

Sub-Creating Arda: World-Building in J.R.R. Tolkien's Work, Its Precursors and Its Legacies

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This volume takes up the threads of Mark J.P. Wolf's 2012 monograph *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Wolf's work provided a 'grammar' for discussing world-building as worthy of study and attention in its own right. Following that vein, *Sub-creating Arda* collects twenty essays which showcase diverse approaches for considering the world-building elements of various fantastic and fictional text-worlds – some of them more convincing than others. As the name suggests, this anthology is primarily concerned with Tolkien's Legendarium, taking for granted the fact that it presents a supremely convincing example of a secondary world.

But it would be a mistake to think that this book is only about Tolkien. In fact, it is divided into three sections: five essays which consider the theoretical problems and solutions which world-building provides, nine essays focusing on world-building in Tolkien's work, and six essays looking at world-building by other writers through a Tolkienian lens. Each of these sections has its gems, but it is also worth mentioning that many of these essays are best considered in dialogue with the other pieces in the collection. This review will take the approach of highlighting one essay from each of the volume's three sections, and then suggest ways in which that essay can be read in dialogue with the others in the book.

In the first section, Massimiliano Izzo's 'Worldbuilding and Mythopoeia' critiques Wolf's grammar of subcreation by making a distinction between 'worldbuilding' and a 'myth-making' or 'mythopoeia.' By the former, Izzo means the scientific, quantitative, or computational aspects of a secondary world: economics, physics, and intricate magical systems borrowing from the physical sciences of the primary world. In explaining the latter set of terms, Izzo draws upon Tolkien's seminal essay 'On Fairy-stories,' in which the things that lend verisimilitude to a secondary world are primarily mythical and linguistic constructs. Thus, there can be said to be a dialectical opposition, or at least a tension, between worldbuilding and myth-making. Izzo argues that Tolkien's successors in the fantasy genre have often failed to hold this tension. Contemporary high fantasy authors have far exceeded the Legendarium in terms of volume, detail, and scale,

but lack the enduring mythical quality of Tolkien's work due to their tendency to historicise myth rather than to mythologise history.

On the opposite extreme, Izzo points to authors such as Peter Beagle, Neil Gaiman, and Juliet Marillier, all of whom have tended to avoid the more tangible aspects of worldbuilding and embrace the 'placelessness' of the fairy tale genre, losing the distinct sense of time and place afforded by a convincing myth. One gets the impression that Izzo thinks this the lesser of two evils, but he ends the essay by calling upon these mythopoeic writers to 'reach out' and embrace the attractive scope and scale of contemporary high fantasy, and provide 'a glimpse of Fäerie as well as an immersive experience in a massive story' (p. 52). Detailed in its scope and constructive in its conclusions, 'Worldbuilding and Mythopoeia' offers an answer to the much more pessimistic critique of worldbuilding found in Péter Kristóf Makai's 'Beyond Fantastic Self-indulgence: Aesthetic Limits to World-building' and in combination with N. Trevor Brierly's incisive and practical 'Worldbuilding Design Patterns in the Work of J.R.R. Tolkien,' it would provide a helpful way forward for aspiring subcreators.

In the second section, John Garth's 'Ilu's Music: The Creation of Tolkien's Creation Myth' is as engaging a read as one would expect from the author of *Tolkien and the Great War*. Taking the form of a literary 'whodunit,' Garth's essay chases the various threads of Tolkien's Ainulindalë down unexpected avenues of Tolkien's early years, from the home library of his friend and fellow T.C.B.S. member Christopher Wiseman's father, to the death of two of his closest friends at the Battle of the Somme. Throughout this process, Garth shows us that 'Tolkien is still half a stranger to us' (p. 122). Garth proposes an alternative timeline to the one generally supposed for the first draft of the *The Music of the Ainur*, placing it roughly contemporary with *The Fall of Gondolin*. In all of this, Garth avoids stooping to mere source-hunting (always a danger when trying to ferret out Tolkien's 'influences'). He draws on a complex range of elements from Tolkien's life during those years: musical interests, linguistic play, and personal correspondence.

The essay ends by highlighting yet another facet of the complex relationship between language and legend in Tolkien's work, tracing Tolkien's engagement with an (erroneously translated) Akkadian creation myth and the Biblical story of Babel, all of which is entangled in his attempt to find meaning and identity during a time of personal crisis. Set in this light, *The Music of the Ainur* can be understood not merely as a work of theological speculation, but as a real source of consolation which Tolkien used to navigate tragedies in the primary world. Within the larger context of this collection, 'Ilu's Music' serves as a useful counterpoint to Bradford Lee Eden's 'Sub-creation by any Other Name: The Artist and God in the Early Twentieth Century.' Eden focuses mainly on the 'Third Spring' authors who predated or were Tolkien's

contemporaries, suggesting tenuous connections between them without drawing any conclusions about how this should illuminate our reading of any of the authors mentioned.

In the final section, Kristine Larsen's 'A Mythology for Poland: Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* Fantasy Series as a Tolkienian Subcreation' challenges preconceptions about what 'Tolkienian fantasy' might mean. Larsen draws comparison between two secondary worlds which, at first glance, are quite different in scope and tone. Larsen argues convincingly that the genesis of Sapkowski's *Witcher* stories as attempting to give voice to a lost sense of Polish national identity – characterised, among other things, by scarring – is similar in its aims to Tolkien's early desire to create a 'mythology for England.'

To follow Larsen's argument: Sapkowski, though not endowed with the same poetic or linguistic gifts as Tolkien, has adapted a wide range of recognisable European fairytales and folk traditions, modifying and subverting them in ways that compensate for the erosion of Polish national identity by the wars and conquests of the twentieth century, and by an Anglo-American hegemony in Polish science fiction and fantasy. Larsen even suggests that in this regard, Sapkowski's experiment has been more successful: while *The Lord of the Rings* 'will never inspire patriotic emotion in the English breast, or culturally distinguish any English person from the rest of the world,' Sapkowski's subcreation does in fact seem to inspire these sentiments in Poland (pp. 389-90). In the way it uses a Tolkienian lens to examine Sapkowski's secondary world, this essay is a good companion to Maureen f. Mann's 'Artefacts and Immersion in the Worldbuilding of Tolkien and the Brontës,' which compares some of Tolkien's statements about children's linguistic play as found in his lecture 'A Secret Vice' to the Brontës's own imagined world, a shared collaborative space in which they could engage in literary experimentation.

Sub-creating Arda is a fascinating collection of essays, many of which highlight less well-known facets of Tolkien's subcreative technique, such as focalisation (Allan Turner's 'One Pair of Eyes: Focalisation and Worldbuilding'), poetry (Michaela Hausmann's 'Lyrics on Lost Lands: Constructing Lost Places through Poetry in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*'), and dialogue (Lothmann, Heilmann, and Hintzen's '*Then Smaug Spoke*: On Constructing the Fantastic via Dialogue in Tolkien's Story Cosmos'). It deserves a place on the shelf of scholars, enthusiasts, and aspiring subcreators with an interest in Tolkien's Legendarium.

Reviewed by Richard Rohlin