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Gifted Amateurs and Other Essays on Tolkien, the Inklings, and Fantasy Literature (2023), by David Bratman

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Gifted Amateurs and Other Essays on Tolkien, the Inklings, and Fantasy Literature, by David Bratman. Altadena, California: Mythopoeic Press, 2023. [2], x, 382 pp. $19.95 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781887726269. Also available in ebook format.

David Bratman has been a ubiquitous presence in the Tolkien scholarship and fandom communities for decades. Formerly the editor of *Mythprint*, currently one of the three editors of *Tolkien Studies*, and a prolific blogger, his standing is such that in 2022, he was the scholar Guest of Honor at the annual conference of the Mythopoeic Society. Yet, as he himself wrote in a blog post "When I was first chosen as Scholar Guest of Honor for what turned into the 2022 Mythopoeic Conference, I was uncomfortably aware that I lacked something that most Guests of Honor had: a book." He therefore set about to remedy that deficiency, not by writing new content, but rather by selecting from his large collection of previously written (and mostly previously published) works into one new package. Despite the lack of new material, *Gifted Amateurs and Other Essays on Tolkien, the Inklings, and Fantasy Literature* proves to be a worthwhile addition to the study of Tolkien, the Inklings and fantasy literature in general. Bratman has a distinctive and intelligent voice, though it is sometimes tinged by a certainty of "rightness" that threatens to tip into arrogance, leavened with equal doses of humor and introspection. Overall, his observations tend to be thoughtful, well-expressed, and thought-provoking, though occasionally exasperating.

Bratman has long been known for his extensive knowledge of the Inklings (he himself notes that one of his "best-known works is the bio-bibliographical appendix for Diana Pavlac Glyer's *The Company They Keep*, describing all 19 of the known regular attendees of the Inklings" [121]), and so it is perhaps fitting that the title of the book is taken from an essay that he wrote about the Inklings as a whole, rather than one about Tolkien. Nonetheless, even though less than half of the content is dedicated specifically to works about Tolkien, there is no question that Tolkien's work is Bratman's main literary focus, and apart from the essay from which the title is taken, provides the most interesting content in the book. This review focuses primarily on that material.

At times, Bratman focuses more on documenting own history discussing Tolkien, the Inklings, and fantasy in general than he does on those subjects themselves. He describes in the introduction his first presentation at a MythCon conference in 1976 and then notes that "I did make it into print the next year, after *The Silmarillion* was published. I'd already read the book twice, once for myself and once (trading off with a friend) aloud into a tape recorder for the benefit of blind friends who didn't want to wait for the audio or Braille edition to come out. It seemed to me that there were enough references to the number of years between events that it would be possible to compile a Tale of Years for the First Age, so I read the book a third time to do so. Seeking the quickest possible publication, I sent

it to the *Minas Tirith Evening-Star*, where it duly appeared, the first such chronology to see print" (viii).

Fortunately, most of the actual essays are more illuminating. In the first piece, "J. R. R. Tolkien: An Introduction to His Work" (which was originally published in *Adventures of Sword and Sorcery* in 1996) Bratman provides this excellent summary of what sets Tolkien apart from other genre writers. He writes, "Tolkien was never a professional writer. Unlike American fantasists such as Fritz Leiber, Robert E. Howard, and H. P. Lovecraft, he never survived by writing adventure stories at a penny a word for pulp magazines. This is one main reason why his writing is unlike theirs and that of writers influenced by them" (6). Although this piece was written in 1996 (and only slightly updated for presentation in this book), Bratman does a good job of making the case for why it is worth exploring the nooks and crannies of Tolkien's vast body of work, even though much of that canon was not published until after this piece was written.

Bratman observes that "Tolkien's central work is a trilogy" (7). He then explains that he is not referring to the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*, which is often mis-identified as a trilogy as a result of the publisher's decision to split the work and publish it in successive years. What he means by this statement is that *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion,* while each a separate work, need to be taken together to fully appreciate them. While this is true in hindsight, it certainly was not intended to be the case at the time that Tolkien embarked on each of these works. While there are some references in *The Hobbit* to Tolkien's older mythology (which would become *The Silmarillion*) these references are largely just made to add color to what was intended to be a separate work of a completely different nature. *The Hobbit* was originally meant to be a fun tale to entertain his children, while *The Silmarillion* stemmed from Tolkien's (what proved to be overly) ambitious plan "to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story-the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths" dedicated to England (*Letters*, 131, p. 103). It was not until he began a sequel to *The Hobbit* (at the publisher's urging), only to find that he really wanted to write a continuation of *The Silmarillion*. Bratman does aptly explain why that new work came to be is considered Tolkien's greatest work: "*The Lord of the Rings* takes the strengths of both its predecessors, and weaves them together. It has what biologists call hybrid vigor" (9).

