

Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger, eds, *Sub-creating Arda: World-building in J. R. R. Tolkien's Work, Its Precursors, and Its Legacies*, Cormarë Series No. 40 (Zürich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2019). Print. 464 pp., £19.85/€22.50, ISBN: 978-3-905703-40-5.



Review

The ‘building’ of fictional worlds is a practice which has only recently gained theoretical traction. This may be a product of the recent cultural shift fuelled both by technological innovation and a nostalgia for the geek culture of previous decades. Role playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are now the mainstream, as is the ‘transmedial’ world of the Marvel Universe, and the complexity and scope of open-world video games means that these kinds of immersive, virtual experiences are now more popular than ever.

Sub-creating Arda takes many of its initial cues from the theories set out by Mark J. P. Wolf in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012) and *Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds* (2017). His is the most prominent voice in an area of criticism that considers worldbuilding to be an exercise worthy of attention – and once excavated, the foundations prove to be deep. Tolkien is used in this current book as the ‘paradigmatic example’ of the concept’s processes. Wolf, who contributes the first of the volume’s twenty chapters, identifies four types of subcreation: nominal, cultural, natural and ontological. These range from mere renaming to the radical creation of worlds which constitute different realms of existence (Wolf cites Edwin Abbot’s *Flatlands* (1884) and the video game *Portal* (2007) as examples). Tolkien’s Arda would linger somewhere between the cultural and the natural.

The essays in this volume vary in tone from the rigorous and the technical (see Brierly's 'Worldbuilding Design Patterns in the Works of J. R. R. Tolkien') to the more entertaining, at times bordering on investigative journalism (John Garth's 'Ilu's Music: The Creation of Tolkien's Creation Myth'). Garth's essay suggests convincingly that *The Music of the Ainur*, the genesis for the author's fictional cosmogony, might have been composed much earlier than first thought, in 1917 in response to the death of his friend Christopher Wiseman, and that it may even follow the structure of the musical fugue. This invites discussion surrounding Tolkien's model of free will. Other than Brierly's essay, the technicalities and conceptual limitations of Tolkienian worldbuilding are explored in Jonathan Nauman's 'Composition as Exploration: Fictional Development in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*' and Allan Turner's 'One Pair of Eyes: Focalisation and Worldbuilding'. Considerations, too, of geography, ecology and anthropology in Arda are welcome and tread new ground, notably Anahit Behrooz's argument that the author's subcreation is based on a catastrophic model; his use of maps, subject to change following natural disasters, establishes a developing relationship between the physical landscape and 'deep time'.

Perhaps the volume's chief concern is the implications of creating such worlds under the shadow of religious outlook. In Tolkien's work this means of course his Roman Catholicism and how his own term 'subcreation' aptly describes the relationship between a primary, god-created world and an author-created secondary world. Łukasz Neubauer considers Middle-earth alongside George R. R. Martin's Westeros, and points out that while a belief in a god or multiple gods is far more prominent in *A Song of Ice and Fire* it is not suffused in the same framework of Christian ethics as Tolkien's world. It is nihilistic and cynical in comparison. The religious elements of *The Lord of the Rings* are implicit, or as Tolkien wrote in a letter to Father Robert Murray SJ, 'absorbed into the story and [its] symbolism'. One of Neubauer's conclusions is that Martin was perhaps

more realistic in his depiction of his medieval world as polytheistic, but that his disregard for a detailed development of belief (between, for example, the ‘old gods’ of the north and R’hllor, the Lord of Light) results in a lack of moral considerations – though this might not of course have been Martin’s intention, and portraying his gods as ‘shallow, if often attractively depicted’ might serve to convey the spiritual futility of his ruthless world. Along similar lines Gergely Nagy’s essay on the uses (or lack) of magic in Tolkien suggests that the theological hierarchy of Arda creates separate levels of knowledge, wherein the ignorant consider something ‘magic’ that which they do not know.

With *Sub-creating Arda*, editors Fimi and Honegger (both Tolkien scholars in their own right) have contributed a valuable addition to Walking Tree’s *Cormarë* series. Considering Tolkien through the emerging theoretical lens of worldbuilding opens several unexplored avenues of enquiry and allows for sustained and detailed comparisons with other subcreators, as the final batch of essays in the volume demonstrates. Amongst others, Tom Shippey offers an analysis of Michael Swanwick’s ‘industrialised faërie’ world in a set of stories which may have used the same folkloric sources from which Tolkien took the word ‘hobbit’ (The Denham Tracts), and Maureen F. Mann contrasts the worldbuilding processes of the Brontë sisters with Tolkien’s own immersive practise. Following the publication of Christopher Tolkien’s *The History of Middle-earth* series, subcreation is a concept which has long been scrutinised within Tolkien studies; situating it within the growing framework of worldbuilding theory offers a new set of tools with which to examine Tolkien’s mythopoetic method.

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