



Book-Review:
*There Would Always Be a Fairy Tale: More Essays on
Tolkien*

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Flieger, Verlyn. *There Would Always Be a Fairy Tale: More Essays on Tolkien*. Kent State UP, 2017. ISBN 978-1-60635-308-0.

Verlyn Flieger has long been recognized as one of the leading voices in Tolkien Studies. Her diligence in the field and her work's accessibility to lay readers and scholars alike have made her an acknowledged Tolkien expert, and as such she has been at the forefront of many of the field's critical conversations. In particular, Flieger has often focused her scholarship on Tolkien's theory of sub-creation, especially as it can be used as a lens to read his fiction. She has written extensively on Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-stories" and was also one of the first to seriously address his unfinished time travel novel *The Notion Club Papers*.

Flieger's latest collection, *There Would Always Be a Fairy Tale*, falls neatly into the established pattern of her work. The first section of the book, for example, is dedicated to "On Fairy-stories," and the final section examines Tolkien's debt to foreign literary traditions, especially as they interacted with his Númenor/Atlantis obsession. These are the areas in which Flieger's expertise shines: readers will find here a deft and sensitive handling of Tolkien's complexities that manages to retain a reverence for the man and his work while asking probing, challenging questions that often lead to unexpected answers. The collection is not the cohesive whole that one might expect from a monograph, however; instead, it is an assortment of distinct essays which form "an unpatterned mosaic whose tiles touch a variety of subjects" (xii). Flieger's description is fitting: readers expecting or searching for any sort of linear argument – a pattern to the mosaic – will be disappointed.

The essays largely remain in their original forms (all but two were written for other occasions) and are, as Flieger puts it, "grouped loosely by theme" (xii), a gross understatement considering the variety of topics represented. Given the limits of

space, this review will focus on a handful of essays that stand out as representative of the collection's strengths and weaknesses.

In the first and titular essay, "There Would Always Be a "Fairy-tale": J.R.R. Tolkien and the Folklore Controversy," Flieger reads "On Fairy-stories" as a response to the debates between three branches of folklore studies represented by the theorists Max Müller, George Webbe Dasent, and Andrew Lang. In Flieger's eyes, what is at first a scholarly response to an intellectual debate becomes a deeply personal apology for fantasy in a world ravaged by war and catastrophe: at the end of the day, the solution to the controversy is less important than the recovery, consolation, and escape fantasy offers a world emerging from the bloodbath of the First World War only to find itself on the threshold of the Second. Flieger's enchanting resurrection of the historical and intellectual background of Tolkien's famous fantasy manifesto returns the essay to its natural context – a move rarely made by scholars – and thus underscores Tolkien's rejection of each of the three divisions and his unconventional decision to emphasize the *effects* of fairy-stories rather than their origins.

Next, "Re-creating Reality" describes fantasy's relationship to the primary world. Flieger defines Tolkien's term "Faërie" through the suggestion that fantasy literature differs from "realistic" literature not in category, but in degree; and explains that words "produce fantasy by rearranging reality" (36). For Flieger, *The Lord of the Rings* embodies the journey from the primary world to a secondary one – a compelling reading that deserves further exploration. It is unfortunately overshadowed by Flieger's choices elsewhere in the essay, however, beginning with the claim that the importance of *The Hobbit* relies on its foreshadowing of *The Lord of the Rings*. While many scholars agree that the latter exceeds the former in artistry, few have gone so far as to suggest that *The Hobbit's* progeny is its greatest significance, and it is unexpected coming from one who tends rather to champion Tolkien's minor works. Flieger's own essay "Tolkien's French Connection" exists in tension with the tendencies of "Re-creating Reality" by reading *The Hobbit* as both a classic and a parodic *aventure* narrative – i.e., where a knight goes off into the Blue to seek adventure – that is completely independent of the quest narrative of its sequel. The essay is further troubled by her assertion that the book's conclusion lacks "a eucatastrophe" because Bilbo "has never been in any real peril" (40), a claim on which she does not elaborate or support with evidence, leaving her readers as much in the dark as Bilbo in Gollum's cave. Finally, the essay concludes with a section titled "The Inheritors," which discusses only Philip Pullman in any meaningful detail. The essay is encumbered by this final section, leaving the reader confused as to exactly what Flieger means by it, why Pullman was the most appropriate "inheritor" to include, and to where the original topic has vanished. The final paragraph asserts that Tolkien the theorist will exist as long as Tolkien the story-teller, but it is difficult to see how this relates to fantasy's alteration of reality.

The collection's second section opens with "Words and World-making: The Particle Physics of Middle-earth," a tour de force in miniature, in which Flieger studies the ways in which the various names of a single location reflect the worldviews of the peoples who named it. She examines the etymology and definition of each name of the mountain Caradhras, for example, concluding that "words change the phenomena; the Elves do not see the mountain differently from Men and Dwarves. They see a different mountain" (74). Despite being outside Flieger's usual areas of interest, this essay is perhaps the best in the collection: it is fascinating, insightful and, despite its emphasis on etymology and language, clear and accessible. Regrettably, it is also short: less than five pages; and, just as the reader becomes truly excited by what might be said next,

the essay ends. Indeed, many of the pieces in this collection are not traditional academic essays, “Words and World-making” included. “Eucatastrophe in the Dark,” for example, is a description of Flieger’s strategies for teaching Tolkien’s major fiction in higher education.

