

Excerpts From:  
Not Another Tolkien Study:  
The Development of the Fantasy Genre in the Late-Twentieth Century  
 By Bonnie McKnight

*Introduction*

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* was published from 1954 to 1955, but it did not become truly popular in America until ten years later. In 1965, two paperback versions of *The Lord of the Rings* were published in the United States. The first—an unauthorized edition published by Ace Books—sold over 100,000 copies.

The real explosion came, however, when Tolkien himself authorized an American paperback edition, published by Ballantine Books. This copy came with a printed plea by the author on the back cover to support this version over its illegal twin. Due to the widely-publicized controversy, the Ballantine version quickly sold over a million copies. This event has been called “perhaps the most important publishing event in the 1960’s in terms of the *long-term* development of the fantasy market.”<sup>1</sup> The combination of such well-received fantastical fiction and the paperback form had significant consequences. Tolkien’s sales soared, which enabled fantasy to take root in American popular consciousness. Soon thereafter, modern fantasy emerged as a formal genre of American fiction.

It is difficult to underestimate the influence of Tolkien over modern fantasy fiction. His work informs and overshadows nearly every aspect of late twentieth-century fantasy.<sup>2</sup> His was the name most closely associated with fantasy literature as it solidified into what we now call the genre. In fact, his was the *only* name associated with fantasy. In a sense, fantasy *was* Tolkien and Tolkien *was* fantasy in the early years of the mid-twentieth century.

But Tolkien was only one man, and he wrote only one epic series, and his excellent work had inspired in numberless people a hunger for fantasy. So the genre had to move past him. As the development of a book is two-fold, so is the development of the genre: readers and authors alike (and the line between the two blurs frequently) took what Tolkien wrote and built up a body of modern fantasy as both a response and a reaction to everything he introduced (or re-introduced) to the literary world. Readers and writers of fantasy responded to the criticisms of the genre first engendered by *LotR*, and their efforts to build the genre, evident in their writing, helps to illustrate the differences and similarities between fantasy and other genres such as romance and science fiction. Most importantly, fans of fantasy consciously created a tight-knit, encouraging community where a love of the fantastic could be shared and expanded without limits. This is a study of the unique evolution of modern fantasy, a genre that reflects not just the contribution of writers, but a much larger community of interactions that shaped expectations.

*The Growth of a Fantasy Community*

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<sup>1</sup> Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James, *A Short History of Fantasy*, (London: Middlesex University Press, 2009), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Hence the double nature of the title: while this is, in a sense, not another Tolkien study because it looks at how the genre moved passed him, it also works in a derogatory sense—if I were to read this paper, I would undoubtedly say to myself “Ugh. Not *another* Tolkien study.”

From its earliest days in the 1960s, the fantasy genre has exhibited an amazing growth of community. Part of this growth is due to labeling. Fantasy and science fiction have frequently been grouped together since the earliest days of genre.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, for a long time, all fantasy works were labeled science fiction (sci-fi for short). The fantasy genre was thus able to incubate in an already-formed community of fans: the science fiction fan community had been growing since the late 1930s, when the first sci-fi conventions were held. These conventions provided ample opportunities for newly-converted Tolkien fans to meet, congregate, and discuss “the Books,” as one fan called them.<sup>4</sup> A review of the 30<sup>th</sup> World Science Fiction Convention in 1972 mentions “panels on the Tolkien explosion [and] medieval marriage,” both panels related specifically to fantasy, sprinkled among more science-fiction-specific discussions.<sup>5</sup>

With the sci-fi community as a guide, fantasy fans began to form their own communities. Most notable is the Tolkien Society of America (TSA), founded in 1965 as a “one-man organization, designed for no more than a couple of hundred members.”<sup>6</sup> By the next year, the TSA was home to 1,000 members, and the membership count continued to grow at an astounding rate, adding at least 500 in the next half-year. The Tolkien craze was going strong, and new readers continued to join the throng of fans and participate in the burgeoning community.

From its first year of existence, the TSA printed the fanzine (fan magazine) the *Tolkien Journal*, full of articles written by its members. A similar fanzine was published by another Tolkien society in Britain. Britain and America are frequently paired together in studies of fantasy and of literary trends in general.<sup>7</sup> Fantasy saw a similar increase in popularity in both countries, and, as Tolkien was English, England may even be considered the birthplace of modern fantasy. So it is not surprising that British fans of *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*) formed their own group, simply named the Tolkien Society, in 1969. Shortly thereafter they began publishing their own magazine, which became known as *Amon Hen* in 1972.

