

# THE WESTMARCH CHRONICLE

The newsletter of the Tolkien Fellowships of Southern California, discussion groups devoted to the enjoyment and study of the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien. This newsletter is written and published by Bernie Zuber, 2214 Oakwood St., Pasadena, CA 91104, (213) 791-1432. Subscription is \$2.50 per year. Please make checks payable to Bernie Zuber. Illustration on pg. 1 copyright © 1977 by Susan Schulman. Text copyright © 1977 by Bernie Zuber.

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 8

NOVEMBER 1977



BEREN AND LUTHIEN

## The Silmarillion

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

During the October meetings I asked the members of Bywater and Westmarch for their first impressions of *The Silmarillion*. Here are some of their responses.

**Charles Curley:** It's not a novel like *The Lord of the Rings*. This is the Bullfinch of Middle-earth...several thousand years of mythology, and it's meant to be read that way. I think it's also meant to be read aloud. There's a lot of material in there. I'd like to film "Of Beren and Luthien." There are several other stories in there that could be filmed. One of the things I found absolutely fascinating is the fact that Tolkien was a Roman Catholic, and the idea of Hell and damnation is very important in Catholicism, yet there is no Hell in Tolkien's mythology. Morgoth is kicked out into the void, but there is no pain or eternal damnation.

**Maurice Daigle:** My favorite part of *The Silmarillion* is the scene in which Ungoliant poisons the Two Trees. I think the Trees of Valinor can be compared to the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden.

**Joe de Blois:** From the few pages I have read so far I find *The Silmarillion* more believable than *The Lord of the Rings*. From the beginning *The Silmarillion* throws you right into the middle

of everything. You're not even given any space to doubt that this is gospel. There's no room to think that this isn't the way it happened.

Rick de Blois: It reminded me of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, only it was a lot more interesting. My favorite sections were "The Akallabeth" and the last section about the Third Age.

Doug Garfinkel: I waited nine years and my expectation was that it wouldn't be as good as *The Lord of the Rings*. But I enjoyed it more. It delved deeper. To me, Tolkien was getting at the basic spiritual background of mankind. Certainly the Bible and all the mythologies arise out of mankind's background and the mythic element in human thought. *The Silmarillion* really got to the heart of that. As a person who enjoys music a lot I loved the way the creation was carried out. Music can convey so much emotion. The idea that you can take a theme of music and, out of that theme, see what it was the Ainur wanted, see what they intended to create, was particularly interesting. I found the archaic style of Tolkien's writing occasionally annoying, but, on the other hand, without that archaic structure you wouldn't have the same sense of mythology. I saw more of an influence from the Bible on *The Silmarillion* than from anything else.

Rick Israel: *The Silmarillion* more than met my expectations. In some ways I find it more interesting than *The Lord of the Rings*. It's deeper, with more overall significance. I did not find the style of writing difficult. Tolkien spent a lot of time choosing his words. You can see that as you read it. *The Silmarillion* was written in a style that appears to have been originally oral and then written down. The Bible and mythologies were supposedly that way too.

Mike Koehler: It's completely different from *The Lord of the Rings* but I wasn't disappointed because I didn't expect it to be the same. It's comparable to mythology and also to the myths of H.P. Lovecraft. My favorite section is the creation of Middle-earth.

Bruce MacRae: I went through it with my mouth hanging open. "Wow! Far out!" It was so neat the way Tolkien set the universe together. The tale of Beren and Luthien left me entranced. That was the most moving chapter of anything I've read by Tolkien. My only criticisms are that the book is too short and that I constantly had to have my hand in the index of names.

Jim Raives: *The Silmarillion* changed my opinion of men and elves. The men were raised up as better people, but the elves were lowered because they killed each other. My favorite section was "Of Turin Turambar". Turin was a wanderer, a sort of evil type on the side of good.

Mark Sellin: I found the section about the Valar, where we got to know their personalities and what they did, most interesting. I particularly liked the part about Aule creating the dwarves. I enjoyed the book up to the point where the elves finish their great journey, but it went downhill from there. The wars of the elves were boring and drawn out. I would read them again only as a reference to *The Lord of the Rings*. The book picked up again with the "Akallabeth" and the section about the Third Age. I preferred the parts with less detail.

Mike Urban: "Ha, ha! So that's the way it works!" was my reaction to the origin of the elves and the dwarves and to the linguistic material. We got the tale of Beren, which everybody had been waiting for, and we also got the tale of Turin, which nobody had been waiting for. The use of music in the creation of Middle-earth was particularly appropriate. Music is structured but emotional. It has a number of marvelous qualities, such as harmony, that make it ideal. I would rather have seen more verse, especially in the tale of Turin, since the short specimen of verse from that tale included in the Tolkien biography seems to be some of his best. Perhaps the reason there isn't more poetry in *The Silmarillion* is because the poetry was the earliest thing Tolkien wrote and the stories had changed since then. Christopher probably didn't want to have to doctor poetry. I was somewhat disappointed in Christopher's introduction. Instead of referring to his father's manuscript he should have said that any inconsistencies were due to the many writers who worked on the Red Book of Westmarch.

