

Why We Should Care About *The Children of Hurin*

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The One Ring Celebration, Burbank, March 11, 2007

I. Introduction

A. News Item: *The Australian*, 9/25/06, Maurice Chittenden

A DARKNESS is once again descending on JRR Tolkien's fabled land of Middle Earth. An unfinished work completed by the writer's son is such a departure from the world of hobbits it may merit an X-rating. Christopher Tolkien has spent the past 30 years working on the epic tale that his father began in 1918 while on army leave. JRR, who was recovering from trench fever contracted during the battle of the Somme, later abandoned the work. Its publication 90 years on follows the success of *The Lord of the Rings*, which has sold more than 50 million copies and was adapted into a trilogy of Oscar-winning films directed by Peter Jackson. The "new" work does not include characters such as the elves Arwen and Legolas. It is much darker and is based on the *Kalevala*, an epic poem from Finland.

Tolkien, who died at 81 in 1973, took the tale and weaved his own story around it. *The Children of Hurin* will tell the story of the family of an elf warrior taken prisoner by Morgoth, the first Dark Lord, held responsible for torturing elves and producing the first orcs, a race of evil goblins. Hurin, the elf warrior, is given powers by Morgoth to foresee what will happen to his children. "Death you may yet crave from me as a boon," Morgoth tells him. ... One Tolkien expert, William Ferguson, said last weekend: "Turin makes folks like Othello and Hamlet and Oedipus look like lucky devils." Other Tolkien experts welcomed its forthcoming publication. Dorothy Heydt, a writer of fantasy and science fiction, said: "Turin had more grief in his life than anybody ought to." ... Adam Tolkien, son of Christopher, said: "The book will be the equivalent of a director's cut of a DVD, except in this case the director is deceased. "It is a very educated work. My father has been working on these stories for 30 years." ... Christopher Tolkien is now 81 and *The Children of Hurin* may be the last "new" book under the JRR Tolkien name. Writers' literary estates lose their entitlement to copyright income 70 years after their death.

B. Who I Am

1. A Tolkien fan
2. A "scholar," academic, and teacher

II. The Big and Little Pictures

A. *The Silmarillion*

1. Synopsis
2. *Tolkienestate.com*: Three « Great Tales » were to be of most considerable importance to J.R.R. Tolkien in his creation of Middle-earth : *Beren & Lúthien*, *The Fall of Gondolin*, and *The Children of*

Húrin. As was to be expected, these tales exist in many unfinished and heavily reworked forms. As a culmination of thirty years' work on his father's papers, and having already published such fragmentary and condensed forms of the tale of Túrin as part of the development of « The History of Middle-earth », Christopher Tolkien has now succeeded in assembling the multiple variants, unfinished pieces, and outlines of the tale to produce a standalone and complete version, entirely in the author's original words. The work therefore is accessible both as a new and complete version of the text for the Tolkien scholar, and as an entirely new tale from Middle-earth for the Tolkien reader who is not familiar with the great tales and mythology that are the roots of « The Lord of the Rings ».

« The Children of Húrin » takes the reader back to a time long before «The Lord of the Rings», in an area of Middle-earth that was to be drowned before ever Hobbits appeared, and when the great enemy was still the fallen Vala, Morgoth, and Sauron only his lieutenant. This heroic romance is the tale of the Man, Húrin, who dared to defy Morgoth's force of evil, and his family's tragic destiny, as it follows his son Túrin Turambar's travails through the lost world of Beleriand.

B. *The History of Middle-earth*

1. 12 Volumes
2. Tedious Academic Detail, Variant Texts: *Unfinished Tales* p. 3
3. Not the Reader's Digest Condensed Version
4. Brilliant Fragments, Even Complete Tales and Manuscripts

C. "Narn i Hin Hurin" in *Unfinished Tales*

1. "Of Turin Turambar" in *The Silmarillion* vs. Narn: *Unfinished Tales*, p. 5-6
2. The Nature of Narn: *Unfinished Tales*, p. 146
3. Recap: Why "Hurin" and not "Turin"?
 - a) About the Curse, the "Sins" of the Father, and the power of evil: *Unfinished Tales*, p. 66
 - b) Hurin's Tale Continues

III. Fielding the Potential Objections

A. "What Do You Mean, 'A New Book by JRRT'?"

1. Alejandro Serrano, *FantasyMundo.com*: Adam Tolkien's Words

As you know, versions and pieces of the story of Hurin and his descendants have been published in various works (Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales, Lost Tales, Lays of Beleriand, etc). The text of "The Children of Hurin" is in part compiled from these extant texts, and particularly that which appears in Unfinished Tales. But it is a new reworking of the complete story. Many parts of the text will be - if not identical - recognizable to the knowledgeable reader, but there are also pieces that have never appeared before. Also the format of the text, as a standalone and complete text with no editorial commentary to interrupt the tale should in itself and in my opinion considerably transform the reading experience.