These two journals and societies, though formed initially to discuss Tolkien, were clearly interested in discussing and promoting other fantasy literature as well. Throughout their histories, both journals fluctuated between focusing only on Tolkien and expanding their purview. The *Tolkien Journal* saw increasing discussions of non-Tolkien fantasy up until it became known as *Mythlore* and restricted its focus to J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. *Amon Hen* was originally strictly Tolkien. However, after some discussion among the fans and contributors, the magazine decided to liberalize its content, improving its book reviews and expanding its coverage to fantasy news in general—a practice which continues to this day.

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<sup>3</sup> A list of Random House classifications from 1970 shows that Science Fiction and Fantasy were given the same editorial number. “List of genre categories,” 1970, box 871, “Random House Records, 1925-1999,” Columbia University, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Dick Plotz, “Editorial,” *Tolkien Journal* III.2, 1967, 1. I find the capitalization indicative of how important *LotR* was to these fans

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Porter, “Sci-Fi Demands Detachment,” *Publishers Weekly*. 1972 (202), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Plotz, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Mendlesohn and James state “For various cultural and economic reasons, very little translated fantasy enters the Anglo-American market, while not only is there a great deal of translation from English into other languages, in Europe, at least, English-language material is widely read by fantasy fans.” Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James, *A Short History of Fantasy*, (London: Middlesex University Press, 2009), 6.

The *Tolkien Journal*, called the *TJ*, was part of a growing trend in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s of the “emergence of a wide variety of smaller ‘special-interest’ magazines focused on specific leisure and recreational subjects and aimed at specialized audiences.” *Amon Hen* seems to indicate that Britain may have been experiencing a similar surge in small magazines. Though more general “mass” magazines had held strong for the first half of the century, a variety of factors led to their decline and the growth of smaller, more specialized magazines. One major factor was the rise of television, which became the new home for generalized advertisements. Having lost a major source of income through advertising, many mass magazines began to fail. Special-interest magazines, however, could cater to specific markets. Their specialized audiences represented “core buys” for advertisers.<sup>8</sup>

In that vein, publishers hoping to make money from the new fantasy phenomenon helped contribute to magazines like the *TJ*. In one 1967 issue, Ace Books had a full page ad, “In case you missed it,” reprinting their original preface for *LotR* with the slogan “ACE BOOKS—FIRST IN SCIENCE-FICTION AND FANTASY.”<sup>9</sup> Such a reminder of Ace’s status as the first to publish *LotR* in paperback in the U.S. was a calculated move to draw Tolkien fans to its other fantasy books. Ballantine Books promoted the publication of the fanzine in its own way, by unofficially publishing and printing the third and fourth issues of the *TJ*.<sup>10</sup> Though this move may not have been widely recognized among the readers at the time, Ballantine did not necessarily need the name recognition. Such a magazine was bound to bring them more sales simply by fostering interest in fantasy, and Ballantine was one of the few publishing houses to start an adult fantasy line in the years following the Tolkien success.

Issues of *Amon Hen* also contained a few ads, one specifically for the British Science Fiction Association in 1978.<sup>11</sup> This ad hints once again at the conjunction of fantasy and sci-fi, but it also speaks to the sense of community among readers. Other literary communities hoped to add Tolkien fans to their ranks, and the Tolkien fans who ran *Amon Hen* encouraged their society members to join others. In their 23<sup>rd</sup> issue, from 1976, the editor included a list of societies, saying, “Once you have discovered the pleasures of reading fantasy, you may ask whether other societies exist to cater for the different interests of each individual. They do indeed, and I now present a guide to the more well-known.”<sup>12</sup> The first society on her list is The Mythopoeic Society, the group with which the TSA merged in 1972.

Such special-interest magazines had a few other advantages over the floundering mass magazines. For one thing, where mass magazines had an “unrestrained belief in the wisdom of ever-increasing circulation,” special-interests did not need huge print runs to be economically viable.<sup>13</sup> The *TJ*’s first issue had a circulation of 100. By the fourth issue, that number had jumped to 800, and

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<sup>8</sup> David Abrahamson and Carol Polsgrove, “The Right Niche Consumer Magazines and Advertisers,” in *A History of the Book in America: The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America*, eds. David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Michael Schudson, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 107.

