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## Review of A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas

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a wide range of studies curiously omits the definitive, groundbreaking and essential work of Diana Pavlac Glyer; her books *The Company They Keep* and *Bandersnatch* offer genre-defining categories of collaboration that would have vastly helped the development of analysis in this already impressive work. While he rightly analyzes the importance of *The Four Loves* and provides a brief but helpful discussion of *Till We Have Faces*, a longer consideration of that last novel (which Lewis rightly called “far and away my best book”) would add even more depth to the study. Nevertheless, *Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis: Friends in Co-Inherence* profoundly moves the landmarks of Inklings studies and offers an indispensable lens to anyone interested in a careful look at these and related writers. As a significant theologian and scholar, Fiddes pays these authors and their readers alike the grand compliment of taking them seriously, and by doing so, this book will surely widen many worlds.

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Peter Grybauskas, *A Sense of Tales Untold: Exploring the Edges of Tolkien's Literary Canvas* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2021). \$55.00. 176 pages. ISBN 978606354308.

With the September 2022 release of Amazon Prime's *Rings of Power*, Peter Grybauskas has selected an opportune time to explore the margins of Tolkien's legendarium. Perhaps, unlike the creators of the Amazon series, Grybauskas ventures to the edges of Middle-Earth with both scholarly rigor and faithfulness to the spirit of Tolkien's mythmaking project. With this powerful combination, Grybauskas makes a persuasive case for why we should consider the legendarium's “untold tales”—the “gaps, enigmas, allusions, digressions, omissions, ellipses, and loose ends that pepper [Tolkien's] narratives” (1)—as “a defining feature of his subcreation” (xx). While not necessarily groundbreaking in taking up this theme, the study illuminates how careful attention to the periphery of Tolkien's work sheds new light on both his literary techniques and broader cultural legacy.

A senior lecturer at the University of Maryland, Grybauskas takes the study's motivating question from a letter Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher in 1945, describing what Tolkien calls the "fundamental literary problem": "A story must be told or there'll be no story, yet it is the untold stories that are most moving" (1). How, then, does Tolkien tell the untold tales? And to what effect? Grybauskas gives a plethora of examples that quickly convey the depth and breadth of this phenomenon in Tolkien's oeuvre. First, we have the snatches of verse and legend about the Last Alliance we hear from characters as diverse as Samwise Gamgee, Elrond Half-Elven, and a pair of Orcs (26). Then, there is the story of Celebrimbor, original creator of the Rings of Power, who is mentioned only three times in *The Lord of the Rings*. This is followed by the epic deeds of Túrin Turambar, alluded to by Elrond when Frodo accepts the Ring and just once more after Sam defeats Shelob (50-1), and, perhaps most famously, Treebeard's tantalizing evocation of the missing Entwives (122). Grybauskas categorizes this "unfinished tangle of plotlines, developments, and movements" (73) into three major types: faded tradition, allusive web, and omission (21-5). His central claim is that these categories of untold tales work together to create the remarkable sense of depth and mythic history that "color, inform, and enrich the reading of [Tolkien's] work" (73).

Fittingly for the subject matter, Grybauskas brings deep background knowledge of the legendarium to his study. His sources range from Tolkien's classic stories and essays to personal correspondences, medieval scholarship (even an undergraduate essay on the *Kalevala*), and lesser-known manuscripts like *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, Tolkien's dramatic-verse addition to the Old English *Battle of Maldon*. Grybauskas marshals this wide-ranging archive across five main chapters. The first draws mostly from Tolkien's 1939 essay "On Fairy-Stories" to flesh out the importance of the "fundamental literary problem" to his mythmaking project; the last explores the enduring legacy of Tolkien's untold tales in film, video games, and other pop culture adaptations. The three middle chapters develop the meat of Grybauskas's argument, showing with a series of close-readings how each of the three categories of untold tales develops the rich mythic history behind Tolkien's corpus: the allusions to the Last Alliance in *The Lord of the Rings* (chapter two), the faded tradition of the Túrin saga (chapter three), and omission in *The*

*Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (chapter four). Throughout, Grybauskas moves smoothly between the legendarium's literary-technical minutiae and its large-scale mythopoetic mission. In one particularly moving section, Grybauskas demonstrates how Tolkien's use of parentheses and footnotes in referencing Túrin Turambar's story gives the reader a poignant sense of Middle Earth's lost history, calling her attention to the same problem of forgotten tradition that Tolkien so forcefully critiqued in his own age and set out to correct through his "mythology for England," in Humphrey Carpenter's memorable phrase (61).

Though several similar studies have emerged in the last fifteen years (3), *A Sense of Tales Untold* advances the discussion of Tolkien's "hidden depth" by taking a direction similar to that of Holly Ordway in her 2021 study, *Tolkien's Modern Reading*: namely, putting Tolkien in conversation with contemporary writers. Grybauskas explores how Tolkien's "untold tales" reflects and refracts similar techniques found in the work of other twentieth-century fantasy writers like Lord Dunsany and E.R. Eddison, as well as arch-modernist Ernest Hemingway (15). This comparative approach pays dividends in the fourth chapter, when Grybauskas makes a persuasive case for renewing scholarly attention to *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* by showing how the text mirrors Hemingway's "iceberg theory" to achieve its remarkable sense of depth (87). Furthering Ordway's work on Tolkien's contemporary sources, Grybauskas's analysis overturns the caricature of Tolkien as the long-winded "dinosaur." Not only does he borrow literary techniques usually considered modern, but he does so to convey maximal background in minimal words. The insight scores a hit against critics like Harold Bloom and Salman Rushdie, whom Grybauskas quotes in the introduction for reproaching Tolkien's "over-written" style (xviii).

This reframing of Tolkien as engaged with, if not wedded to, modernist literary techniques springboards the readers into the study's final chapter, where Grybauskas offers an illuminating discussion of how Tolkien's "untold tales" continue to influence contemporary fantasy. We hear of similar techniques in the work of George R.R. Martin and Ursula Le Guin (101-4), in the "slow gaming" style of role-playing video games like *Diablo* and *Dark Souls* (110-15), and in film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, which may be less emblematic of Tolkien's hidden depth

more indicative of how *telling* too many untold tales can destroy the magic (104-110). Along the way, Grybauskas shows how close-reading these non-traditional media can push the edges of Tolkien scholarship into intriguing new territory.

If one can criticize Grybauskas for omission, *A Sense of Tales Untold* devotes disappointingly little attention to the philosophical and theological implications of Tolkien's "ice berg" techniques. How was Tolkien's hidden depth influenced by his Catholic faith, for example? How do the legendarium's deliberate lacunae leave room for readers to fill in narrative gaps with their own historical imagination and artistic sub-creation? These questions seem crucial for a full understanding of how Tolkien's mythopoetic project connects with his literary techniques, especially in light of his well-known regard for *The Lord of the Rings* as a "fundamentally religious and Catholic work," and his distaste for allegory as an affront to the freedom of the reader.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps in keeping with the spirit of his project, however, Grybauskas leaves these dimensions of Tolkien's tales untold for future scholars to explore.

Omissions notwithstanding, *A Sense of Tales Untold* is essential reading for scholars who want to understand Tolkien's literary methods, place Tolkien in conversation with other leading authors of the twentieth century, and better understand his ongoing legacy in the twenty-first. Grybauskas's study is also a fitting tribute to the late Christopher Tolkien, who devoted so much of his life to expanding the edges of his father's legendarium, as well as a hopeful argument that a deeper appreciation for Tolkien's tales untold may not only "lead us into new imaginative territory," but also "point us back to the story told with fresh eyes" (122).

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<sup>1</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 172; Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Great Britain: HarperCollins, 2003), xxvi.