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## A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas (2021) by Peter Grybauskas

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*A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas*, by Peter Grybauskas. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2021. xxii, 154 pp. \$55.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781606354308. Also available in ebook format.

In reviewing Peter Grybauskas's *A Sense of Tales Untold*, a book about digressions, gaps, and the untold stories lying beyond the main narrative's margins, perhaps I may be forgiven for beginning with a digression of my own. As I made my way through this book, what intrigued me most wasn't the main argument, which is slight, but the "untold tale" surrounding this slender volume itself. Barely 150 pages long, including index and notes, *A Sense of Tales Untold* was—as Grybauskas tells us—"many years in the making" (xi). We get no details, understandably, but I suspect many of us can probably reconstruct something plausible: a scenario that reflects the realities of academic labor in the 21st century. For instance, feminist scholarship has always excelled at recognizing how female scholars often face challenges unknown to their male colleagues, including personal and institutional hurdles such as child care, marginalization, disrespect, disproportionate service expectations, and so on. Yet, in the last few decades, an increasingly neoliberal model of higher education has created entirely new hurdles that are seemingly insurmountable: adjunctification and labor casualization; the cratering of the tenure-track (TT) job market, particularly after the Great Recession; the precipitous decline in English majors across the country; and the overproduction of English PhDs by graduate programs playing ostrich with the new economic realities of our profession.

So, within this scenario, the pressure to publish has only increased. Worse, it has exacerbated the troubles of contingent scholars working through low-paying, high-stress jobs with inadequate (or no) healthcare. In ages past, academics used to complain, "Publish or perish!" Now, newly minted PhDs more often say, "Publish, and maybe a job search committee will take my application seriously." This problem affects everybody in literary studies, but sometimes I wonder if Tolkien scholars haven't been hit especially hard by this progressively bleak situation. Granted, courses on fantasy and Tolkien tend to fill quickly, and scholarship *on* Tolkien has skyrocketed the last two dozen years, but this hasn't consistently translated into permanent TT jobs with protected research time. Many of the best Tolkien scholars are independents without institutional affiliation, which brings significant hurdles in terms of access and productivity. Likewise, many Tolkienists are contingent faculty—or even graduate students—with excessive teaching loads and little-to-no recourse to conference travel funds, sabbaticals, research assistants, and the like. In addition, several talented Tolkien scholars work in library sciences rather than English departments, which demands they master *two* different academic disciplines, but even those few Tolkienists with permanent TT positions oftentimes work in suboptimal conditions, at least when it comes to producing

original research. For instance, few have secure employment at R1 research institutions, and nobody (as far as I know) teaches at an Ivy.

This situation poses several wide-ranging consequences not often enough acknowledged in Tolkien Studies; graduate students and early-career researchers must often learn the hard way. Overall, academia—especially in the United States—tends to be highly prestige conscious and hierarchical. When it comes to the job market, the journals where one publishes—not to mention the institution that grants your degree—count as much (or more) than one’s actual research. Although university presses have grown friendlier to Inklings Studies than formerly—for instance, John Garth’s latest book hails from Princeton UP, and Oxford UP has two books on C. S. Lewis in as many years—the “major” journals in literary studies, the ones that overwhelmingly drive promotion decisions and academic clout, still conspicuously avoid scholarship on Tolkien. Except for the 2004 special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, now almost two decades old, I’m hard pressed to name any major articles on Tolkien or *The Lord of the Rings* in mainstream venues otherwise unrelated to fantasy, folklore, or children’s literature.<sup>1</sup> In this regard H. P. Lovecraft, ironically, seems to have fared better than Tolkien despite having fewer fans (in absolute terms) and far more ideological baggage. During the last decade *Genre*, *Mfs*, and *Symplokē* have all happily published articles exploring Lovecraft’s work. Partly this reflects Lovecraft’s relevance for hot-button new topics like object-oriented ontology and the Old vs. New Weird, and we should all be happy for Lovecraftians. Still, these kinds of inroads haven’t yet happened for Tolkien Studies, and that carries manifold professional consequences affecting the material conditions under which our field can produce new high-level scholarship.