<sup>9</sup> Ace advertisement, *Tolkien Journal* 3 1967, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Plotz, 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Amon Hen*, July 1978

<sup>12</sup> *Amon Hen*, December 1976, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Abrahamson and Polsgrove, 109.

membership in the TSA and subscriptions to the magazine kept growing. Though the TSA was originally free to join, as interest in Tolkien and fantasy grew, prices increased. Less than a year after it began, dues were charged at \$1.50 per person, and went up to \$2.00 in 1967. Interestingly, TSA founder Dick Plotz said that this price increase was not simply due to higher printing costs for a greater circulation, but was in fact “to keep enrolment down rather than to finance extra costs.”<sup>14</sup> Whereas other special-interest magazines were probably looking to make a profit, the *TJ* was purely a means of maintaining community, a community that apparently desired to remain limited in size.

The British Tolkien Society faced a similar quandary over whether or not to expand their membership. In an issue from December of 1976, editor Jessica Yates wrote an editorial explaining her decision to increase publicity for the Society. She knows that there are those who “will ask – why bother? Let’s keep the Society small and intimate.” But she gives several reasons to publicize. The first and “most important” is the “joy we all share at being able to contact, either through meetings or reading the publications, others who feel as we do about the works of TOLKIEN.” She also mentions that higher membership means more chances to set up small, local meetings of the Society in a variety of cities, a practice that will be discussed below. Finally, she encourages an increase in members as a way of ensuring “more economical production of our publications, so that we can keep level with rising printers’ costs without raising the subscription.”<sup>15</sup> Unlike Plotz, by 1976 Yates did not want to increase costs to keep membership down; she wanted the membership to keep growing.

Yates cited rising print costs, but improvements in technology in the 1950s and 1960s had a tremendous impact on the rise of special-interest magazines. Better technology meant cheaper and easier printing. Indeed, although the *TJ* had some early help with printing from Ballantine, Plotz soon discovered that it was in fact cheaper to use his own printer. Plotz passed off the editorship in 1967 because he did not have enough time to publish the journal on his own for so many people. Though he had considered disbanding the TSA and giving up the *TJ*, the fanzine was rescued just in time by a call from Ed Meskys, who became the next editor. Meskys was able to adopt this position, according to Plotz, because “Belknap College, where he teaches physics, has a new computer which, among other things, prints mailing lists from IBM cards onto mailing labels.”<sup>16</sup> This new technology cut down on one of the most labor-intensive, non-intellectual parts of distributing the magazine.

As the *Tolkien Journal* was fan-based, all of its submissions came from subscribers, and the submission types and numbers increased with the increasing readership. Like other special-interest magazines, the *Tolkien Journal* tended to follow a pattern of submissions. According to Abramanson and Polsgrove, “the preferred approach was to offer sophisticated treatments of complex subjects aimed at the expert enthusiasts who represented the publication’s core readership, while at the same time including a few articles that would meet the needs of entry-level readers.”<sup>17</sup> In the *TJ* and *Amon Hen*, the editorials, letters to the editor, and illustrations are clearly understandable by anyone, but most of the rest of the submissions are complex discussions of linguistics, heredity, morality, and

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<sup>14</sup> Plotz, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Jessica Yates, “From the Hill of Sight,” *Amon Hen*, December 1976, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Plotz, 1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Abrahamson and Polsgrove, 113.

more. Still, these expert articles are all based on the information found in Tolkien's books, which ostensibly even the beginning subscribers have read. So though there may have been a high learning curve, even the most specialized articles were accessible to various readers.

Through these journals, fantasy fans shared with each other new books they were reading that helped satisfy the hunger for worlds like Tolkien's. For example, Anthony Cermak wrote in a letter to the editor in 1969: "In the last Tolkien Journal you mentioned the book *The Last Unicorn* I have read this book and it is interesting but a better one still is *Three Hearts and Three Lions* by Paul [sic] Anderson."<sup>18</sup> In that same issue, Nan C. Scott wrote, "I will follow your suggestion about reading Lloyd Alexander as soon as I can get hold of the books.... Meanwhile, I'm looking into George MacDonald.... Better than MacDonald I like E. Nesbit's books."<sup>19</sup> In 1976, *Amon Hen* provided a list of bookshops through which American fantasy could be bought by British fans.<sup>20</sup> Throughout issues of these magazines, fans and contributors wrote in suggestions for fellow readers, and in the process created a dialogue about where to find good fantasy.

