

2022

Race in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and in Katherine Addison's *The Goblin Emperor*

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Recommended Citation

Reid, Robin A. Dr. (2022) "Race in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and in Katherine Addison's *The Goblin Emperor*," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol15/iss2/4>

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Before beginning, I'd like to note two things. First, that Katherine Addison is an open pseudonym used by Sarah Monette. Second, the Works Cited for this paper is below, in an Appendix, which also includes some key quotes from sources I used for the presentation and which was distributed as a handout at the Tolkien Studies Area of the virtual Popular Culture Conference, in 2021.

As I discuss in the 2017 essay, "Race in Tolkien Studies: A Bibliographic Essay" (Vaccaro and Kisor), there is little consensus in the small but growing body of work on race in Tolkien's legendarium. Some scholars consider that the field is deadlocked with no chance of building on arguments that tend to be expressed as either/or: either Tolkien/his work is racist, or he/it is not. In the bibliographic essay, I consider the role that oppositional definitions of "racism" play in heightening conflict as well as the differing theories, methods, and even period specializations of Tolkienists.

As always happens, my presentation required extensive pruning of different branches and leaves. My primary question is how Katherine Addison's 2014 Court intrigue/steampunk novel, *The Goblin Emperor*, engages with J. R. R. Tolkien's racist constructions of Orcs and Elves in *The Lord of the Rings* and the extent to which the novel exemplifies Dallas Jean Baker's concept of "writing back" or Harold Bloom's concept of "swerving." At this point I have found minimal paratextual or epitextual evidence that Addison intended to write back to Tolkien's Orcs in contrast to specific evidence of her intent to swerve from Tolkien's quest plot and gender roles. However, considering Addison's novel in connection with earlier work I did on queerness in Lois McMaster Bujold's Five Gods series, I am starting to evolve a theory that, in some cases, the lack of a conscious focused decision, or intent, may make for a more successful swerve, perhaps a strong enough swerve to be considered writing back.

The concepts of writing back and the swerve come from, respectively, Dallas John Baker's essay, "Writing Back to Tolkien: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in High Fantasy," and Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*. The concepts describe different ways writers respond to influential precursors. Baker defines writing back as a progressive, even radical, literary strategy used by "feminist, postcolonial, and queer writers to reclaim, re-imagine and complicate normative or marginalizing narratives that are colonial or widely disseminated" (133). Bloom defines the swerve, or as he calls it, the "clinamen [cleenamen]" as a "poetic misreading or misprison proper." Bloom limits his theory to male poets, so I draw from Faye Ringel's useful feminist application of the concept in "Women Fantasists: In the Shadow of the Ring" for this discussion. Ringel interviewed four white American women fantasists about their work and

identified which of Tolkien's elements they accept and which they reject, or swerve from.¹ These elements are "ordinary" rather than epic characters; language; and Fate; they reject his "unquestioned acceptance of medieval ideals of kingship and class structure" (165-166) and his portrayal of women's roles.

I build on recent scholarship by Dieter Petzold and Helen Young who argue that the systemic racism in Tolkien's legendarium, particularly his Orcs, has shaped genre fantasy literature, films, and games. Their work, like mine, draws on sociological theories of unconscious or systemic racism (see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism Without Racists*).

Despite systemic racism in Anglophone culture and publishing, recent years have seen a growing body of fantastic and speculative fiction by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) published and winning awards. In "If Tolkien Were Black," Laura Miller interviews two fantasy authors, including Nora (N.K.) Jemisin who won three Hugos for best novel in three consecutive years for her Broken Earth trilogy, making her the first African-American to win the Best Novel Hugo, and the only person ever to win three Best Novel awards in a row. Jemisin points out the racist effect of relying on the conventions of epic fantasy established by Tolkien and, in a follow-up post in her blog, challenges readers and critics to move beyond asking how writers of colors' races affect their fantasy to ask how Tolkien's whiteness affected his. I know of only one essay that is on the topic of Whiteness in Tolkien studies, Sean Redmond's, and he focuses on the films. I am being provocative here: there is a great deal of scholarship on Tolkien's "Englishness" but in none of that work is the extent to which "Englishness" is "Whiteness" acknowledged. I would argue that Jemisin's challenge, issued in 2011, also needs to be extended to other white fantasy writers such as, for example, Katherine Addison!