Of course, it would be a gross oversimplification to accuse mainstream literary studies of simple genre bias. Some fault surely lays with Tolkien Studies itself. In a recent (and excellent) book, Thomas Kullmann and Dirk Siepmann observe that

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years, edited collections have become increasingly popular in Tolkien Studies, but they have a tricky relationship in academia’s prestige hierarchy. Much depends on poorly defined factors that change according to one’s situation. In general, for anyone seeking tenure-track employment in the United States, I’d give the same advice given to me when I first entered the job market: “Avoid edited collections like the plague.” Most job search committees—oftentimes with good reason—don’t consider book chapters on a CV as equally valuable as peer-reviewed journal articles. Likewise, a book chapter’s value can plummet depending on who publishes the edited collection. University presses are a safer bet than trade publishers, even the respectable ones, but I know some scholars who see a *low*-prestige trade publisher on an applicant’s CV as an immediate red flag. (I shouldn’t name any publishers here, but I’m happy to discuss anything over email.) Anyway, there are several good job-market books out there. Personally I’d recommend Kathryn Hume’s *Surviving Your Academic Job Hunt: Advice for Humanities PhDs* (2010). Karen Kelsky from *The Professor Is In* (<https://theprofessorisin.com/>) also has a free blog that dispenses much sound advice.

Tolkien is analyzed and explained by means of Tolkien; material to work with is provided by biographical sources, posthumous Tolkien publications and manuscripts. There is little input from contemporary English scholarship, linguistics or literary and cultural studies. (30 n4)

A few Tolkienists might bristle at this remark, and off the top of my head I can think of a few counterexamples. Still, Kullmann and Siepmann's observation rings more true than false . . . and it certainly describes, accurately, the major limitation pervading Grybauskas's *A Sense of Tales Untold* (more on which in a moment). Yet a disciplinary focus on Tolkien—and Tolkien alone—is not something we can easily disentangle from the broader issue of academic precarity. Contingency affects more than just how long early-career researchers need to turn their theses or dissertations into monographs. It cuts short our research time—period. It limits how often we can read in other disciplines and subfields; it curtails the number of academic journals we can study; it discourages experimentation and our full immersion into new methodologies and new theoretical lenses. And if, somehow, somehow, contingent academics *still* find the time to branch out, wresting from their iron cage of professional obligation the unstructured research time necessary to explore fresh approaches to Tolkien, it still remains an open question whether they'll have the luxury of absorbing those new approaches fully. Thus the research questions posed by young Tolkienists tend toward simple expansions of traditional topics already well-trodden by the field's major figures. There is little energy left for anything else. The wages of precarity are unrelenting critical exhaustion.

So: that is my digression. The “untold tale” of academic labor is mostly what I thought about while preparing this review. Like myself, Grybauskas is a contingent academic at an R1 university, a senior lecturer, and many markers of contingency seem to pervade his monograph. Besides its long gestation time, three chapters out of five—an inordinate 60%—stem from previous publications. Yet a deeper issue concerns Grybauskas's overall argument. As he himself explains, he is arguing that “untold tales are nothing short of a defining feature of [Tolkien's] subcreation” (xx); to this end, he will study the “gaps, enigmas, allusions, digressions, omissions, ellipses, and loose ends that pepper his narratives” (1). Thus we are treated to long discussions on the Last Alliance of Elves and Men (Chapter 2) and the Túrin saga (Chapter 3). Unfortunately, it becomes apparent all too quickly that *A Sense of Tales Untold* is not a thesis-driven book. To be frank, there is simply nothing new about the idea that Tolkien created his famous “impression of depth” through untold tales, and Grybauskas's conscientious and thorough literature review only reinforces this point: his thesis is encapsulated by a quote nearly 50 years old from Paul Kocher: “The art of fantasy flourishes on reticence” (qtd. in 4). Rather than advance any genuine argumentative claim, then, Grybauskas instead prefers a “thick description” of several untold tales surrounding *The Lord of the Rings*. In this he

succeeds. Read this way, *A Sense of Tales Untold* can serve as an admirable reference volume. For instance, if someone were to write on the Last Alliance, they could do worse than turn instantly to Grybauskas's second chapter.

