
J.R.R. Tolkien is perhaps the best-known and most widely beloved author of fantasy literature. Additionally, his scholarly essays such as “On Fairy-Stories” (1947) and “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” (1936) are key works in the theoretical development of speculative fiction. As Grybauskas rightly notes, “[t]o call Tolkien the father of modern fantasy may feel like a slight to earlier writers like Morris, Dunsany, and Eddison, yet his influence in this arena is plainly great; his works have been adopted as a blueprint for those who followed” (100). While criticisms of Tolkien’s pacing, characters, or writing style may be somewhat justified, where Tolkien’s fiction excels and establishes a nearly unparalleled model for those who follow is the depth of his worldbuilding. Tolkien’s world feels lived-in, with a history, literature, folklore, and languages that span millennia; his readers encounter this world through poetry, elusive references, and passing remarks which give Middle-earth a feeling of great depth. In *A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien’s Literary Canvas*, Peter Grybauskas explores Tolkien’s worldbuilding through the lens of the untold tale - the story that is referenced or only briefly sketched out, but never explicitly retold as part of the narrative.

The body of *A Sense of Tales Untold* measures in at 122 pages of dense but very readable prose, followed by twenty-five pages of detailed footnotes, an expansive bibliography, and a thorough index. Grybauskas’ book is clearly the work of both a devoted scholar and an avid fan. The detail of the work’s critical apparatus alone would make *A Sense of Tales Untold* a useful addition to the library of any Tolkien scholar or fan, but the content contained therein warrants a prominent place on the shelf for this book.

Following a brief introduction to the question examined in his book, Grybauskas in chapter 1 dives straight into his analysis of the untold tale. He does not begin with Tolkien’s fiction, but with one of Tolkien’s favorite works: the Old-English poem *Beowulf*. Here, Grybauskas discusses the numerous other tales alluded to by the *Beowulf* poet, and how the richness of allusion gives the poem a sense of weight and history. This chapter outlines a key cornerstone of Grybauskas’s argument and demonstrates just how influential the poem was on Tolkien’s thinking, frequently
referencing Tolkien’s own critical commentary on the poem. While *Beowulf* is the main emphasis of this chapter, Grybauskas shows his familiarity with the Anglo-Saxon literary corpus and makes frequent, supplementary references to other works in the literary canon.

The following two chapters dive into specific events in the history of Middle-Earth: The Last Alliance, formed to defeat Sauron at the end of the Second Age, and the Túrin saga, set in the distant First Age. While these two events are not the only moments in Middle-Earth’s history that Tolkien alludes to in *The Lord of the Rings*, they are two which frequently appear on the edges of Tolkien’s fiction and in which “Tolkien found a lifelong playground for untold stories” (xx). Details of these untold tales have been expounded by Tolkien’s son Christopher, in the decades following the elder Tolkien’s death, but there are still details left untold, the sense of which still shapes the experience of reading *The Lord of the Rings*.

Grybauskas’ fourth and fifth chapters depart from a direct analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* and instead focus on other areas of Tolkien’s fiction and on the “afterlives” of Tolkien’s legacy (xxi) and his influence on later literature, film, and video games. Chapter four deals principally with *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, Tolkien’s fictional poem based on the Old-English poetic fragment *The Battle of Maldon*, and spends a considerable amount of text discussing Ernest Hemingway’s “iceberg theory”—an idea related to Grybauskas’ untold tale—that much of a story lies submerged below the surface. Grybauskas’ fifth chapter is one of the highlights in an already excellent study of Tolkien’s work due to the particular care he places on the analysis of video games as an expression of Tolkien’s legacy specifically and the genre’s importance to speculative fiction broadly. Plenty of critical attention has been paid to fantasy film and literature, but far too often scholarly study shies away from video games, a manifestation of fantasy which is increasingly becoming the most significant medium through which fans interact with the genre. It is refreshing to see a scholar such as Grybauskas treat it with the scholarly attention that it properly deserves.

*A Sense of Tales Untold* is generally an excellent treatment, not just of Tolkien’s work, but of the theoretical groundwork of worldbuilding in speculative fiction. That is not to say that the book is without flaw. Grybauskas’ extensive knowledge of Anglo-Saxon literature is clearly demonstrated in the vast number of sources he references and the detailed treatment he gives to each. However, even though he acknowledges the influence of Norse, Celtic, and Finnish sources on Tolkien’s storytelling, it is equally clear that Grybauskas does not possess the same mastery of these literary traditions as he does of the Anglo-Saxon, and his work would have surely benefitted from more knowledge of these literary traditions. Additionally, his fourth chapter dealing with *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* falls somewhat flat and feels almost as though it were an afterthought added to the book rather than part of his comprehensive argument.

Those criticisms aside, *A Sense of Tales Untold* should almost be required reading for more than those with a broad interest in Tolkien or speculative fiction. The book is reminiscent of one of Tolkien’s most influential theoretical works, the essay “On Fairy-Stories,” in that it seeks to investigate the importance of worldbuilding in fantasy literature, and how successful authors craft
fictional worlds which feel as alive and lived in as our own. It would not be a surprise if *A Sense of Tales Untold* becomes a classic text that will be studied for years to come.

**Russell A. Stepp** is a natural fit for speculative fiction. He holds a BS in Physics Astronomy, master’s degrees in Comparative Studies, Medieval Icelandic Studies, and Medieval Studies, and a PhD in Medieval studies. He has a particular interest in medieval Icelandic *fornaldasögur* and mythological poetry. He currently teaches AP Physics and Astronomy at *Aristoi Classical Academy*, a public charter school in Katy, Texas.