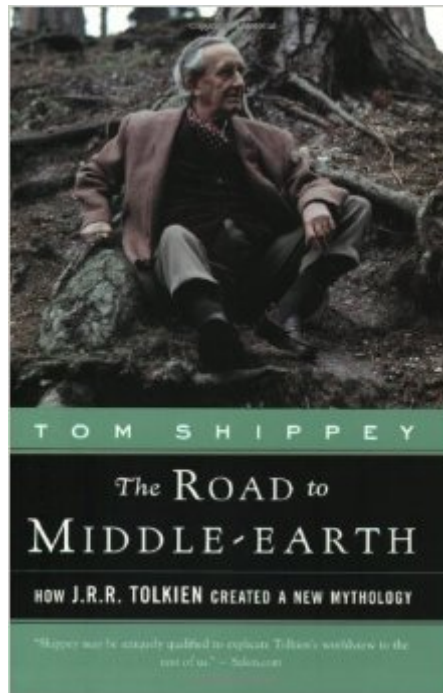


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The Road To Middle-Earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created A New Mythology



Synopsis

The Road to Middle-earth, Tom Shippey's classic work, now revised in paperback, explores J.R.R. Tolkien's creativity and the sources of his inspiration. Shippey shows in detail how Tolkien's professional background led him to write The Hobbit and how he created a timeless charm for millions of readers. Examining the foundation of Tolkien's most popular work, The Lord of the Rings, Shippey also discusses the contribution of The Silmarillion and Unfinished Tales to Tolkien's great myth cycle, showing how Tolkien's more difficult books can be fully appreciated. He goes on to examine the remarkable twelve-volume History of Middle-earth, written by Tolkien's son and literary heir Christopher Tolkien, which traces the creative and technical processes by which Middle-earth evolved.

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Customer Reviews

Shippey's "J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century" places Tolkien in the context of his time. "The Road to Middle-earth" has the more scholastically challenging job of placing Tolkien in the context of his tradition. As that tradition is primarily philological and philosophical, these are his subjects. He tells us what Tolkien meant the words and names in his stories to mean; he tells us how Tolkien used modern language to convey modern and ancient styles and philosophies in contrast; he tells us how the Ring mediates two mutually exclusive concepts of evil; he explains Tolkien's complex narrative strategies; he dresses down critics who misunderstand Tolkien and blame him for not fitting into their concepts of literature; and he does all this with such a blistering display of erudition

and general intelligence that the reader sits back amazed. The book is discursive, and the opening theoretical chapters may seem heavy going, but have patience: they provide necessary context. Shippey has Tolkien's measure in full throughout. He explains what was important to Tolkien, what Tolkien thought he was doing, and - no less vitally - why it is necessary to understand this if one is not to bash Tolkien in annoyance for not accomplishing something totally different. If you read Shippey, will you necessarily understand Tolkien? No. But if you don't read Shippey, and if you also don't have his insight and knowledge, you will not fully understand Tolkien.

This book is quite simply superb in every conceivable respect. It is written by a scholar who understands and respects Tolkien's own scholarly passion for philology, the science and stories of the evolution of words and language. This is very different from the humanistic field of literary criticism, and Shippey explains at some length what a philologist can and cannot do. The close reader will end Shippey's book with a wistful feeling that some very wrong turns have been made in academia over the past one hundred years, and one of the reasons for Tolkien's greatness in his time was quite simply his refusal to accept or acknowledge that these wrong turns had been made. At bottom, a scholar of literature is, or at least ought to be, someone who loves words. We will always have a few of these people among us, and Tolkien's and Shippey's works remind us that no overgrown pathway is ever truly lost.

I only have one complaint about *The Road to Middle-earth* and that is that Shippey doesn't concede an inch to Tolkien's non-Anglo-Saxon influences. The only real flaw in the book is the fact that the reader can easily be led to believe that everything Tolkien put into *The Lord of the Rings* was drawn from something in Anglo-Saxon history or legend. As long as people keep an open mind, however, *The Road to Middle-earth* sheds light on some of the most obscure details and references in Tolkien's work. Shippey admits in the foreword he may be stepping across the line, since Tolkien himself warned the author against reading too much into anything. But the ride is fun and in Shippey's whirlwind fashion the reader is treated to a torrent of near-mystical adulation for one of the 20th century's greatest authors. The writing is straight-forward and well within the reach of most readers. One of the pitfalls of literary scholarship which Shippey avoids is an overdependence upon jargon. He knows his audience wants to read more about Middle-earth and less about what fancy words critics are most apt to use. And despite Shippey's own tendency to accuse Tolkien of deception, he pounces with delightful vengeance and righteous anger upon many a critic who has sought to lay low the immensity of Tolkien's creation. One needn't agree with everything Shippey

writes in order to appreciate the passion he has for Middle-earth, or the intense loyalty the writer feels toward Tolkien himself. Of all the Tolkien commentators who have ever dared put pen to paper, T. A. Shippey is most probably the best qualified (after Christopher Tolkien) to say anything at all concerning how Tolkien may have viewed his creation, or what Tolkien might have intended to say between the lines.

Tom Shippey has an intimate knowledge of the mind and creative processes of the late Professor J.R.R. Tolkien, perhaps nearly as intimate a knowledge as Christopher Tolkien himself. The degree of the schism between language and literature professors of his day was most startling, and how that affected the early critics' appraisals of his masterpiece was also not what I had expected. Tom Shippey's knowledge of JRR Tolkien's mind is most revealing and is encyclopedic, and his ability to explain how deeply the master philologist would see legends and myths in the most ordinary of names and words left me thunderstruck. I have read all five of the main Middle Earth volumes several times and have read some of the Lost Tales, but I had not gained any insight from previous volumes saying how Pr. Tolkien created his world. The authors of those books seemed to lack legitimacy. Tom Shippey does not have that problem, and his book demonstrates that he is Pr. Tolkien's bona fide pupil and linguistic heir. Fans of Middle Earth should be thankful for Tom Shippey's insight, an insight that could only be bettered by Christopher Tolkien, or Pr. Tolkien himself.

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