

Feeding on Fantasy

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Truly let it be said that Sir Tristan von Eising is everything a knight should be—honorable and chivalrous, 6 ft. 4 in. tall and an expert in armed combat. On weekends Sir Tristan von Eising is a proud nobleman of the Barony of Nordskogen, but during the week he is better known as Darren Chermack, 34, an inventor who is a sword-carrying member of the Society for Creative Anachronism (S.C.A.), an organization devoted to re-creating the lifestyle of premodern Europe. And in case you're not familiar with the Barony of Nordskogen, most benighted Muggles know it as the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn., area. Strange and magical things are afoot in this great land of ours—Middle-earth, Middle America, whatever you want to call it.

The past quarter-century of American popular culture was ruled by the great mega-franchises of science fiction—*Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Independence Day*, *The Matrix*. But lately, since the turn of the millennium or so, we've been dreaming very different dreams. The stuff of those dreams is fantasy—swords and sorcerers, knights and ladies, magic and unicorns. In 2001 the fantasy double bill of *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* ranked first and second at the box office, and it's happening all over again this year. In its first weekend alone, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* cleared \$88 million. Think *Star Trek: Nemesis* is going to come close to that? *Harry* hasn't done badly at the bookstore either, having moved a total of 77 million copies in the U.S. so far, while Tolkien's works sold 11 million copies in the U.S. in 2001 alone. The online fantasy game *EverQuest* pulls in more than \$5 million a month from its half a million subscribers, and the fantasy card game *Magic: The Gathering* boasts 7 million players. The business of fantasy has become a multibillion-dollar reality, and science fiction is starting to feel, well, a little 20th century.

Popular culture is the most sensitive barometer we have for gauging shifts in the national mood, and it's registering a big one right now. Our fascination with science fiction reflected a deep collective faith that technology would lead us to a cyberutopia of robot butlers serving virtual mai tais. With *The Two Towers*, the new installment of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, about to storm the box office, we are seeing what might be called the enchanting of America. A darker, more pessimistic attitude toward technology and the future has taken hold, and the evidence is our new preoccupation with fantasy, a nostalgic, sentimental, magical vision of a medieval age. The future just isn't what it used to be—and the past seems to be gaining on us.

The strangest thing about it is, we've been here before. It all started with a little-known Oxford professor whose specialty was the West Midland dialect of Middle English. Beginning with *The Hobbit*, a story he invented in the early 1930s to amuse his children, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's novels first became merely popular and then turned into a phenomenon. When a pirate paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings* was published in the U.S. in 1965, it and other versions sold more than a million copies within a year. GANDALF FOR PRESIDENT buttons appeared on wide late-1960s lapels, and FRODO LIVES was scrawled on subway cars. Led Zeppelin gave Gollum a shout-out in *Ramble On*. Tolkien inspired an American insurance

salesman named Gary Gygax to quit his job and create *Dungeons and Dragons*, the fantasy role-playing game that launched a million junior high school wedgies.

"The funny thing," says Simon Tolkien, grandson of J.R.R. and author of the forthcoming novel *Final Witness*, "was that he was most famous on your side of the Atlantic. I think the English establishment was slightly suspicious of him." In fact, Tolkien found all the fuss distasteful. "Many young Americans are involved in the stories in a way that I'm not," he once remarked about his fans—or as he called them, "my deplorable cultus." He wondered what Americans saw in his long, deeply Anglophilic and, let's be frank, overwritten epic. But the *Rings* had struck a chord. The burgeoning environmental movement saw in his wasteland of Mordor a strip-mined industrial dystopia. On a deeper level, a country drowning in the moral quicksand of Vietnam and Watergate found comfort in the moral clarity of Tolkien's epic story of a just, clear war. Good and evil are fixed stars in the skies of Middle-earth even as they're starting to look wobbly in ours.

Like a sleepy Balrog in the depths of Moria, fantasy fever is stirring again. In 1997, voters in a BBC poll named *The Lord of the Rings* the greatest book of the 20th century. In 1999, Amazon.com customers chose it as the greatest book of the millennium. The Tolkien revival began when the Internet bubble was bursting, the market for consumer electronics was nosediving like Harry Potter chasing the Golden Snitch, and America's long summer romance with technology was fizzling. "Change and technology are so pervasive a part of daily life that for the most part there's no magic to it anymore," says Vivian Sobchack, a professor of film and television studies at UCLA. "The promise of science and technology has been normalized. The utopian vision we had didn't come to pass." The magic would have to come from somewhere else, and we found it in fantasy.

Swords, not lasers. Magic, not electricity. Villages, not cities. The past, not the future. It's a world we see in the creepily cozy work of Thomas Kinkade, whose soft-focus paintings of bucolic never-never lands has brought his company, Media Arts Group, almost \$75 million so far this year. Fantasy envisions a society modeled loosely on agrarian medieval Europe, though with plenty of Vaseline on the lens. Antitechnology, antiglobalist, it's a misty, watercolored memory of a way we never were. But if the vision is imaginary, the longing for it is very real. That may be why the 24,000 members of the Society for Creative Anachronism are so busy brewing mead, sewing doublets and whacking each other with swords. Their motto? "Forward into the past!" "I think our technology today has taken us further from morality and generous behavior," says Darren Chermack—that is, Sir Tristan. "I find that this lifestyle is a way to touch on something that I want to be as a person—the pursuit of courtesy, chivalry and proper behavior." "There's a heavy anti-industrial streak there," agrees Carrie Crowder, 41, a conservative Republican, mother of two and former S.C.A. member. "It's tied back to the medieval, feudal landscape that is the backdrop for so much of fantasy." Granted, the S.C.A. crowd is a good deal further out on the fringe than most people who will shell out to see *The Two Towers*, but as John Adcox, 38, a fantasy fan in Atlanta, points out, it's all relative. "If I told you about a group that dresses oddly, paints their bodies and gathers by the thousand to share an enthusiasm, who would you think of?" he asks. "Right, football fans." Point taken.