Christopher Tolkien believes there may be many readers who have found the Silmarillion too difficult and distanced in style to be attracted to the story, and who have not wished to make their way through the painstaking editorial content that makes for the main interest of the History of Middle Earth. We hope that these readers will be sufficiently attracted to "The Children of Hurin", and will discover in this way the "great tale" that was so important to JRR Tolkien and then the whole fascinating mythology that lies behind "The Lord of The Rings".

The text as a whole can be said to be "new" as it is a recomposition of published texts and other "pieces" that weren't published previously. A completed puzzle, in a sense. But the fact is that the text of "The Children of Hurin" is entirely in the author's (So J.R.R. Tolkien) words - apart from very minor reworkings of a grammatical and stylistic nature. Christopher's work has been to produce a polished text that is a faithful rendition of his father's writings - using many sources spaced out over decades.

2. *The Guardian Unlimited*

The announcement could cause controversy amongst the many fans of the so-called "father of modern fantasy literature". Tolkien's readers have often searched for narrative links between the interwoven tales, which he called a "legendarium".

Christopher Tolkien has been responsible for illuminating his father's fictional histories by compiling works from his notes. One of the author's three surviving children, and the owner of the rights to his father's literary legacy, he sparked controversy three years ago by objecting to the Academy Award-winning trio of films of The Lord of the Rings.

He said he was unhappy with the way the film-makers had interpreted his father's work.

B. “*Why is Christopher Tolkien Such an Ass?*”

1. CT’s *History of Middle-earth* style as Cause for Parody: “Monty Python’s Return of the King” at *Utterpants.co.uk*:

After Samwise's valiant rescue of Frodo, the pair made their way into the very heart of Mordor disguised with armour and coverings scavenged from the slain orcs of Minas Morgul and Cirith Ungol. Taking advantage of the broken and twisted landscape of the haunted plain of Gorgoroth, they made their way to the foot of ominous Orodruin... the dread mountain of fire that was their destination. Yet, with each passing step, the burden of the ring became ever more impossibly grievous for Frodo to bear. So great was the evil power of the One Ring near the cursed place of it's making that it is very noteworthy to know that Samwise never returned the pocket change taken from Frodo during the brief time he carried the precious ring. For his part, Frodo never bothered much about what became of his pocket money and afterwards always assumed the orcs must have made off with it. This act would, unfortunately, haunt and gnaw away at the otherwise faithful and steadfast Samwise Gamgee's soul through the many remaining years of his long life. Now, a clue as to exactly how much pocket change was involved may or may not be found in my new upcoming book "The History of Middle-Earth Vol. XXXVII: Grocery Lists, Doodles, Cleaning Receipts, and Other Things my Father Never Possibly Intended to Publish" which will be available at fine bookstores everywhere by the summer of—

2. “Disowning Family” Rumor: Ethan Gilsdorf, *Boston Globe*

AS A YOUNG MAN, CHRISTOPHER TOLKIEN read early drafts of *The Lord of the Rings*, then followed in his father's scholarly footsteps as a lecturer at Oxford. After J.R.R. died in 1973, Christopher edited thousands of unfinished manuscript pages: legends, poems, and languages. Now 79, Christopher remains the ultimate Tolkien archivist and gatekeeper of his father's treasures. As literary executor, he heads the family estate. But besieged by interview requests, Christopher has sequestered himself somewhere in southern France far from the movie-driven crowds. This solitude reflects his overall attitude toward his father's work: the less PR, the better. According to those close to him, he worries that *Rings* will be exploited for frivolous reasons. So the Tolkien estate jealously guards the family name as if it were a Ring of Power. Or, at least, to the extent that it legally can. Since J.R.R. sold the subsidiary rights to *The Hobbit* and *Rings*, Christopher is powerless against the big-screen

adaptation and the merchandising. So the estate fights back through access to the archives, granting of reprint rights, and court battles over copyright infringement.

Estate approval as an official Tolkien scholar is not easy. The touchy subject of who has access to the mass of unpublished papers -- some at Oxford's Bodleian Library and others at Milwaukee's Marquette University -- has led to infighting. ... The door to Tolkien's ivory tower was slammed shut on Michael Perry, author and publisher of Seattle-based Inkling Books. Perry wrote a reference work called *Untangling Tolkien: A Chronology and Commentary for The Lord of the Rings*. The estate accused Perry of plagiarism, asking for \$750,000 in damages and that all books be destroyed. An out-of-court settlement reached in May finally allowed him to publish the book. Talented authors often feel complimented when others build on what they've written," Perry says. "The family, unable to create anything nearly as brilliant, see [the work] as a precious treasure to be guarded by any and all means." Perry respects copyright law but thinks the prohibition shouldn't be so broad that it "turns fans who want to use that same material into criminals."

Perry hypothesizes that overzealous guardianship explains Christopher Tolkien's distancing from the *Rings* movie trilogy. In 2001, Christopher issued a statement declaring that the "Tolkien estate would be best advised to avoid any specific association with the films." This dispelled any rumor that director Jackson had received his blessing. But not every member of the Tolkien Company, the board that maintains the relationship between the estate and the outside world, was in agreement. Simon Tolkien, one of J.R.R.'s six grandchildren, expressed interest in cooperating with the filmmakers. For Simon's traitorous views, Christopher removed his son as a trustee.