To these impressions I'd like to add a few of my own. I think one of the greatest things about *The Silmarillion* is the beautiful imagery, especially in the opening sections, and, as an artist I feel quite inspired. The scenes with Iluvatar and the Ainur made me think of illustrations by William Blake. As far as the mythic element is concerned, I agree with Doug Garfinkel that Tolkien managed to touch a very ancient basic source. I would like to read more comments on that from Tolkien fans and scholars. The section that most reminded me of the Bible was "The Akallabeth." Ar-Pharazon reminded me of Herod, and the tombs of the Numenoreans were obviously like the Egyptian pyramids. At times I wish Tolkien had been more original and less derivative, and yet his description of the creation of Middle-earth is so refreshing and inspired that I wonder if his mythology isn't closer to the way things really did happen. I was just as glad that there wasn't much poetry because I prefer prose, but the archaic style did make some of it harder to read. I think William Morris's archaic style flowed better.

If you wish to share your first impressions of *The Silmarillion*, or if you have any disagreement with the opinions expressed in this issue, please feel free to write to me. If I get enough letters I will try to publish some of them in future issues of this newsletter.



## A REVIEW OF THE REVIEWS



Instead of writing my own review of *The Silmarillion* I thought it would be more interesting to review what reviewers in the press have written about it.

The first review that came to my attention was a short one in the September 21 issue of *The Christian Science Monitor*, under the title "Tolkien's *Silmarillion* Tests Fans." After a brief summary of the book's contents the reviewer says that "its language and imagery are often beautiful...written in the heroic style of legend and ancient tale, very unlike the easy-flowing conversational style of the *Hobbit* books." He warns readers that they will have to make frequent reference to the index. I certainly can't disagree with that. After expressing the opinion that Tolkien's works would not be widely known if it weren't for the endearing human qualities of the hobbits, missing from the elves and men of *The Silmarillion*, the reviewer concludes with: "Should *The Silmarillion* have been published at all? Yes, indeed, it should, for this posthumous book gives us insight into the extraordinary world of fantasy and the rhythm of words which permeated Tolkien's life." This seems to me a fair appraisal of *The Silmarillion*.

A briefer review in the October issue of *Atlantic Monthly* claims that *The Silmarillion* is of scholarly interest but that it will be a disappointment to many of Tolkien's admirers. The reviewer states that *The Silmarillion* has neither the charm of *The Hobbit* nor the magic of *Lord of the Rings*. This kind of comparison to Tolkien's other books was to be expected from reviewers who have only a cursory knowledge of Tolkien, but I disagree with this reviewer's closing statement that "most people prefer their fantasy a bit frothier than this."

An even briefer review in the October issue of *Bookviews* is, at least, more positive.. Christopher Tolkien is given credit for performing a difficult service exceedingly well. The review concludes with: "All the writing throughout is as rich and resonant as that in *The Lord of the Rings* and should not be missed by Tolkien lovers."

The October issue of *The New Republic* has a two-page review by L.J. Davis, a critic and novelist, author of *Walking Small*. Davis, who describes himself as someone easily foiled by the cap on a medicine bottle, and who would have to sit down if someone pointed a sword at him, felt more at ease with the hobbits than he ever did with valiant knights. He also liked the coherence of Tolkien's Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings* and the fact that the legends of earlier ages were only hinted at in the appendices. When the first ages were fully revealed in *The Silmarillion* Davis felt let down. "There is no sense of immediacy about it," he writes, "and still less mystery. All the characters are 37 feet tall and live for a million years...if things get out of hand, Daddy in the form of Eru-Iluvatar will put down his pipe and lend an omnipotent hand." He describes *The Silmarillion* as a cross between the writings of Joseph Smith (*The Book of Mormon*) and L. Ron Hubbard (Scientology) as conceived by S.J. Perleman. I don't know exactly what he means by that, but at least his tongue-in-cheek summary of *The Silmarillion* could make him a candidate to write something like *Bored of the Rings* (*The Sillymarillion?*). The review is accompanied by an absolutely puzzling illustration by someone called Salvador Bru. The only connection to Tolkien seems to be the elvish lettering in the caption, which I have not yet attempted to translate. The illustration shows twelve connected light flares floating in the sky while small men (?) fight some flying creatures resembling H.G. Wells' Martians. This is the kind of thing magazine illustrators used to do in the 60s when they made no effort to even open *The Lord of the Rings*.