In online essays and interviews, Addison criticizes the genre's dependence on quests and coming-of age stories as well as the limited roles for the female characters in the novel ("The Emperor and the Scullery Boy"). She briefly mentions Tolkien's "pastoral nostalgia, his ingrained racism, his equally ingrained adherence to a utopian version of the class structure of pre-World War I England" ("Guest Post") I have found one only one point she makes about race responding to the question of how she got the idea for *The Goblin Emperor*.

Well it was when the *The Lord of the Rings* [sic] movies were coming out and I was thinking about elves and the very tall very pale very beautiful

¹ Patricia McKillip, Rosemary Edghill, Delia Sherman, and Greer Ilene Gilman.

people and thinking it seems very unfair to Goblins that they always have to be sort of dark and slimy and unpleasant. What if what if goblins too were a noble people? (Addison, "Interview" with Rihn, *Steampunk Journal*).²

The Goblin Emperor is an alternate world fantasy. Addison described her pitch for the novel as "The youngest, despised, half-goblin son of the Elvish Emperor succeeds to the throne after an airship accident kills his father and half-brothers" (Bookplank Interview). The tight third-person point of view, limited to Maia, the protagonist of the novel, immerses readers in his experiences of going from exile to Emperor. After his mother dying when he was a child, he was put in the care of an exiled and abusive guardian and has received little education on history, political, economics, or any of the skills required for survival in the court. He is viewed with suspicion because of being half Goblin, his mother, the daughter of the Great Avar of Barizhan (the Goblin Empire) having been married to the Elvish Emperor in a political marriage. Increased trade between the two empires has resulted in more movement and mixing of the populations. Maia's ascension to the throne is challenged by two attempted assassination plots: one by a group of Eastern Elvish nobles who want to maintain their power, tied to a monopoly of silk production, and the second led by his Lord Chancellor and his oldest brother's widow who is also the mother of Maia's heir until he marries and has children.

Addison's worldbuilding and characterization are some of the most significant swerves from Tolkien that she makes. Her worldbuilding includes the geographical relationship of competing empires built around characteristics from later historical periods than Tolkien's early medieval world; presenting two different systems of governance; adding a third culture in the north locked in a multi-generations resistance to Elvish imperialism; building a polytheistic religion with a network of different religious organizations and priesthoods, some of whom have spiritual powers, powers I hesitate to call "magic" since that term is never used in the novel. While she did not attempt to invent multiple languages, she invented terms in Ethuverazhin, included in a glossary at the end, as well as distinguishing between formal and informal registers of speech by means of pronoun choices in dialogue. Her characterization includes the protagonist, Maia, a mixed-race character whose perspective readers share, as well as the complex familial and social hierarchies around him consisting not only of Elves and

² This interview seems to have disappeared from the internet: the Wayback machine indicates it was "crawled" a number of times; I also have a text copy of it in my research folder if people would like a copy (email robinareid@fastmail.com): https://web.archive.org/web/20200715000000*/https://steampunkjournal.org/2019/04/25/interview-with-katherine-addison/.

Goblins, but also numerous mixed-race characters, evidence of the movement and mingling of populations that, if judged by current scholarship on people of color in medieval and pre-modern Europe, is probably more {air quotes} "accurate" than Tolkien's world (Ramey, Heng). In the interests of time, I had to cut discussion of her language and structured pronouns as well as the gods and religious systems for this presentation.

Addison provides a rough map on her website; it is not included in the published book (see page 12 for the link and copy of the map). Her map evokes then swerves from Tolkien's geographical choices. The Elflands are north of Barizhan, the Goblin empire. The animosity between "East" and "West" is changed to a conflict between the established Eastern Elvish nobility and the rising Elvish, Goblin, and multi-racial merchant classes in recently colonized western lands. In the North are the Evressai, a nomadic culture which has resisted Elvish colonization since Maia's grandfather's attempted annexation of their lands. There are no humans, Dwarves, or hobbit analogues in Addison's fantasy world; the focus on Goblins and Elves is a significant swerve.

The novel has steampunk elements (airships, and pneumatic communication tubes in the palace) with references to the start of an industrial revolution, with the problem of the poor working conditions in factories in cities. One major character informs Maia that conditions in the factories need to be, so Addison's technology is not presented as uniformly positive. The novel is set almost entirely in the Elvish Court (some readers find it claustrophobic), and Addison says she based the Court on Louis XIV's Versailles. The Elves' system of governance is structured around central authority, supported by a vast bureaucracy, with power passed down through family lines, father to son (daughters not being useful for anything except political marriage). The Goblin's system of governance sounds closer to the feudal system of the Middle Ages with the leader, the Avar, having much less power over the avarsin, and no guaranteed right of succession if the avarsin decide to fight.

