

Introduction: J. R. R. Tolkien

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien lived from 1892 until 1973. His lifetime included the rise of the automobile and motion pictures, World Wars I and II, the discovery of atomic energy, the beginning of space exploration, and the first computers. John Ronald, however, was not as attracted to the new world of machines and technology as he was to an older world—the world that contained the English countryside where he grew up, the world that held the stories and myths he loved to read (and write) about, and the world of simple things he enjoyed, such as good food, gardening, and the fellowship of close friends.

Tolkien held a special enjoyment for language. He loved words, and he was fascinated by the way they worked and the stories they could tell. When he was a boy, he learned several languages from his mother, including Latin. He enjoyed reading stories like *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland*, but he liked fairy stories most of all, especially the “Curdie” stories of George MacDonald and *The Red Fairy Book*, by Andrew Lang. Tolkien grew to be so interested in words that he became a philologist, a scholar who studies languages and literature. During his years of university at Oxford, Tolkien not only started writing poetry, but he invented two languages, which he said came from elves. Behind his love for language was an imagination so big, it went further than poetry or story to the realm of mythology.

Before Tolkien got very far creating his mythical world, he was summoned by the British army to fight in World War I. While serving in the muddy trenches of France, he thought more about his mythology, both to continue his creative work and to escape the bloody horror of war with his mind. Two of Tolkien’s best friends also fought in the trenches, and during the Battle of the Somme they were killed. Tolkien himself was wounded by a mortar shell and had to be sent back to England, where he spent many months recovering from his injuries and other illnesses. It was in large part because of the friends he lost in the war that Tolkien was inspired to make his mythology a lifelong work.

Several other important people inspired Tolkien, including his wife, Edith (whom he called “Luthien,” after an elf princess he created), his good friend and colleague C. S. Lewis, and his four children: John, Michael, Christopher, and Priscilla. Tolkien loved his children very much, and he enjoyed using his stories to entertain them. One of these stories took place “long ago in the quiet of the world,” a time when elves, goblins, and dragons lived. The story was about a little person who goes on a grand adventure, and it was quite entertaining. It was so good, in fact, that it was published in 1937, and since that time, it has become a classic of children’s fiction. Tolkien thought that no child ought read a book that an adult would not enjoy. And so, as you will find if you keep reading *The Hobbit*, it is a book that can both entertain and teach a person their whole life long.

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."

Reading Notes

Bilbo Baggins	well-to-do hobbit living at The Hill in Hobbiton
The Bagginses	hobbit family respected for their wealth and sensibleness
hobbits	little people, half the height of humans, who relish comfort
The Tooks	hobbit family living across The Water; known for adventures
Gandalf	wizard who knew Bilbo's grandfather, the Old Took
dwarves	people of short, stout stature, with beards and a love of treasure
Thorin	important dwarf leading a band of twelve other dwarves
Smaug	dragon who stole the dwarves' home and treasure

Vocabulary

Write the meaning of each bold word or phrase.

1. Mr. Baggins was not quite so **prosy** as he liked to believe _____
2. who was feeling positively **flummoxed** _____
3. the **depredations** of dragons _____
4. Thorin with his feet on the **fender** _____
5. this most excellent and **audacious** hobbit _____
6. The **estimable** Mr. Baggins _____
7. **singed** beards _____

Comprehension Questions

Answer the following in complete sentences.

1. The Tooks are richer than the Bagginses, but not as respectable. Why? _____

2. What are the dwarves planning to do? _____

3. Gandalf says Bilbo is "as fierce as a dragon in a pinch." Why does Gandalf say this? _____

4. Why does Gandalf choose Bilbo? _____

