



BOOK REVIEW:

*A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the
Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas*

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Grybauskas, Peter. *A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas*. Kent State UP, 2021. ISBN 978-1606354308.

Peter Grybauskas makes a compelling case that Tolkien's use of "edges, allusions, lacunae" (xvii) is an essential element of Tolkien's world-building, that "untold tales are nothing short of a defining feature of his subcreation" (xx). In so doing, Grybauskas undermines a perception common among many critics that Tolkien's legendarium depends for its narrative power on copious detail, on historical depth fully painted in. Building on work by Gergely Nagy, John D. Rateliff, Michael D. C. Drout, Namiko Hitotsubashi, and Rachel Scavera (and more generally that of Verlyn Flieger, with whom he studied), Grybauskas creates a tripartite taxonomy of untold tales that other Tolkienists – and other scholars of speculative fiction – will find useful as an interpretive framework: "faded traditions, allusive webs, and outright omissions" (21). These categories apply across a wide range of Tolkien materials from *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* to role-playing games. Grybauskas covers this vast terrain with efficiency, warmth, and wit in just 138 pages. He acknowledges fellow scholars frequently, and when he disagrees with the latter (for instance, with Tom Shippey on page 88), he does so in a measured, constructive way. Still, Grybauskas could have made his arguments even more powerful by mapping his taxonomy onto (or against) widely used schema such as Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), Mark J. P. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), and N. K. Jemisin's popular webinar *Growing Your Iceberg* (2015). The book would also have benefited from more attention to the untold tales of the Orcs and the inhabitants of

Harad, Khand, and Rhûn, addressing the significant scholarship on the racist and orientalist tropes Tolkien deployed in conceptualizing and depicting these peoples. Even with such missed opportunities to connect with wider research, however, *A Sense of Tales Untold* has much to offer Tolkien scholars, medievalists, folklorists, and students of fantasy literature writ large.

Tolkien himself emphasised the importance of *not* spelling everything out, of creating the illusion of depth in order for Faerie to be real for his audience. Grybauskas reminds us of this by using Tolkien's own words as epigraphs, how it's the "untold stories that are most moving" (from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*). Grybauskas traces how consistently Tolkien maintained the primacy of what he called in a 1971 letter a "Frameless Picture ... surrounded by the glimmer of limitless extensions in time and space" (qtd. in Grybauskas xix) – from the injunction in "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" to not let the "glamour of Poesis" overcome the "seekers after history" (qtd. in 7) to the joy of "Eucatastrophe" described in "On Fairy-stories" and the vistas seen but not reached in *Smith of Wootton Major*. Further stressing the point, Grybauskas quotes Rateliff to great effect: "Dr. Humphrey Havard, fellow Inklings and family friend ... thought Tolkien had *only ten percent of his legendarium written down*. All the rest was in his head" (94, emphasis original). Ten percent aligns nicely with the well-known "Iceberg Theory" coined by Hemingway, discussed at length by Grybauskas, which posits that the great bulk of a story's meaning and mechanics should exist below its surface.

The chapter on the allusive web of the Last Alliance evidences how useful Grybauskas's approach can be. Consider this insight: according to Grybauskas, *The Lord of the Rings* is not "so much a story of war as it is about war stories: telling them, reading them, remembering and reflecting on them" (26). Grybauskas proceeds to unpack this suggestion, with references not only to Tolkien's wartime experiences but to those of novelist Tim O'Brien in Vietnam. War stories in *The Lord of the Rings* let characters ponder events that took place thousands of years prior, affording agency to the "lowly" characters like Sam, Gollum, and the Orcs. War stories are at the heart of Grybauskas's surprising argument that "Gollum's keen ear for story ... solidifies his role as a knowledgeable historian and – from a certain point of view – a hero" (29). For example, Gollum throughout the text avidly tells and consumes stories about the Last Alliance, and his knowledge on some crucial bits of lore surpasses that of the Wise. For instance, "Sauron himself only discovers 'where Isildur fell' through torturing Gollum" (32). Gollum's understanding of stories widely dispersed across the allusive web helps him remain undaunted as Grybauskas illustrates by noting Gollum's acquaintance with Sauron's Black Hand, which though an "undoubtedly menacing Hand, its fingers can be cut, as history and legend teach" (32). Grybauskas here leads readers back to the text under scrutiny, refreshing our own knowledge of the story and nudging us to cross-check what we recalled or thought we knew. As he foregrounds, records of the Second Age are a misty mess, yet understanding the Third Age depends on the web of allusions that a Frodo, a Gollum, or a Gorbag and Shagrat might reveal, infer, or discover. These characters are proxies for the reader, unlike, say, Elrond (whose reticence to elaborate on the history of the Second Age is, as Grybauskas says, frustrating). The Third Age characters are not antiquarians; what they learn is often necessary for their survival, and it helps drive the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The chapter on the Túrin cycle provides valuable (inter)textual analysis, not least given the inherent complexities within what Grybauskas calls Tolkien's "most-told tale" (50, emphasis original). Grybauskas draws attention to the *Kalevala* as the initial inspiration, underscoring Tolkien's speculation that already upon their transcription the *Kalevala*, the *Mabinogion*, and other oral tales include what Tolkien called "strange lumber" and a "thick dust of a no longer understood tradition" (qtd. in 69). Grybauskas contributes to our understanding of Tolkien's desire to complete or at least organise the underlying story-cycles in the Primary World and of his son Christopher's deep-delving editorial labours. Grybauskas buttresses his analysis with expositions of fragments, possibly dubious allusions, and other "strange lumber" in the Túrin tales, Mim's sack and its contents (70–71), the swords Anglachel and Anguirel (71–72), and the Dragon-helm (72–73). Grybauskas brings us back to the source materials such as the *Völsunga saga* and *The Battle of Maldon*. As Grybauskas suggests, Tolkien may have taken some inspiration from a "convoluted tradition. He seems to revel in the sheer confusion ... of the Völsunga material and the Sigurd-Brynhild-Gunnar triangle" (73); as such, a "weird feedback loop develops, whereby the Sigurd legend of the Primary World explicitly influences the subcreated Túrin Tur-ambar, who in turn exerts an influence on Sigurd in Tolkien's *New Lay*" (82).