One of Bratman's better known essays, "The Literary Value of *The History of Middle-earth*," first appeared in the classic book *Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on The History of Middle-earth*," the first (and, in my opinion, best) Festschrift in honor of Christopher Tolkien. This is one of Bratman's best pieces, but it also provides some good examples of the types of sweeping judgments that Bratman tends to make. "Even as the cutesy-elf 'Tinfang Warble'" (*Lost Tales I* 108) is

generally considered Tolkien's most unfortunate poem, so the opening of "The Annals of Aman" should be conceded his single poorest stretch of prose. But the Antique style could also rise to the poetic elegance of the 'Ainulindalë' which in its final form in *The Silmarillion* is the most profound and moving prose Tolkien ever wrote" (25). It is certainly true that the 'Ainulindalë' provides *one of* the most profound and moving examples of Tolkien's prose; it is an extraordinary and powerful piece of work. But categorically calling it objectively *the* most moving and profound prose Tolkien ever wrote is jarring and unnecessary; there are too many other examples of profound and moving prose throughout Tolkien's cannon that could equally be so anointed[1]. Similarly, calling the opening of "The Annals of Aman" the worst stretch of prose Tolkien ever wrote is just as silly. It would be better if Bratman just told us what makes the former so good, and the latter so bad, and left it at that. Or at least state it as his opinion and not a categorical statement of rightness, such as he does in a later statement in this essay: "To my taste, the finest poem in *The History of Middle-earth* is "The Nameless Land," written in 1924 and published attached to Númenórean material in *The Lost Road* (98–100)" (30). This is considerably less grating, as such judgments are fundamentally subjective in nature. Nonetheless, despite this minor complaint, this essay provides an excellent synopsis of the content of *The History of Middle-earth* series.

The next piece, "Top Ten Rejected Plot Twists from *The Lord of the Rings*: A Textual Excursion into "The History of *The Lord of the Rings*" (which is based on a presentation made by Bratman at Mythopoeic Conference 30 in July–August 1999) is a humorous rundown of some the more off-beat examples of concepts that Tolkien originally considered in drafting *The Lord of the Rings*. The "History of *The Lord of the Rings* volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* are not to everyone's taste, but I find the insights into Tolkien's creative process that they provide deeply fascinating, and Bratman's amusing essay does help demonstrate how much the work changed over the course of that creation.

"The Artistry of Omissions and Revisions in *The Lord of the Rings*" (based on a presentation at the Marquette University Tolkien conference in October 2004) also addresses an aspect of the editing process, but in this case, he is talking about editing that took place after the work was first published, by Tolkien himself, by his son Christopher Tolkien and by others who were responsible for finalizing the various published versions of that work, in correcting accumulated errors. Bratman observes, "If we do count the changes noted by Christopher Tolkien as corrections,

[1] It is true that Tolkien's work is full of similar categorical statements such as Maglor being "mighty among the singers of old, named only after Daeron of Doriath" (S 254), or Lúthien being "the most beautiful of all the Children of Ilúvatar" (S 165). But it is one thing for an author who is creating a secondary universe to make those kinds of categorical statements; it is their universe to create as they wish. It is something else altogether for someone commentating on other author's works to engage in that kind of absolutism.

what difference does this make to the reading experience? In most cases, not a lot. The reader might not even notice that a change had been made, any more than numerous readers ever noticed many of the typographical errors in earlier printings, and from the reader' perspective, we can apply the old saw: a difference that *makes* no difference *is* no difference" (73). However, as Bratman notes, many of the readers of Tolkien's works are "peculiarly attentive" to whom such details do matter. Bratman observes that these small inconsistencies can be roughly broken into two categories: "ghosts of earlier versions of the story overlooked during revisions" (74) and "simple omissions of wording occurring during the course of successive draftings"(75). While these are the types of observations that many readers may not pay much attention to, Bratman gives some good examples of seemingly minor errors that had significant consequences. A good example is the seemingly callous reference that Aragorn makes to Merry and Pippin when he, Gimli and Legolas are searching for them and finding a footprint, supposedly says "Pippin's, I think. He is smaller than the other." As Bratman points out, this was actually due to a typo and it should have been "others." That one missing "s" makes a world of difference (76).