Later in the *TJ*'s run, as it went through a few name changes and mergers, these suggestions for new books to read became even more formal through written reviews. One of the major concerns of Tolkien fans was the tendency by publishers to compare new fantasy books to *The Lord of the Rings*. In a 1976 issue of *Mythlore*, a reincarnation of the *TJ*, one review for a pair of new fantasy books opens with "In the tradition of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien' is a cover blurb so frequently and inappropriately used" that one is often disappointed, however this new book, "if it does not absolutely live up to such exalted billing, at least makes a good enough attempt to do so to be worth noticing."<sup>21</sup> The main character in Jo Walton's book *Among Others* has a similar though much more vehement response to the tendency of publishers to compare all fantasy to Tolkien in the hopes of improving sales. She mentions a certain book she does not buy because it "has the temerity to compare itself, on the front cover, to 'Tolkien at his best...' How dare they? And how dare the publishers? It isn't a comparison anyone could make, except to say 'Compared to Tolkien at his best, this is dross.'"<sup>22</sup> A British Tolkien fan in a 1983 issue of *Amon Hen* wrote that whenever he sees the word "Tolkien" on a book cover, if it is a book about Tolkien, he will buy it without reservation. But if it is another fantasy novel claiming to be comparable, he will still buy it, "mind intent on one thing: to be thoroughly bored by every tedious paragraph and thus prove that this book is not, as is claimed on the front cover, 'comparable-to-Tolkien-at-his-best.'"<sup>23</sup> Publishing houses obviously had an inkling of the potential sales that could be reaped through fantasy, and they were willing to publish all sorts of fiction that might even remotely capitalize on the Tolkien frenzy. So these reviews served to help readers of the magazines (and fans of fantasy) sort through the many new books coming from fantasy publishers and locate those that were truly worth reading.

In addition to reviews, *Amon Hen* was unique in organizing a lending library. Along with their magazine, the Society would send out supplements with the full listing of their library, which

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Cermak, "Letter," *Tolkien Journal* 3, no. 4. (1969): 19.

<sup>19</sup> Nan C Scott, "Letter," *Tolkien Journal* 3, no. 4. (1969): 21.

<sup>20</sup> "Bookshops," *Amon Hen*, December 1976, 14.

<sup>21</sup> George Colvin, "Chronicles of Christ and Constantine," *Mythlore*, June 1976, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Walton, *Among Others*, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Gael Robinson (alias Gilraen Tengwarannan), *Amon Hen*, December 1982, 11.

would be housed at one of the member-officer's houses. If interested in one of the titles, a member could send mail to the librarian's house requesting the book and including 15p for shipping. The books in the lending library covered a variety of topics, the largest of which was "Fantasy and Books about Fantasy," but which also included "Books by Tolkien, Lewis and Williams," and "Books About These Authors" as well as "Other Inklings and Friends."<sup>24</sup>

This system of a lending library was probably more feasible for the British society than for the American, due to geographical limits. However, the issue of geography was solved in the US through the institution of smaller satellite groups which met locally. These groups, also used by the British, were called "smials" (the hobbit-holes from *LotR* lore in which furry-footed hobbits so famously lived). Many of the smials, in cities like Denver and Los Angeles, actually predate the TSA. These smaller groups were essentially book clubs formed by like-minded individuals in one geographic area to share their love for *LotR*. In their own words, the TSA took "a long time to realize" that "the smial craze is the most sensible way to organize the Tolkien Society."<sup>25</sup> Many of the preexisting clubs were absorbed by the TSA after its inception.

These Tolkien societies, and even the smials, began instituting their own conventions, similar to those held in the science fiction world that helped give birth to the fantasy community. Convention activities can range from opportunities to dress up and party with fellow fans to academic panels with in-depth discussions. One of the first such meetings was held by the TSA in December of 1966. This first convention, Afteryule, lasted only an hour and a half and was held in the home of founder and editor Dick Plotz. Though they began small, meetings such as these eventually grew into large conventions and conferences. The Tolkien Society in Britain has held its annual Oxonmoot every year since 1973, where Tolkien fans meet in Oxford every September for a weekend of Tolkien-related festivities from panels to parties. The Mythopoeic Society, which merged with the TSA in 1972, has hosted its Mythcon, generally in California, every year since 1970. And in 1975, fantasy got a convention all its own with the annual World Fantasy Convention. Tolkien fans were persistent in communicating and meeting together throughout the years, gradually expanding their interests to include all works of fantasy. The fantasy community grew, publishers responded, and the genre became an established part of the literary world.

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<sup>24</sup>"Lending Library," *Amon Hen*, March 1978, 4-5, 10.

<sup>25</sup>"Smials," *Tolkien Journal*, 1967, 4.