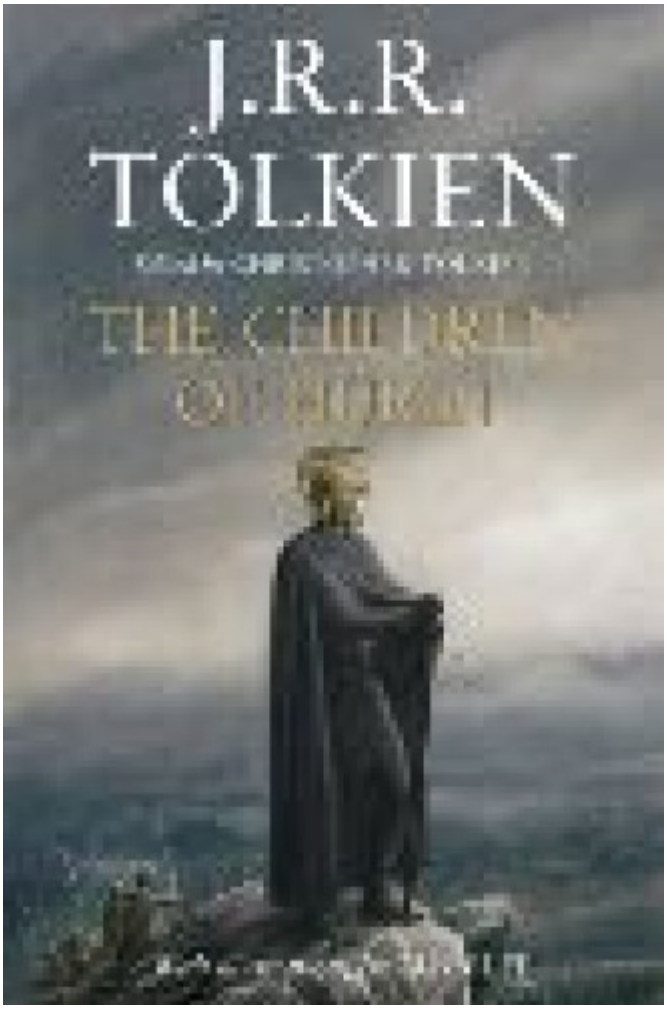
# The Children of Húrin

reviewed by Philip Zaleski in the October 16, 2007 issue

## In Review




### The Children of Húrin

J. R. R. Tolkien
Houghton Mifflin

In his iconoclastic *Autobiography* (1883), Anthony Trollope recalled speculating, during a sea voyage to Australia, about the fate of his unpublished manuscripts if his

ship were to founder en route:

> I do not know how many posthumous books the public would receive from an author's pen, one after the other, when the author had long been buried. That one novel should be accepted, as was the case with *Kenelm Chillingly*, I can understand; but I fear that the numbers appearing month after month, and year after year—when the man who wrote them was all but forgotten—would weary the British public.

Trollope may be too sanguine here, for the public no longer accepts even *Kenelm Chillingly* (Edward Bulwer-Lytton's last novel), which has vanished from the memory of all but specialists in minor Victoriana. Yet there is one brilliant exception to Trollope's rule: 34 years after his death, posthumous works by the English fantasist and philologist John Ronald Reuel Tolkien continue to roll off the presses with satisfying regularity and into the hands of an eager public. Has any author enjoyed so prodigious a literary afterlife? First came *The Silmarillion* (1976), Tolkien's creation myth, followed by the 12-volume *History of Middle-earth* (1983-1996), a vast compendium of previously unpublished legend, lore and linguistic invention. Three children's books and a sheaf of scholarly papers have appeared also, making, in aggregate, a dent in the budget of libraries nationwide.

Tolkien's immense influence—all those bookcases at Borders and Barnes & Noble devoted to second-rate knockoffs of *The Lord of the Rings*!—generates sharp dispute among critics and scholars. Who can forget Germaine Greer's wail about a nightmare come true when *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was voted the 20th century's most popular book in a Waterstone poll (trumping, in descending order, *1984*, *Animal Farm*, *Ulysses* and *Catch-22*)? And then there's Tom Shippey's crack response in his work with the flagrant title *J. R. R. Tolkien*: *Author of the Century*.

The debate about Tolkien boils down to this: what does one seek in a work of fiction? If one seeks psychological subtlety and brilliant style, then Joyce or Woolf are the novelists to read. Tolkien writes in a different key, offering not only a gripping tale—he is rightly celebrated for recovering fiction's primary function of telling a good story—but one drenched in mythology and folklore, in which the actions of gods, demigods and the various creatures that inhabit the great chain of being make up a cosmic drama of good and evil, sin and forgiveness, damnation and salvation. This is emphatically Christian literature, incognito.

Tolkien was a devout Catholic who attended mass daily. But he didn't write explicitly religious fiction (as many have pointed out, God makes no appearance in *The Lord of the Rings*). His vision was too wide and his cunning too great for him to produce baldly Christian fiction of the high (Graham Greene) or low (Tim LaHaye/Jerry Jenkins) variety. He aimed at works that would draw people of every creed, or none at all, into an imagined universe where physical quests and battles are analogs of moral and spiritual conflict, a world where the "secret fire" of God's Holy Spirit burns, invisible but ever present.