Addison's novel, like Tolkien's, is concerned in part with the question of what makes a good ruler. Maia is isolated at Court not only because of his mixed-race status but also as a result of his and his mother's exile. He has had minimal education and no training for the position he inherits without warning when he is eighteen. He is horrified to find that he has total control over the lives of all the women in his family, which includes not only his sister, but the wives and fiancée of his brothers, and his father's surviving ex-wife and wife). He finds himself much more in sympathy with them: "He has to reach adulthood and self-knowledge in other ways, ways that are more passive and thus traditionally

'feminine,' while at the same time the women around him are fighting to achieve adult identities that aren't just 'wife'" ("Emperor and Scullery Boy"). One aspect of Maia's characterization is responses to what he sees in the court around him and how it affects his ruling: he insists on maintaining some of the Goblin culture's beliefs his mother taught him before her death. Specific examples are the practice of meditation (in contrast to the court's culture of atheism) and the belief that servants are part of an extended family or perhaps clan.

While overt and systemic anti-Goblin racism in Elvish culture, especially in the Court, is clear from the start--as is Maia's internalized belief his body and skin are ugly-- equally clear is that the Goblins consider the Elves to be primitive and uncivilized as Maia's grandfather, the Great Avar, makes clear on his visit to Maia, the first the Avar of Barizhan has ever made to the Elflands:

However, I am not pleased at leaving thee here among these elves. We have always thought them a cold people, but I tell you, any goblin would be ashamed to behave as hotly to his avar as they have behaved to thee. Attempts to usurp thee! Attempts to murder thee! Among the avarsin, it is at least an honest fight (403).

The final revelation of the novel is that the crash of the airship carrying the emperor and his sons was sabotage by a revolutionary group composed of full-blood Elven and Goblin factory workers, headed by a half Elf and a Goblin. Maia insists on meeting with the revolutionaries before their trials because his actions made him Emperor. Shulivar, the leader, tells him "If I had not done what I did, a half-goblin such as yourself would never have gained the throne of the Ethuveraz. . . . you have new ideas, ideas that no emperor before you has ever had. . . .you bring change. . . because I opened the way for you." When Maia declares the change was not worth the price of twenty-three lives, Shulivar asks, "Do you know how many people the factories of Choharo and Rosary and Sevezho kill in a year? In a month?" (398-399). Maia cannot argue with Shulivar's point that Maia will be able to change the problems in the west now that the Eastern nobles' failed coup (culminating in the second attempt to assassinate Maia) destroyed their power base.

While I see Addison's novel as continuing the tradition Ringel identifies of white women fantasy writers who critique some systems of hierarchical power and systemic inequalities through the mode of fantasy, I am not sure that she intended to subvert the racist elements of Tolkien's Orcs. However, as I have argued in another essay, on the queerness of Lois McMaster Bujold's Holy Family, an

author's intention, even when clearly stated, cannot control how aspects of the text are interpreted by readers. In "The Holy Family: Divine Queerness in *The Curse of Chalion* and *The Hallowed Hunt*, I contrast Bujold's explanation of her intent which was "to create a religion that allowed for 'parity between men and women,' and to avoid dualism" with my conclusion that "to the extent she succeeded in her goal of disrupting hierarchical sex and gender binaries, she also disrupted the patriarchal religious and/or psychoanalytic heterosexual/-homosexual binary which overlaps with those of sex and gender" and thus created a certain type of queer spaces while noting that my queer reading is heavily informed by my personal experiences as a queer woman (223).³

As a white woman, I have no right to declare that Addison's swerve in her creation of the alternate world of Goblins and Orcs is strong enough to count as a work that succeeds in the more radical project of writing back to systemic racism. As far as I know, there is no scholarship on Addison, or Monette's work (I retired in May 2020 so do not have easy access to the databases), but I have noted the number of reviewers who write glowing (or not so glowing reviews) of the novel without ever mentioning race as well as some reviews that do (excerpts from those that do are included in Section III of the Appendix below).

Thank you!

³ "Chat with Lois McMaster Bujold 07/31/01," *Writerspace*, archived at *The Wayback Machine/Internet Archive*, accessed June 4, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150604052747/http://www.writerspace.com/chat/chat073101.html>.