But the appeal of fantasy goes deeper than mere nostalgic Luddism. Tolkien, a veteran of the British nightmare at the Somme in World War I, is a poet of war, and we are a nation in need of a good, clear war story. At a time when Americans are wandering deeper into a nebulous conflict against a faceless enemy, Tolkien gives us the war we wish we were fighting—a struggle with a foe whose face we can see, who fights out on the open battlefield, far removed from innocent civilians. In Middle-earth, unlike the Middle East, you can tell an evildoer because he or she looks evil. *The Lord of the Rings* also plays to America's view of itself as a reluctant warrior. As Peter Jackson, director of the Rings trilogy, remarks, "On some level most of the people watching these movies regard themselves as peace-loving, gentle people who would rather stay out of trouble and who are forced to deal with situations that are out of their control." Sometimes fantasies tell us less about who we are than who we wish we were.

It's ironic that all these peace-loving premodern agrarians are making astonishing amounts of cash for a lot of postmodern technocapitalist movie executives. Fantasy is hot, and studios are backing up the truck. Even as New Line and Warner Bros. (which, like TIME, are owned by AOL Time Warner) churn out Potter and Rings sequels, New Line is already developing a follow-up franchise based on Philip Pullman's critically acclaimed fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*, about the journey of an adolescent girl and boy through alternative worlds inhabited by witches, angels and armored polar bears. Late next year the Sci-Fi Channel plans to air a lavish production of two of Ursula K. LeGuin's *Earthsea* novels, *A Wizard of Earthsea* and *The Tombs of Atuan*. The movie of C.S. Lewis' beloved *Chronicles of Narnia* is in development with Andrew Adamson, who co-directed the animated hit *Shrek*, a more comic medieval fantasy. Miramax will shortly begin work on a movie version of the best-selling Artemis Fowl books, a hot contender for the post-*Harry Potter* sweepstakes, and the company paid seven figures for book and film rights to the *Bartimaeus* trilogy, a series of novels about a jinni and a young magician by British writer Jonathan Stroud. Not to be outdone, Disney reportedly paid nearly \$8 million for the film, theme-park and multimedia rights to Clive Barker's fantasy novel *Abarat*.

But is all this fantasizing really good for us? Should we worry about all these strapping men poking each other with sharpened phallic symbols? After all, on the political correctness meter *The Lord of the Rings* is radioactive. Where are the women? Peter Jackson filled out Liv Tyler's role for the movies (it's much less prominent in Tolkien's version), but the *Fellowship* is still as much a boys' club as Augusta National. And whiter too. Don't let all the heartwarming Elf-Dwarf bonding between Legolas and Gimli fool you. The only people with dark skin in Middle-earth are the Orcs.

The clarity and simplicity of Middle-earth are comforting, but there's also something worryingly childish, even infantile, about it. Things are too simple there. Everyone has his class and his place—funny how feudalism works that way—and he's either good or evil, with no messy gray area in between. "Just because something is reassuring, comforting and seductive doesn't mean that it's offering you what you need," points out Sherry Turkle, professor of the social studies of science and technology at M.I.T. "The question is whether that prepares us to live in a world that's complex, where we need to be able to work in a structure where there are no rules and where we have to be really attentive to other people's cultures and other people's ways of seeing things."

The question is, Are we running away from reality when we indulge in fantasy? Or are we escaping reality just to find it again and wrestle with it in disguise? Not everything is as simple as it looks, as Gandalf found out when he tried to open the door to Moria. Let's not forget that the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are themselves nostalgic for an even earlier age. The novels are set in the waning hours of the age of magic, with all those rather attractive Elves departing the scene, leaving men to their mundane, Mugglish devices. If *The Lord of the Rings* is a fantasy, it's ultimately a fantasy about growing up and putting childish things aside.

And at its core, *The Lord of the Rings* isn't a story about frilly shirts and talking frogs; it's a tale about temptation. Frodo isn't a knight in shining armor; he's not even a wizard in a pointy hat. His only claim to fame, his sole superpower, is his uncommon ability to resist the seductive, corrupting temptation of the all-powerful Ring he carries. And as hard as he fights against that temptation, in the end he fails.

Is there a message there for contemporary America? As the world's only superpower, we're carrying the Ring on behalf of an entire planet, and our burden is every bit as heavy as Frodo's. Seen in that light, *The Lord of the Rings* looks like a very grownup story indeed, one that can't be told often enough. Frodo lives.

—Reported by Mike Billips and Marc Schultz/Atlanta, Sarah Sturmon Dale/Minneapolis, Sonja Steptoe/Los Angeles and Andrea Sachs and Heather Won Tesoriero/New York