The newest installment of Tolkien's posthumous assault on modern sensibilities is *The Children of Húrin*. Tolkienists (the accepted term for Tolkien fans and scholars) will recognize the title, or at least its gist, because the story of Húrin and his son Túrin, major figures in the history of Middle-earth, appears in truncated form in *The Silmarillion* (in the chapter called "Of Túrin Turambar") and is scattered throughout other volumes of the Tolkien legendarium. Folklorists, too, will find much to recognize, for the tale draws heavily on the Norse *Völsunga* saga, *Beowulf* and, above all, the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, which Tolkien read as a teenager and about which he then wrote: "The more I read of [the *Kalevala*], the more I felt at home and enjoyed myself." Prophetically, he added: "I would that we had . . . something of the sort that belonged to the English." Here is the dawn of the towering ambition that would give rise to the entire Tolkien corpus, expressed in a letter composed in 1951:

> I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legends, ranging from the large and cosmogonic to the level of romantic fairy-story, . . . which I could dedicate simply: to England, to my country. . . . The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd.

The heart of this connected body of legends is, as every true Tolkienist knows, not *The Lord of the Rings* but *The Silmarillion*. This sweeping narrative recounts the history of Middle-earth from the creation of the universe to the twilight of the elves. It begins with a version of Genesis that emphasizes sound rather than light: in the beginning God, named Eru or Ilúvatar, fashions the world through music. The music is not, as some have suggested, the music of the spheres, but rather the music that makes the spheres, a tonal foreword to Ilúvatar's eventual proclamation: "*Eä*! Let these things Be!" This is the gloss of a dedicated philologist on "Let there be light," with the root vowels e and a, the very core of language, giving life to all that is.

Once the world emerges ex nihilo, cosmic powers known as the Valar and Maiar, roughly equivalent to Greek, Norse or Egyptian gods, assist Ilúvatar in the shaping of Arda, the Earth. Opposing their labors is Melkor, the mightiest of the Valar, ruled by pride and self-love, whom Tolkien modeled upon traditional notions about Satan. At bottom, then, *The Silmarillion* merges biblical and pagan cosmologies—or, more precisely, cloaks a biblical cosmos in pagan dress—an audacious venture that sets Tolkien apart from all other fantasists and at the same time undercuts his hope of producing an authentically English myth. For while Anglo-Saxon elements loom large, a great deal of Tolkien's stock of myth and legend is imported from other cultures or is the idiosyncratic invention of his own hothouse mind. The myths of Middle-earth are not England's but Tolkien's alone, and his life's work is not a great national epic but a personal dream of breathtaking imaginative power.

*The Children of Húrin* is set in the early days of Middle-earth, 6,000 years before the events chronicled in *The Lord of the Rings*. It shares with the famous trilogy a moral landscape of ambiguous good battling unadulterated evil. In *Children*, the demonic Melkor—now known as Morgoth—threatens to overwhelm all of Middle-earth from his occult stronghold in Angband, proclaiming his ambition in words that Milton's Satan would have been proud to make his own:

> The shadow of my purpose lies upon Arda, and all that is in it bends slowly and surely to my will. But upon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into darkness and despair. Wherever they go, evil shall arise. Whenever they speak, their works shall bring ill counsel. Whatsoever they do shall turn against them.

Arrayed against Morgoth's might is a familiar (to fans of the trilogy) grouping of humans, elves and dwarves. Or so it seems at first. Continued reading discloses a darker view of these assorted beings than is found in *The Lord of the Rings*. Treachery, fury, lust and a host of other sins run rampant. Notably, the elves lack the ethereal brightness of the book and film versions of *The Lord of the Rings*, while the hobbits, paragons of bucolic amiability, never even make an appearance.

The tale focuses on the trials of Túrin as he wends his way across the land—fighting, thieving and slaying—driven by good intentions gone bad and, in time, by the wish to destroy Morgoth's most powerful ally, Glaurung the Dragon (never has one of Tolkien's dragons exuded such slimy evil). The plot mechanics hinge on a series of catastrophes, usually brought about by Túrin's besetting sins of pride and anger,

climaxing in a ghastly intersection of suicide, mistaken identity and incest. Túrin's assessment of the situation, that "all was black and drear about him, and there was a reek of death," sums it up admirably.

Tolkien's ink ran with more poison than usual when he wrote this potent tale. The bleakness is somewhat mitigated by the elevated manner of Tolkien's prose, as he writes here in the pseudo-archaic "heigh stile" of the Norse sagas and in a way reminiscent of a perhaps more pronounced influence, the pre-Raphaelite fantasist William Morris. Here is a typical passage: "'Touch me not,' he said. 'Stay your raving. She that you name wife came to you and tended you, and you did not answer her call. But one answered for you. Glaurung the Dragon, who I deem bewitched you both to your doom.'" One soon gets used to it.

In its gathering darkness, in its cruel plot and suffering figures, in its portrait of persons who intend to do good but do bad, *The Children of Húrin* has much in common with the works of other cartographers of cosmic darkness, from Aeschylus to Melville. Tolkien lacks the stylistic grace of these noble authors, but what he lacks in polish he makes up for in sheer invention. The book reminds us again of Tolkien's skill as a storyteller and of his fertility as the creator of a deeply felt moral universe, in which beings, human or not, search for or flee from beauty, truth and goodness under the invisible presence of God. To a Christian, this is a description of the world as we know it. The great fantasist Tolkien proves, in the end, to be the greatest of realists.