The prize for holding the collection’s most radical claim, though, belongs to “The Jewels, the Stone, the Ring, and the Making of Meaning.” Flieger compares Tolkien’s three treasures (the Silmarils, the Arkenstone, and the Ring) and evaluates the relative success of each. She concludes that while the Arkenstone is a success because it lacks ambition and the Ring because Tolkien’s skills were fully-developed at the time of writing, the Silmarils’ “role in the story is counter to their essential nature” (111), and they are evidence that here Tolkien’s “reach exceeded his grasp” because of “the limitations of his skill” at the time of writing (106). Flieger rejects the idea that the Silmarils could contain unsullied light and yet incite the most horrific misdeeds in Middle-earth’s early history. While she does indicate significant Silmaril-related discrepancies within the texts, Flieger may have erred in assuming the Jewels were meant to play the same role as the Ring. Indeed, one might point out that it is not the Silmarils but the Oath of Fëanor that wreaks havoc in Arda – and that both the Ring and the Oath (not the Jewels) threaten to bind in everlasting darkness. Flieger is surely accurate in that Tolkien improves with time, but she too hastily assumes that the Silmarils and the Ring are parallels in kind and purpose.

The second section’s final essay, “Making Choices: Moral Ambiguity in Tolkien’s Major Fiction,” addresses a criticism often leveled at Tolkien: namely, that his stories are simple matters of Good fighting Evil and that his characters are one-dimensional and face no real temptations. While the essay is a thoughtful, complex defense of Middle-earth’s moral/philosophical landscape and a must-read for anyone who has found themselves defending said landscape, Flieger’s title is misleading: apart from one obscure case in *The Notion Club Papers*, she offers examples from *The Lord of the Rings* only, inexplicably ignoring the moral quagmires of *The Silmarillion* that so often depress first-time readers.

Flieger reaches again for those dark undertones in the third section’s final piece, “Fays, Corrigans, Elves, and More: Tolkien’s Dark Ladies.” She follows the archetypes of the title as they appear in Tolkien’s works. These figures, she argues, reveal “the danger of underestimating the power of a woman,” and they “all derive from the dark side of Tolkien’s perilous realm of Faerie. They balance and round out his gallery of female portrayals” (177). One might wonder why Flieger did not include the River Woman, Goldberry’s mother, in her reading, but her exclusion is only a minor drawback in an otherwise compelling piece. The essay is an important voice in Tolkien Studies as recent trends encourage scholars to reassess Tolkien’s representations of gender and sexuality.

There Would Always Be a Fairy Tale is, as with many collections, a mixed bag. Flieger’s expertise is to be admired, certainly, and it is on display here, particularly in her treatment of “On Fairy-stories,” the Númenor cycle, and Tolkien’s personal and creative contradictions, but occasionally the essays fail to live up to her reputation. As a whole, the volume’s greatest drawback is its lack of cohesion. Flieger’s defense – that it is consciously “an unpatterned mosaic” as well as “loosely” organized – only stretches so far. Though she sees “a more coherent picture than [she] had anticipated, a picture of a man as complicated as the books that bear his name” (xii), that picture is less clear to the reader, primarily because the collection does not include any final postscript, note, or conclusion to draw the loose ends together.

This makes the volume difficult to read straight through. Flieger advises that the essays are to be read “one by one and in no particular order” (xvii), but this prompts the reader to question the strict necessity of the collection, given that the essays, or at least their concepts, are available elsewhere. “How Trees Behave – Or Do They?” was published in *Mythlore* in 2013, for example, and “Tolkien, Kalevala, and Middle-earth” is quite similar to “Tolkien, *Kalevala*, and “The Story of Kullervo,”” of *Green Suns and Faërie* (2012). Three of the essays, “Tolkien’s Celtic Connection,” “Drowned Lands,” and “Voyaging About,” share titles and a significant amount of information with the sections of an *Interrupted Music* (2005) chapter.

This highlights the deficiency of the essays in a more individual sense: they tend to rehash material with which the veteran reader of Flieger will be familiar. “On Fairy-stories” and topics like ecology and world-building will perhaps always be fixtures in Tolkien Studies, and Flieger has been a worthy champion of *The Notion Club Papers* and other of Tolkien’s lesser-known works; but this is ground she knows by heart. This means that readers are offered on the one hand the very best of Flieger’s knowledge, keenly honed, and on the other the same map of the old country with a few more details drawn in.

For those new to Flieger, these essays are invaluable, and for more experienced scholars they remain worth reading to see how Flieger continues to develop themes long in her repertoire (even the disappointing essays provide food for thought) – although it would be difficult to broadly describe what she presents here as new. Rather, *There Would Always Be a Fairy Tale* celebrates an expertise brought to its height by long and careful study, ultimately revealing as much about Flieger and her dedication as it does Tolkien and his.

Biography: Megan Fontenot is an MA student at Michigan State University whose research interests include Tolkien, mythology and folklore, and the relationship between Western religious mysticisms and the fantastic in 19th and early 20th century trans-Atlantic literature. She holds a dual BA in English and Humanities from Milligan College.