze in detail just how successful fantasy allows the reader to voluntarily suspend disbelief (to paraphrase Coleridge;s formula) and thereby accept fantasy as something ‘real’. Tolkien appreciated* that an important rule in the creation of fantasy is that a writer should use these things in the real (or primary) world with which he is most familiar. In fact, fantasy is made form components of the real world, and must therefore be consistent with itself, and in agreement with natural law (and by deduction, God’s world.) Such a world or universe cannot make a mockery of our senses and sensibilities, and though it may introduce such obviously impossible ideas as one-eyed giants or invisible elves, there must be logic and consistency even in the absurd.”

Interesting concept.

Also, there was a very fine line between allegory and a pure tale. How can one avoid allegory when he delves into Good & Evil? If the emotional scars resulting from a WWI battlefield are no premonition of Armagedon, then who is more capable of describing the Last War?

Abby Lang says

I loved this book. It had a good description on a great author’s life. It began at the beginning of Tolkien's life and ending at his death. It was very interesting to learn about all of the struggles he had to go through to become a famous author and how he overcame those struggles. I would recommend it to anyone who is interested in J.R.R. Tolkien’s life and how he was the “Architect of Middle-Earth”.