Furthermore, Grybauskas emphasises what he calls Tolkien's huge influence on the development of role-playing games (110). Noteworthy is Grybauskas's use of the term "slow-gaming", based on the "slow food movement founded in Italy", as a good vehicle for Tolkienian untold tales and narrative depth (111); he then provides excellent case-studies on the games *Diablo* and *Dark Souls*, focusing on how these games create their immersive experiences, convey narrative depth, and develop the hero's journey slowly and elliptically. At the same time, Grybauskas's argument here would have benefited by including ideas from "In Praise of Slow Games", a classic 2019 manifesto by Artur Ganszyniec, lead designer on *The Witcher* and *Wolsung* games. Ganszyniec's desiderata include player-focused growth in assumptions and feelings, more grounding in relations to other players, and increased originality and authenticity of voice, all of which would have deepened the context of Tolkienian slow-gaming in *A Sense of Tales Untold*.

One of the most problematic untold tales is that of the Orcs, as Grybauskas acknowledges: "Tolkien wrestled with questions moral and metaphysical regarding the origin and nature of the Orcs, whose status as cannon fodder became increasingly untenable in his sub-creation" (38). Given the growing body of research into how Primary World ideas about race and ethnicity play out in fantasy worlds, the not-insignificant question about the origin and nature of the Orcs feels largely ignored in *A Sense of Tales Untold*. To help elucidate *why* stories about the Orcs (and the Haradrim, Variags, and soldiers of Rhûn) remain largely untold, *A Sense of Tales Untold* would have benefited from scholarship such as Dimitra Fimi's "Revisiting Race in Tolkien's Legendarium" (2012), Helen Young's *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (2016), and Matthew X. Vernon's *The Black Middle Ages: Race and the Construction of the Middle Ages* (2018). None of these, however, appears in Grybauskas's bibliography.

Likewise, because *A Sense of Tales Untold* fits nicely within the burgeoning field of research into world-building and subcreation, Grybauskas

would have been well-served to bring heightened attention to recent scholarship in this area. For instance, P. Djèlí Clark on his blog *The Musings of a Disgruntled Haradrim* ... (September 21st, 2018) explains in great detail the historical underpinnings and world-building techniques of his novel *The Black God's Drums* – his use of untold tales is both like and unlike the uses Grybauskas identifies in Tolkien's work, and our understanding of Tolkien would be enhanced by a comparison. Stefan Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor's "Notes Towards a Critical Approach to Worlds and World-Building", an article in *Fafnir* from 2016, presents a case for "world-architecture" that *A Sense of Tales Untold* might have used with profit, especially in the chapter on Túrin. In addition, Helen Marshall's "A Flare of Light or 'The Great Clomping Foot of Nerdism?': M John Harrison's Radical Poetics of Worldbuilding", an article in *TEXT* from 2020, juxtaposes Tolkien with Harrison (and Michael Moorcock, China Miéville, Timothy Morton, and Jeff VanderMeer). Marshall's reading suggests that Harrison and Tolkien are more alike than Harrison's well-publicised polemics might imply, which would have provided additional scaffolding for Grybauskas's thesis.

Still, plaudits to Grybauskas for aperçus that open doors to further reflection. For example, referring to *The Blade That Was Broken*, he writes that Orcs and Uruks are not "wholly ignorant of heroic legend either: perhaps this very blade figures prominently in their horror stories of the Great Siege and the bad old days" (48). He adds a footnote: "Proto-slasher films, perhaps" (130n45). I laughed out loud at this (a rarity when reading scholarly monographs), valuing the potential for nuance in his interpretation. There is also this: "Tolkien's terse summaries open up imaginative spaces for all manner of Túrin cycles: *Túrin in Love*, *Túrin Enraged*, *Túrin the Outlaw Swashbuckler*, *Túrin and Beleg: The Buddy Comedy*" (74). Here Grybauskas looks back to source traditions such as *Orlando Furioso*, *Tirant lo Blanch*, and *Amadís de Gaula* – and the multitudinous sequels and derivatives so famously satirised by Cervantes – and forward to the endless prequels, sequels and spin-offs of modern cinema and games (including, of course, the Tolkienian legendarium).

To close: Grybauskas succeeds in supporting his central thesis that "Tolkien's untold tales matter; [that] they are integral to the author's total vision" (79). Just as importantly, Grybauskas does this in part by reading Tolkien in the context of novelists such as Hemingway and O'Brien whose work is not speculative/fantastical, and likewise in terms of role-playing games. Tolkien Studies needs more such readings, to lodge its findings ever more firmly within wider rivers of literary, ludic, and media scholarship – and those wider rivers most definitely will benefit from Tolkienist eddies and currents. As Grybauskas makes clear, research on Tolkien's work and the underlying traditions have much to teach about meta-, inter-, and para-textuality; about point of view, aporia, diegesis, and unreliable narrators; about the reality effect and negative capability; transmediality; and many other topics that currently interest scholars across varied fields of literary inquiry. Perhaps Lit and Lang can be reconciled after all?

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