APPENDIX (FORMERLY HANDOUT)

I. Excerpts from Sources Relating to Addison's Knowledge of Tolkien and Intent

"Doing Tolkien Wrong" by Sarah Monette.

I was given *The Hobbit* for my sixth birthday, *The Lord of the Rings* for my ninth. I've read *The Silmarillion*. I own the extended edition DVDs of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*—even though I don't own a DVD player. In other words, I love Tolkien as much as the next really geeky person.

So when I say that Tolkien is an affliction and a curse, you understand that I'm saying it for a reason.

Specifically, Tolkien is an affliction and a curse to fantasy writers. This is a horribly ungrateful thing to say, when it's largely thanks to Tolkien that fantasy writers can exist as a sub-species today at all. Certainly it's thanks to Tolkien that so many fantasy novels, especially series of novels, can get published. But, nevertheless, the genre has reached a point where Tolkien causes more problems than he solves. . . .

My point is not that one should not imitate Tolkien [RAR: meaning, imitate his fiction].. Rather, it is that one should do precisely that: imitate *Tolkien* [RAR: meaning the author's approach/method to writing]! Love the secondary world you create, understand the story you want to tell, choose your prose techniques and world-building tricks accordingly. Imitate the process, not the product. The story you write will most likely have nothing in common with *The Lord of the Rings*. Except, perhaps, that readers will love it.

"The Emperor and the Scullery Boy: Quests and Coming-of-Age Stories" by Katherine Addison.

The Goblin Emperor starts where the bildungsroman of the scullery boy ends, as an unprepared young man discovers that he is now the emperor. The book turned out, in many ways, to be a methodical disassembly of the idea that becoming emperor is in any sense a victory condition, a "happily ever after." Maia's bildungsroman is confined to the imperial palace, and it became clear, both to him and to me, that he was as much a prisoner as a ruler: he couldn't have gone wandering across the continent on a quest, even if there had been a quest available. He has to reach adulthood and self-knowledge in other ways, ways that are more passive and thus

traditionally "feminine," while at the same time the women around him are fighting to achieve adult identities that aren't just "wife."

Any bildungsroman is a quest. Where the scullery boy's quest is to find his rightful identity as king, Maia has been forced into an identity as emperor that he feels is wrong, and his quest is to find some way of making this external identity match his interior sense of self. Along, of course, with ruling the empire, learning to negotiate the court... and, oh yes, surviving to his nineteenth birthday.

Addison Guest Post, Fantasy Cafe

If you look at the various blog posts, essays, and articles I've left scattered across the internet, you'll see that I pick on Tolkien a lot. You might think this is because I loathe him, but the exact opposite is true. I love Tolkien. I love his stories. I passionately admire his writing. I imitate his world-building to the best of my ability.

And I'm not actually picking on Tolkien qua Tolkien. I'm picking on the consequences of Tolkien, because Tolkien is one of the most admired, copied, and influential Anglophone fantasists of the twentieth century. At this point, I think that even fantasy writers who hate Tolkien, even fantasy writers who have never read Tolkien, are still in conversation with Tolkien and the way that his story and his world-building became the gold standard of the genre.

There are lots of aspects to this: Tolkien's fiercely anti-technology pastoral nostalgia, his ingrained racism, his equally ingrained adherence to a utopian version of the class structure of pre-World War I England. But I want to talk about his women, and the models they do (or don't) provide for girls and women who want to imagine their own place in fantasy.

Interview

Steampunk, Gregory Rihn

A: Well it was when the *The Lord of the Rings* movies were coming out and I was thinking about elves and the very tall very pale very beautiful people and thinking it seems very unfair to Goblins that they always have to be sort of dark and slimy and unpleasant. What if what if goblins too were a noble people? And then the other thing I thought I thought completely at random was why shouldn't elves have airships?

II. Excerpts from Sources on Racism and Tolkien

Laura Miller, "If Tolkien Were Black"

[W]hat's most striking about the fictional worlds Durham and Jemisin have created is how cosmopolitan they are. Their cities are populated by people of different races and religions, mixing together and comparing their respective values. They bridle at the limitations of class. Economics drive many of their actions, and the conflicts that inevitably arise can't be easily parsed. . . . Jemisin finds deeper problems in "certain expectations of the genre that are rooted in Western cultural assumptions that are not necessarily true. For example: the whole good-versus-evil focus, the binary. You see that in so much of epic fantasy. The Dark Lord is really bad, we know this. Because he's dark. Well, did you do something to him? Doesn't matter, he's dark. That's why he's bad and that's why you've got to go kill him. That kind of thinking I inherently do not trust."