Nonetheless, the job market values monographs more highly than reference manuals, and I suspect this has forced Grybauskas into a genre of academic writing ill-suited to his actual research. His first chapter exemplifies the issues pervading the whole. According to Grybauskas, Tolkien's "fundamental literary dilemma" is that untold tales are often aesthetically the sweetest, but *telling* those tales paradoxically deprives them of romance. Grybauskas thus attempts to explain how Tolkien solves this conundrum, but his approach leaves much to be desired. After dawdling overlong on biographical and literary background without much use value, Grybauskas eventually reveals that Tolkien achieves his famous "impression of depth" through half-forgotten traditions, webs of allusion, and outright omissions. Of course, none of this is new. Even worse, Grybauskas leaves a lot of critical potential on the table. As he confesses, a "complete theory of and guide to untold tales is beyond my skill, and would possibly run counter to the spirit of the project" (4); unfortunately, a "complete theory" is precisely what would have made Grybauskas's research worthwhile to other scholars. A vast secondary literature exists on textual gaps, for instance, but he rarely cites anything without "Tolkien" as a keyword. There is Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological method of reading, for one thing, which is a handy tool for discussing gaps, or Possible Worlds Theory, a subbranch of Narrative Theory quite skilled with epistemologically incomplete fictional constructs like storyworlds. Either would easily have carried Grybauskas into new realms unexplored by prior Tolkienists. More egregiously, Grybauskas also bypasses relevant secondary scholarship *on his own topic*. Since Chapter One first appeared as an article in 2012, Mark J. P. Wolf has written and edited several ground-breaking works on world-building. None appear in Grybauskas's Works Cited. Indeed, even the secondary material cited by Grybauskas is usually treated in a cursory or superficial manner. He tucks quite a few citations into footnotes where substantive engagement with their arguments is hard if not impossible.

Similar issues affect other chapters, but nonetheless the strongest is Grybauskas's fourth chapter, where he makes a clear and substantive argument about Tolkien's "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." In a challenge to Tom Shippey's "character assassination" of the character Totta (94), Grybauskas instead sees Totta as the future unnamed poet of *The Battle of Maldon*; the events in Tolkien's verse drama educate this young romantic poet on the dangers of *ofermod* and foolhardy heroism. Although I'd balk at the suggestion that "omission" is somehow unique to Tolkien—he never explicitly identifies Totta as the *Maldon*-poet—this interpretation of "Homecoming" by Grybauskas remains both plausible and useful. It is worth noting, though, that Grybauskas recycles this argument not just once but twice: once in a *Tolkien Studies* article from 2020, which

he acknowledges, and once also in a long section for a *Mythlore* article from 2011, which he does not. Perhaps more than anything else, this blatant recycling—even if borderline acceptable—testifies to the pressures faced by young Tolkienists trying to publish frantically in order to survive a devastatingly bleak labor situation.

Finally, in the last chapter of *A Sense of Tales Untold*—there is no conclusion except a two-page epilogue—Grybauskas surveys in a scattershot way Tolkien's subsequent influence on fantasy, filmmaking, and video games. Probably his truest point is that Peter Jackson's filmmaking style “strikes a blow to the spirit of untold tales” (107)—that is, Jackson seems demonically compelled to visually depict *everything* in his adaptations, even the hints and the whispers. All told, though, *A Sense of Tales Untold* is a monograph that, although raising the occasional good point, also demonstrates the necessity for Tolkienists to hold frank and realistic conversations among ourselves: conversations about intellectual labor, the academic job market, and the direction in which our field is heading.

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#### WORKS CITED

Kullmann, Thomas, and Dirk Siepmann. *Tolkien as a Literary Artist: Exploring Rhetoric, Language and Style in The Lord of the Rings*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.