My several attempts to reach Christopher or interview an estate lawyer were handily deflected. But via telephone I did reach Simon. "The essential thing was that I crossed my father on a Tolkien issue, and he never looked back," Simon, 44, says from London. "I never saw the films as a threat. I've enjoyed the movies for what they are." Obviously hurt by his father's rejection, Simon hasn't spoken to him in 4 1/2 years. He's not permitted to discuss the estate. "I do have a relationship with the money, but I can't talk about it. If what you're after is someone who will tell you the estate's attitude toward this and that, I can't. I'm cut off. It's a source of grievance for me." The Tolkien studies community widely acknowledges Christopher's difficult balancing act: preserving the sanctity of his father's legacy while hopelessly trying to rein in Tolkien's cultural impact. But ultimately, it's the estate's secrecy, protectionism, and reputation

policing that may harm the Tolkien name, not the phenomenon's crasser aspects.

By aggressively defending the family brand like a corporate bulldog rather than accepting it as a public artifact, the estate only reinforces the commerciality of the entire enterprise and alienates its most devoted fans. Its holier-than-thou position also seems hypocritical. Though no one will divulge details of their contractual agreement, Tolkien's heirs receive a share of HarperCollins UK's profits on *Rings*. Meanwhile, the releasing of J.R.R.'s obscure scribbles as if they were fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls only adds to Tolkien's mystique. I wonder if that's the image Christopher wants to project: his father as prophetlike apparition, speaking intermittently from beyond the grave. But Simon Tolkien won't comment: "I'm not going to speculate at all on what my father thinks."

3. Taking it All With a Grain of Salt

- a) Royd Tolkien's Appearances at ORC and other LOTR Cons
- b) Sibling rivalry between Adam and Simon?
- c) More on Simon from Gilsdorf and *The Globe*: A barrister by trade, Simon recently published a courtroom thriller, *Final Witness* (Random House, 2003). In the book he's currently writing, Simon says, "The main character has murdered his father. And the father may have committed crimes in the past."

C. "Why Should I Feed the Coffers of the Tolkien Estate?"

Ethan Gilsdorf, *Boston Globe*: "Get your talking plush Gollum here!" No quaint cottage industry anymore, marketing Middle-earth has assumed a world-girdling corporate form, a behemoth encompassing publishers, merchandisers, educators, law firms, webmasters, not to mention countless hordes of opportunistic hangers-on. For sheer commerciality, *Rings* has arguably become the most profitable fictional work of all time. Amid this unharmonious convergence of forces clambering for some acreage of the Tolkien empire, there is also a literary reputation at stake. Can the words of Tolkien, the serious author, be heard above the din of Middle-earth's ravenous strip development? ... Cashing in is hard for even the Tolkien Society, a registered British "educational charity," to resist: Its "Trading Company" hawks Aragorn and Arwen mugs. Everyone wants in. "This very dear person [Tolkien] has been magnified into something unrecognizable," says TheOneRing.net webmaster, Erica Challis, whose site attracts some 1.1 million visitors each month. But even Challis profits from the fad, directing Red Carpet Tours, whose two-week "The Year of the King" movie location bus trips around New Zealand go for \$2,300.

As if to counter the wanton profiting, Tolkien's official publishers lay claim to a literary legacy, and they position themselves above the fray. "We are the keepers of the flame," says Clay Harper, Tolkien projects director at Houghton Mifflin Co. ... Houghton Mifflin talks about "long-term stewardship," but aspects of its *Rings* franchise vulgarize a novel it paradoxically pushes as a lasting, artful accomplishment, "the greatest adventure story ever written," according to Harper. Apologists will say the master of Middle-earth himself had a firm grasp of the realities of the marketplace and enjoyed, as Tolkien put it, "the grosser forms of literary success." After all, he peddled his books' film and merchandising rights and even the drafts of his manuscripts. But in 1969, when he sold the rights, merchandising was in its infancy. He was paid 10,000 pounds, about \$17,000 in US dollars today, a figure dwarfed by today's multimillion dollar payoffs. By then, his books had sold only 3 million copies. To put 2003's juggernaut in perspective, this August, *The Two Towers*' DVD and videocassette sold a record-breaking 3.5 million units -- on the first day of its release.

IV. The Upside

- A. The First Age in All Its Dark Splendor
- B. Not a "Fairy Story," as Later Defined by Tolkien
 - 1. No Happy Ending
 - 2. Tragedy in the Grandest Greek or Shakespearean Tradition
- C. Just Great Literature
 - 1. Character Development, and Dialogue!! *Unfinished Tales*. p. 60
 - 2. Style and Grandeur: *The Silmarillion* p. 198 vs. *Unfinished Tales*, p. 65