N. K. Jemisin, "If Tolkien were Black..."

But after this interview I couldn't help wishing that a) I'd namechecked a few of the other authors of color doing fantasy of an epic nature, because the article gives the impression that there's only two of us when in fact there's maybe a dozen (a few offhand: Michelle Sagara/Sagara West; Saladin Ahmed; Charles Saunders; Carole McDonnell; Nnedi Okorafor; Eugie Foster; Karen Lowachee; Cindy Pon). And b) I kind of wish I'd hit harder on the point that a lot of PoC writing epic fantasy aren't labeled as such, whether by themselves or their publishers or the wider literary community, for good or for ill, because the genre works so carefully to police itself. . . . there's definitely something to the way in which works which in every other way fit within the genre boundaries are consistently pushed out and called something else, when the major difference is the race, nationality, or first language of the writer. . . . And in addressing the issue, the article encourages epic fantasy to wake up a little more from its reflexive adherence to traditions that are underlaid by some seriously creepy assumptions.

And yet.

My race is relevant to my writing. Of course it is. *Every* writer's race is relevant to their work, whether they believe it to be or not — whether they have the privilege of ignoring that relevance, or not. But my race is not the be-all and end-all of who I am, or why I write. That's also true for every writer.

So I'd like to ask something of all critics, reviewers, interviewers, etc., who read this. Think of it as a challenge, maybe, or just a new way of looking at your work. A thought experiment. *When was the last time you considered the impact of a white writer's race on his/her work?* Just curious. Maybe you can work that into your next interview, or something. Because I think there's all kinds of nummy lit-crit goodness that's come out of people considering Tolkien's whiteness (c.f. that convo in the Salon comments). So try applying that brush to the whole genre, and see what comes of it.

III. Excerpts from Reviews that Consider Race in The Goblin Emperor

Crystalclear

The elves are the favored race in the empire, and elves have white skin and fair eyes. The goblins, on the other hand, have shades of dark skin and varied eyes. The elvish Emperor of the Elflands reluctantly took on a goblin as his fourth empress for political reasons, and his half-goblin son is what he had to show for it. There are the obvious connotations (are they connotations when they are splayed out in the open?) about the reaction of a white ruling class suddenly being ruled by someone of mixed race. Honestly, it seems that they took it much better in the book than what would happen in reality.

Dark and Fergus McCartan

Addison represents goblins and elves as more matters of racial types than separate species, with the tall, pale elves contrasted against the black skinned, red eyed goblins, with half goblins (such as Maia), possessing grey skin. These races also come with their own beliefs and customs, indeed a high point later in the book is the visit of the goblin ruler and a chance to see Maia's mother's people at first hand. . . .

I was quite surprised that with the book's title, the fact we see a lot of half goblin servants and at least the vague suggestion of anti-goblin racism, that so much focus was given to the treatment of women, and so little to the treatment of goblins.

Michael Ann Dobbs

Maia's sudden elevation is even more complicated by the fact that he's half-goblin. Racism is rampant between the white elves and the black goblins, and though no one questions Maia's legitimacy on the basis of his

race, his gray skin (black and white are much more literal terms in this world) does not endear him to the court.

Lise Fracalossi

The main characters may be elves and goblins, but this is no stereotypical fantasy world where the elves are all beautiful and enigmatic and the goblins are ugly and barbaric. Sure, the elves might *think* that, but it goes both ways (Maia describes your typical elf as "ferret-faced"). Instead of outright war between the two factions, we have complex political negotiations, diasporas, and intersections of race and class.

There's also a complex east vs. west dynamic to the Elflands, and a muddled, neverending war with a people called the Evressai to the north.

