

P O P U L A R C U L T U R E

Lord of the Rings

Hobbits & elves & wizards—oh my!

BY DUNCAN H. BROWN



The first book of the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, introduces the main characters—including the seven-foot mercurial wizard Gandalf, above (played by Ian McKellan)—and propels them into a quest.

ON DECEMBER 19, WHEN 10,000 screens around the world light up with the premiere of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, moviegoers will be able to see the first of three live-action adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. Judging from the movie's website, www.lordoftherings.net, loving attention has been paid to the books, and it looks like the movie will do justice to Tolkien's phenomenally successful fantasies, which have sold over 100 million copies since their publication in 1954-55.

John Ronald Revel Tolkien (1892-1973) was a university professor of medieval studies and English literature in England. For *The Hobbit* (1938) and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Tolkien created an entire world, Middle Earth, and sketched out maps of its geography. He populated Middle Earth with an amazing variety of peoples and proceeded to develop languages for each of them, along with detailed histories ranging back thousands of years. With this framework, he wrote a heroic tale that captures the character of Middle Earth.

The invented languages and histories are interesting in themselves, but the most fascinating part of Tolkien's world are the unique peoples he imagined. Far from creating the stock characters common to fairy stories, Tolkien invests the elves, dwarves, trolls, wizards, and hobbits with realistic and believable characteristics, making them memorable individuals.

Short and tough, dwarves are the stone-hewers, craftspeople, and metalworkers of Middle Earth. Though long-lived, they are mortal. Elves are the elder race, people of starlight and song and memory, and their memories are long indeed, since they are immortal. Men in Tolkien's stories are recognizably men, though medieval in a culture rich with kings and knights and peasants. Hobbits are short, like dwarves, but are more man-like in appearance. They love comfort, good food and drink, and a warm fire on a cold night. One of their chief delights is the elaborate birthday parties they throw for each other. They simply want to be left alone to live their lives in peace.

Separated by the vast distances of Mid-

dle Earth, these peoples each live in their own lands and have grown apart with the passage of time. Once the dominant people, the elves have retreated into a few strongholds where they relive their memories in songs. The dwindling dwarves work in their lands at their mines and forges. Men, growing in numbers, pursue agriculture and farming. Hobbits mind their own gardens in their out-of-the-way land, the Shire. Some interchange occurs between the different peoples, but it is mostly limited to trade carried on at the borders of the various lands.

Unfortunately, an evil power dwells in Middle Earth: Sauron, the Dark Lord, a sort of spirit filled with malice toward all things and all creatures that roam free under the sun. Sauron lives in the benighted land of Mordor, and such is his power and influence that his schemes and

wars threaten to overwhelm all of the free peoples of Middle Earth.

Sauron has his own evil and twisted servants, called orcs. Orcs are a menace to all the other peoples: they are in constant armed conflict with them in ambushes, attacks, and wars. Sauron also uses men whom he has tricked or cowed into submission and loyalty. Nothing less than ruling all of Middle Earth will satisfy Sauron.

The final element in this world is magic, wielded both by Sauron (the dark variety, of course) and by wizards, good magicians who labor on the side of light and freedom. Tolkien, however, gives his characters freedom of choice: a wizard, man, dwarf, elf, or hobbit can give their service to Sauron instead of the good guys.

Tolkien depicts Middle Earth as a place of great beauty, and delights in pouring a wealth of description into a walk through a

wood, along a brook, or up a mountain-side. I believe Tolkien channeled his deep affection for his native English countryside into the detailed, loving descriptions of the various places in Middle Earth.

The Lord of the Rings centers around a quest. Thousands of years ago, Sauron, before he was known to be evil, worked with elven smiths to forge magical Rings of Power. But Sauron betrayed them, forging his own Ring of Power, the One Ring, into which he poured much of his native strength so that it could rule all the other rings, thus allowing him to take over Middle Earth and all its peoples. The tale of how Sauron lost the One Ring is an epic in itself: a great war was fought against Sauron by an alliance of men and elves, and Sauron was finally overthrown, though at great cost. Unfortunately, his One Ring was not destroyed and thereby Sauron continued to exist.

Countless years later, the ring reappears. Sauron learns of it and sends his terrible servants to reclaim it. It seems the One Ring has found its way to the Shire, home of the hobbits. Tolkien tells the story of the hobbit Frodo Baggins, who inherits the One Ring from his older cousin, Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo found the ring on a quest of his own as described in Tolkien's diverting children's story, *The Hobbit*. (*The Lord of the Rings* is written for adults, though children will also enjoy it if they are old enough to distinguish fantasy from reality.) Frodo must flee the familiar comforts of the Shire to escape Sauron's minions, and eventually must attempt to bring the One Ring all the way to the land of Mordor in order to destroy it.

Along the way he meets friends and enemies and strange creatures, and experiences wonderful and terrible events. Tolkien is such a good storyteller that by the time I finished the 1,400 pages of the three books (including extensive appendices on the languages, histories, and customs of the peoples of Middle Earth), I began to regret that *The Lord of the Rings* was so short. For me, that's a good way to tell just how well an author has succeeded at his or her craft. □

Duncan Brown can be reached at dhbrown@iowatelecom.net.