In other cases, Bratman exhaustively documents minor changes in punctuation or capitalization that have little substantive interest. In contrast, Bratman's discussion of the evolution of the Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* at the end of the essay is more substantial. As he notes, "Many who do not own copies of the first edition of *The Lord of the Rings* have never read its extremely interesting Foreword. The greater part of this is reprinted, for the historical record, in *The Peoples of Middle-earth* (25–26, 18 n15, 12). What is striking about the first edition Foreword for a reader of the second edition is the complete difference in tone" (89).

Bratman also goes deep into the weeds with his next essay, "Hobbit Names Aren't from Kentucky." (Originally published in *The Ring Goes Ever On: Proceedings of the Tolkien 2005 Conference*.) He expends considerable effort in debunking the rather bizarre assertion that "the Shire is flavored with touches of Kentucky" (95). Bratman writes, "I decided to be systematic about this. I was not aware of any complete geographic indexes to surnames in old U.S. census returns, but at least I could get current data. I went home and looked up hobbit surnames in an Internet U.S. telephone directory, www.switchboard.com, and tallied up the search results by state. And what I found was that, regardless of whether Tolkien got his names from Barnett or not, hobbit names are neither particularly characteristic of, nor distinctive to, Kentucky. Yes, some of them may be found in Kentucky, but almost all are just as common in other parts of the U. S., and more often than not they're a good deal more common elsewhere" (96).

Bratman takes several pages to make the point that Tolkien's hobbits are more likely to be smoking pipes because pipe-smoking was a favorite past-time of Tolkien's rather than because he knew a man from tobacco-growing Kentucky, and

that "the meanings, or apparent meanings, of the names—stoutness and burrowing names among hobbits, botanical names among Men of Bree—ere more important in Tolkien's choice than whether the name came from Yorkshire or Kentucky. It's not impossible that Barnett's tales contributed a soupcon to Tolkien's cauldron of story, but he isn't the secret key to the Shire, and it is as certain as evidence can make it that hobbit names aren't from Kentucky" (102). Bratman spends quite a bit of time and effort reaching these conclusions, which seem largely self-evident.

In contrast, the final essay in this first section dedicated to Tolkien provides a fine homage to one of Tolkien's greatest (and most under-appreciated) works, and the work of the great scholar who helped shed light on it. This essay, "Smith of Wootton Major and Genre Fantasy," (which is based on a presentation at the Popular Culture Association National Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2015) begins with the typically hyperbolic statement "*Smith of Wootton Major*, by J. R. R. Tolkien, is a perfect fairy-story" (104). Bratman then leavens that absolute statement (with which I happen to agree) by noting that it was "not a formal scholarly statement," but rather a launching pad to demonstrating how the scholarship of Verlyn Flieger illuminates why this tale is so great. (*Ibid.*)

Bratman first compares *Smith* favorably to other fairy-stories by Tolkien. In contrast to *Farmer Giles of Ham*, he writes, "*Smith* is different. Its Faërie is *magical*, unlike that of *Farmer Giles* which simply has a fantastic bestiary" (105). Further, unlike in *The Hobbit* there is no there and back again. "Smith has no map and no guide, and, unlike Bilbo, he receives no backstory or explanation. Smith's journeys into Faëie are meandering, without specific goals or destinations, and they are cryptic. . . . Besides emphasizing that Faëie is a dangerous place, which Smith enters only on sufferance, these features give it a mysterious quality, a sense that there is more to the tale and its setting than anything the reader learns" (*Ibid.*). However, he uses these observations as a stepping-stone to the real purpose of this essay of celebrating Flieger's work, noting "The application to *Smith* of Flieger's distinctive ability to clarify the intangible beauties and wonders of Tolkien's creativity was crystalized for me in a remarkable scholarly exchange between her and the equally perceptive and formidable Tom Shippey on how to read this evidently simple story, "Allegory Versus Bounce" (106).

Bratman talks at length about the decision that Tolkien made to publish *Smith* without the essay that was published for the first time in the extended edition edited by Flieger. "Adding the essay to the story changes the focus of the whole, from Smith to the Fairies. This makes for a different type of story. Tolkien wrote in 'On Fairy-stories' that the term 'fairy-story' is misleading. 'Most good 'fairy-stories' are about the *aventures* of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches,' he says. 'Stories that are actually concerned primarily with 'fairies' . . . are relatively rare, and as a rule not very interesting' (*FS* 113). Would *Smith* with the material of the essay added in be less interesting? Would it be cutting open the ball

in search of the bounce? My impression is that a better metaphor is that it would deflate the ball. Even though it doesn't tell you anything you don't already subjectively know, spelling it out and explaining it definitively leeches the tang of eerie mystery from the story. Reading the story is now, for me, a double experience: the one of knowing the facts behind the story simultaneously with the memory of not knowing them" (110).