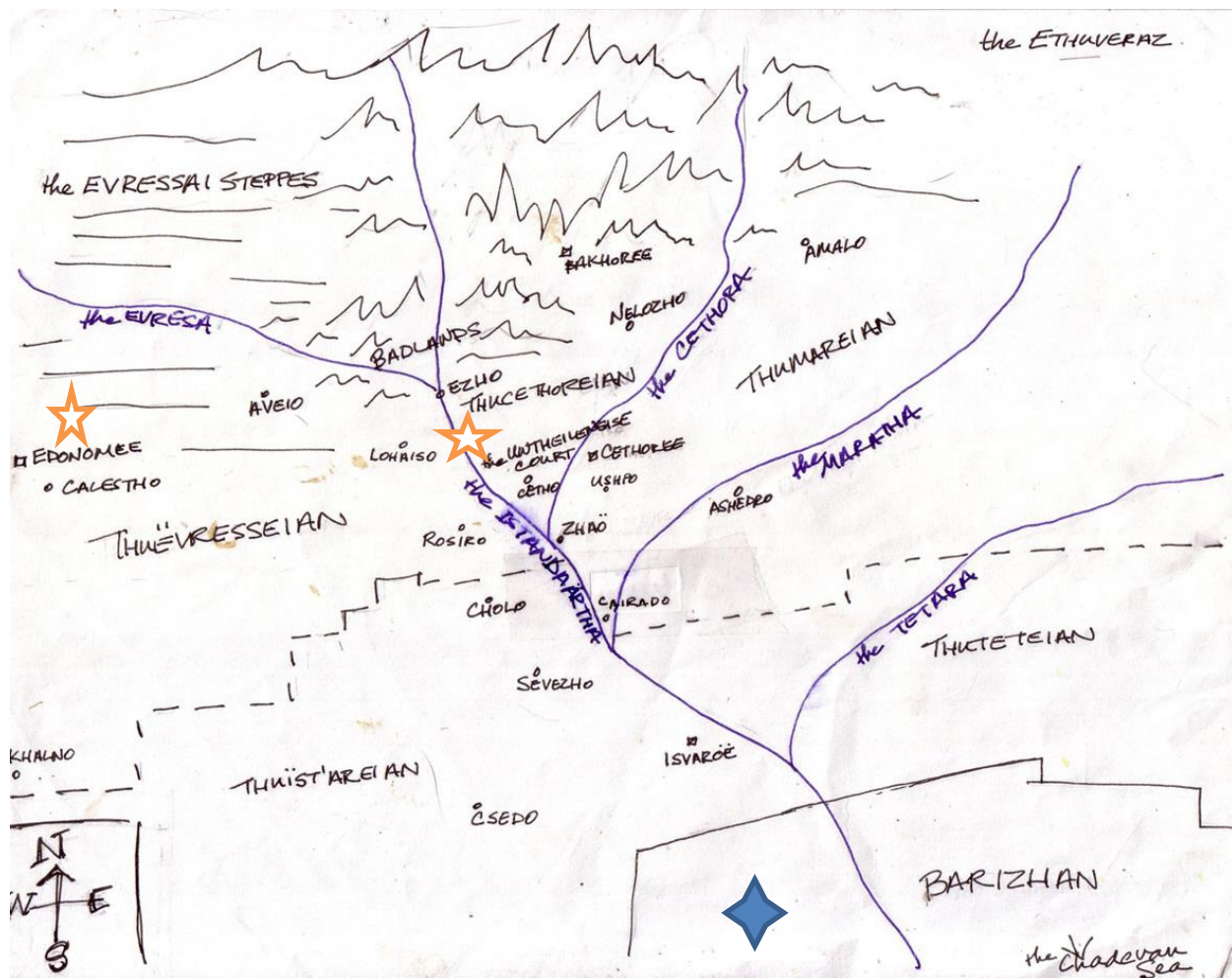
Ana & Thea (Booksmugglers Joint Review)

ANA: The best part are the little, micro details that make-up that world and which mean so much in the great scheme of things. Because this is also a story of privilege, of underdogs and outcasts, of poverty and injustice and corruption.

There is the unspoken racism and prejudice surrounding the Goblins in a court of Elves. There are the limitations imposed on women, based on their gender. There are the class differences between the poor and the rich, those who inhabit the realm of power and have voices, versus those whose voices are barely heard. Many of Maia's actions in the book are about how to break free of those limitations by using the tools and the power at his disposal. As an outsider himself, Maia is a person with an almost limitless sense of compassion and understanding which is a thing of beauty to witness in a character.

THEA: That is to say: Maia's rule, his ascension to power and his maintenance of that power is utterly, perhaps hopelessly, idealistic. Readers may choose to believe in *The Goblin King's* optimistic message, or to discredit it. I, for one, choose to believe in it (though I would not fault anyone for discrediting the vein of pure idealism that runs throughout this book).

IV. Addison's Map Of Ethuveraz <https://www.katherineaddison.com/map.html>



Untheneileneise Court (palace), near Cetho (city), center of Elvish empire



Edonomee (manor house) where Maia and his mother were exiled



Barizhan (Goblin Empire)

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