The staff reviewers of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines, the ones who usually bring you cute statements about "sci fi", gave *The Silmarillion* superficial reviews. In the October 27 issue of *Time* the reviewer managed this muddled bit of misinterpretation: "Now Morgoth whispered in the ear of Fëanor, to trouble him further. Together they came to Valinor and Morgoth pierced the two sacred trees with his spear and Ungoliant drank their light's blood from out of them..." The flying dragons of Morgoth are described as "antique cruise missiles." As could be expected, the reviewer complains about the lack of hobbits "with their lame jokes and sheer joy in comradeship." Any reviewer who uses the word "fustian" to describe *The Silmarillion* should be scolded for being fustian himself. I had to look up the word. It means pretentious. But, in his conclusion, the



## NOVEMBER SCHEDULE

BYWATER: Friday November 11, 8:30 p.m., at the home of Ron Waters, 1090 El Camino, Costa Mesa, (714) 546-4076. Topic: "The Valar compared to the Archangels of Christianity and to the Gods of various mythologies."

THE UCLA CAMPUS TOLKIEN FELLOWSHIP presents THE MIDDLE-EARTH MODEL UNITED NATIONS.

Saturday November 19, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Room 1220, Knudsen Hall, UCLA. Two topics will be discussed: "The Question of Moria" and "The Treatment of Captives Taken in War." This unusual approach to Tolkien's Middle-earth is being prepared by Doug Garfinkel and Rick Israel, both members of Westmarch. For further information contact Doug at (213) 887-6098, or Rick at (213) 347-8330.

WESTMARCH: Sunday November 27, 8 p.m., at the home of Jim Raives, 4753 Corbin Ave., Tarzana, (213) 996-3283. This is the evening that the Rankin/Bass animated version of *The Hobbit* will be shown, so we will gather at Jim's and brace ourselves. As far as I know, the show starts at 8 p.m., so it might be wise to arrive well before. If there is any change in the NBC-TV schedule call Jim. Call him also for directions. His street can be reached by getting off the Ventura freeway at Tampa, then taking Tampa past Ventura Blvd. to Wells Dr., then right on Wells to Corbin. But there is an island in the middle of Corbin which could prove confusing, so please call Jim for more precise directions.

A new group called The Istari has been formed in Santa Ana to discuss Tolkien's works. Many activities are planned, including a costume party and a Middle-earth pot-luck dinner. For more information call Kurt Rice at (714) 537-5499.

I have met Kurt Rice, who organized this group, and I am looking forward to more contact with The Istari in the near future.

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Time reviewer admits that Tolkien's mythology can be majestic and overwhelm the reader.

The review in *Newsweek*, October 24, entitled "Fool's Gold", is more unfavorable. Obviously unaware of the type of reaction I got from members of the Fellowships, the reviewer claims that Tolkien fanatics may be very disappointed. She may be right in saying there is no humor in *The Silmarillion*, but I strongly disagree with her contention that it is "utterly devoid of vivid imagery." The reviewer emphasizes the fact that *The Silmarillion* is well on its way to becoming a top best seller, but she closes her review with: "Tolkien's British publisher reports that the book is also selling well in England and suggests that there has been nothing like it...since the revised edition of the Bible came out in the 1950s. I hope there shall be nothing like it again."

In my opinion, the most comprehensive review is the one by Robert Kirsch in the Book Review section of the Sunday *Los Angeles Times*, October 16. Kirsch did his homework. Not only did he read *The Silmarillion* he also read the references to it in the Tolkien biography by Humphrey Carpenter. I have found the information in the biography invaluable in understanding the creative process that shaped *The Silmarillion*. I think it was very wise of the publishers to release the biography just before *The Silmarillion*. Because he made good use of this source Kirsch is well ahead of other less-informed reviewers. After also giving deserved credit to Christopher for shaping his father's notes into a coherent book, Kirsch states: "There are those who will thrill to this epic work of the imagination, written (sung is a better verb) in a haunting poetic language, echoing the dawn and hauntings of our own world." Kirsch never became involved with the etymology or the genealogy in Tolkien's books, nor did he follow the campus cult of the 60s. But Tolkien's works appealed to him in the same way as the Arthurian legends, and he admits being deeply moved by *The Silmarillion*. Kirsch is perceptive enough to realize what Tolkien meant about man as a subcreator. He does not let the elements that upset the other reviewers detract from his understanding of Tolkien's myth.

Since starting this issue I have read two more reviews, one in the *New York Times* Book Review and the other in *Harper's*, but I have no room or time left for them. Perhaps I will be able to fit them into next month's issue.

HAPPY THANKSGIVING!  
Bernie Zuber