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Book Review:

*Binding Them All: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on J. R. R. Tolkien
and His Works*

Jyrki Korpua

Kirner-Ludwig, Monika, Stephan Köser, and Sebastian Streitberger, editors. *Binding Them All: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on J. R. R. Tolkien and His Works*. Walking Tree, 2017. ISBN 978-3-905703-37-5.

Binding Them All. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on J. R. R. Tolkien and His Works, edited by Monika Kirner-Ludwig, Stephan Köser, and Sebastian Streitberger, is an article collection of selected papers that emerged from a series of lectures given by various scholars at the University of Augsburg, Bavaria, Germany in 2014. Individual contributors range from experts to doctoral students in interdisciplinary fields such as literature, linguistics, geography, history, cultural studies, and communications. Therefore, the title “Binding Them All” proficiently addresses this wide spectrum of approaches. The wide interdisciplinary approach of the book and the different levels of academic authority are at the same time the major strength and the major weakness of the collection.

In the introduction, the editors explain that the series of lectures behind the making of this book aimed originally to bring together two fields of study, linguistics and literature, which have “forcefully been kept apart too often” (1). This of course is a problem that many studies on Tolkien ever since the work of Tom Shippey 1980s have been trying to resolve, and Tolkien scholars today, usually, are well aware of the opposition between “Lit” (Literature) and “Lang” (Language), which was a fundamental conflict within English departments, especially within the British University system, since the early 20th-century.

The editors also explain that they find Tolkien’s fiction an important topic because of “his endeavors to create worlds of absolute and minute detail” (3). Since this book is based on lecture series aimed for students held at the University of Augsburg, it soon becomes clear from the tenor of this book that the position and reputation of Tolkien studies and fantasy studies as whole is very different in Germany than in the Nordic Countries, England, or even the United States, where there are many meritorious scholars producing work on fantasy, speculative fiction and Tolkien. In a German university context, writers and publishers perhaps have to justify Tolkien’s fiction as their subject and claim its applicability for “a university context” (3). For me, this suggests that fantasy scholarship still occupies a quite minor position within German (and Swiss) academia. In addition, the intended audience for the original lectures – students from eleven different fields of study, not fellow scholars – means that this volume’s starting point is relatively basic from a scholarly perspective, assuming little prior knowledge on any given topic.

Because of that, the introductory style of this interdisciplinary book brings up a question: for a scholar of Tolkien or fantasy literature, what can this book contribute? The book contains interesting viewpoints but, because hundreds of works on Tolkien studies have been published since the 1990s, few of which have been cited in this volume, the innovativeness of the research essays presented here can be underwhelming. Although notable exceptions include the contributions by Thomas Honegger and Birgit Schwan, some essays simply make basic observations on Middle-earth's geography or provide didactic, even simplistic, commentary on the film adaptations. For example, Sebastian Streitberger in his article describing the usefulness of fictional films as didactic tools, "Concepts of Space in Middle-earth's Landscapes or the Potential of Fantasy and School Geography," tells us that the "vast scope of Tolkien's closed world with its own immanent history, languages and geography can be studied almost as thoroughly and coherently as the physical existing earth in which we live" (199).

Nevertheless, the book has its virtues. The strongest contribution in the volume may be Professor Thomas Honegger's lively overview of Tolkien's academic life and work, "'Meet the Professor' – A Present-day Colleague's View of Tolkien's Academic Life and Work." Honegger discusses how J. R. R. Tolkien, after his professional retirement, had to adjust himself to a position where he was "no longer primarily perceived as an academic and professional philologist" but a celebrated fantasy author with eager readers, followers and fast-growing fan base (17). Honegger supplements this remark with an overview of Tolkien's professional lectures, seminars, tutorials, thesis supervisions, and his now well-known print publications. Honegger incisively points out that "Tolkien's scholarly work is indissolubly connected with his literary writings, the one influencing and interacting with the other. However, the wider public remained ignorant of this interconnectedness for a long time" (31).

Another notable essay comes from Birgit Schwan's close reading of Tolkien's *The Fall of Arthur*, "Searching 'For a Better Rhythm, or a Better Word or Phrase': J. R. R. Tolkien's Re-Telling of the Legend of King Arthur in Alliterative Metre." Schwan sees Tolkien's long unfinished poem as simultaneously "archaic" and "modern." In the analyses and interpretation, Schwan compares Tolkien's text with Sir Thomas Malory's classic *Le Morte Darthur*, noting general characteristics of metre, syntax, word-order, vocabulary, morphology, and phonology. Schwan's study emphasizes differences in the poetic styles of Tolkien and Malory but also highlights the notion that although "both authors used very different methods to achieve similar and, on the whole, equivalent effects. . . . In fact, both create a different picture of the legend of King Arthur while keeping the story in its essence alive" (130-31). Schwan's article therefore gives the reader an insight to Tolkien's quite recently published text *The Fall of Arthur*, published posthumously in 2013. The article also applies an interesting combination of philological text analysis with the interpretative close reading usually connected with literary studies.

By and large, the book itself is quite well written and easily accessible. The style and layout is functional. Some direct quotes lack page numbers (e.g. the very first quote of the book) but, overall, the book is well edited and competently made. I suggest the book to general readers, but in most parts – excluding the given examples – it does not bring important extra value to Tolkien scholarship.

Biography: Doctor Jyrki Korpua is a literary scholar and a cultural researcher from the University of Oulu. His doctoral dissertation, *Constructive Mythopoetics in J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium* (Oulu University 2015), focuses on constructive poetics and Christian Platonic elements in Tolkien's fiction. For the last thirteen years Korpua has published articles, monographs and participated in international conferences on a wide range of subjects. Korpua's research interests include fantasy, dystopian and utopian fiction, Bible-studies, graphic novels, sport narratives, and the *Kalevala*.