Bratman than engages in a lengthy discussion comparing *Smith* to other works, including Tolkien's own "The Quest of Erebor," Neil Gaiman's graphic novel series *Sandman*, Peter Jackson's movie of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (indulging what often seems a myopic obsession for Bratman, as discussed below) and a "contemporary urban fantasy," *The War for the Oaks*, by Emma Bull. Bratman writes of the latter, "it is the shadow of a *War for the Oaks* type of story that I see when I read Tolkien's essay. I envisage a version of *Smith* incorporating a version of the essay, beginning with the King and Queen of Faery hatching their plot, then arranging through Rider for the King to serve as his apprentice—which the essay clearly states he did (94)—before proceeding on to the Great Cake without any mystery to it at all. It would be a far lesser story that missed the point. It might still be enjoyable to read, but it would not be a perfect fairy-story" (116). He concludes by thanking Flieger "for advocating for the meaning and significance of the story, and then for revealing the essay behind it, the things that made me realize how finely Tolkien had crafted *Smith* as we have it" as well as Tolkien himself as well as "all those later authors with a similarly fine eye for how Faery may be used in their stories" (*Ibid*). I share that gratitude.

Part 2 of the book is dedicated to the Inklings more generally. Most notably, the first essay of this part is the piece from which the title of the book is taken. "'Gifted Amateurs': C. S. Lewis and the Inklings," was originally published in 2007 in the book *C. S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy*, edited by Bruce L. Edwards, and demonstrates Bratman's extensive knowledge about the history of Lewis, Tolkien and the Inklings. Part 3, entitled "Others," covers a range of authors, from Lord Dunsany to Neil Gaiman. Of these, I found a previously unpublished piece (originally presented at Mythcon 31 in 2000) entitled "The Geography of Earthsea" to be the most rewarding.

Bratman returns to the discussion of Tolkien in the fourth part of the book, which he calls "Squiggles," which consists of brief miscellaneous essays, none of which add greatly to the discussion. The first one is a rather odd piece entitled "The Fellowship of the Ring: A Review, 1954," which he first published on his blog in 2005. In discussing this piece in his introduction to this part, Bratman explains that he wrote this "review" because he was "dissatisfied with all the actual 1954 reviews of Tolkien's book" and thought he could have done better" (333). However, writing a review more than 50 years after the release of what turned out to be one of the most important pieces of literature of the twentieth century is not the same thing as

writing a review of that work when the book was first released and its ultimate place in literary history was unknown.

In this section, Bratman also indulges his obsession about the Jackson films[2], with a piece that he wrote before even the first one was released entitled "The Case Against Peter Jackson." Bratman brags about this polemic, "I was subsequently privately informed that my little piece received approbation from certain quarters in southern France (334), implying, of course, that Christopher Tolkien approved of his preemptive attack on the films. Setting aside whether such name-dropping is appropriate or helpful, as someone who has a higher opinion of the Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films than Bratman (or at least is less bothered by them), I found his well-known essay "Summa Jacksonica: A Reply to Defenses of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films, after St. Thomas Aquinas" (Croft 27-62) to be much more compelling than this piece, and I wish that he had included it in this collection instead.

Bratman also includes a more apt "polemic" entitled "Yes, There Is Religion in Middle-earth," which is an extended response to a statement by Lin Carter that "Tolkien's world has no religion in it." Bratman convincingly concludes that "the answer to Carter is that he's framed his question wrongly—what Tolkien lacks is not religion, it's colorful religious trappings—and even taken as Carter frames it, his charge is not entirely true" (348). This part also includes a brief "parody" that Bratman wrote shortly after the release of *The Silmarillion* entitled "The Condensed *Silmarillion*" that some might find amusing.

The final piece in the book is the one that had not been previously published (though it included some elements combined from other pieces that had been). "The Making of a Tolkien Fan: A Personal Reminiscence" is a fitting coda to this book, firmly establishing Bratman's long journey within the filament of the Tolkien fandom and scholarship. For all its foibles, *Gifted Amateurs* is a welcome contribution to those communities.

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[2] This fixation is something that frequent readers of Bratman's blog can observe.

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