

Tolkien: Biopic of author J.R.R. Tolkien rings false

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Directed by Dome Karukoski. Screenplay by David Gleeson and Stephen Beresford.

Tolkien is a fictionalized biography of the early life of J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *The Hobbit* (1936) and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1947-55).

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) is the most significant figure in the field of heroic fantasy, one of the most popular genres of fiction, film and television today. Fantasy, closely related to science fiction as a type of imaginative writing, emerged in the 19th century from the study of folklore, northern European epic poetry and medieval romance. The understanding of these sources was making great strides in the second half of that century, and helped to inspire fantasy, which was influenced by the romanticism of the earlier 19th century.

It is generally agreed today that Tolkien's stature as an important English-language novelist—whether one agrees with this characterization or not—should not be diminished by the fact that he wrote about imaginary worlds with fictitious mythologies in which magic is used and which he populated both with humans and with a variety of human-like creatures.

After an initial success of *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1950s, the trilogy, and its prequel *The Hobbit*, steadily grew in popularity and are today a defining influence on the fantasy genre, which includes many bestselling novels and popular television dramas, such as *Game of Thrones*.

Tolkien was born in South Africa, where his father died in 1896. His mother relocated the family to Birmingham, England, and raised him and his brother in poverty until she, too, died in 1904. He spent the rest of his youth under the stewardship of a Catholic priest, Fr. Francis Xavier Morgan (played in the film by Colm Meaney), who sought to prevent his attachment to a fellow orphan, Edith Bratt.

Tolkien shows the author as a young man in the period preceding, during and immediately following the First World War of 1914 to 1918, in which Tolkien served as a junior officer in the British army on the western front. The film more or less stops there, however.

On this basis alone, the film must be judged wanting. It cannot possibly give a serious depiction of the times and experiences that produced Tolkien and his work while omitting the impact of the rest of the first third of the 20th century on Tolkien's work. Even more seriously, it gives a simplistic and linear view of artistic development in general.

The film lavishes attention on Tolkien's childhood and youth as an orphan, his association with a group of young friends, first at King Edward's school in Birmingham, and after 1913—while he was at Oxford University—the Tea Club and Barrovian Society (TCBS). The TCBS scenes are given far too much emphasis in the film. Another focus is Tolkien's courtship of Edith Bratt (Lily Collins). Both of these elements only add to a misleading impression of Tolkien as simply a typical middle-class youth of the pre-war period, with an interest in ancient languages.

This was the period of Tolkien's life during which he formed an interest in the study of Germanic languages, ancient and modern. His love of linguistics and ancient Germanic literature (the Old Norse Eddas or the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, for example) and his play with word-origins became the focus of his academic career after the war, but also a significant source of his own fictional mythology of Middle Earth, the world of *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and other works.

To its credit, *Tolkien* does show this interest—in one scene, John Ronald (Nicholas Hoult) approaches the famous Oxford Germanic linguist Joseph Wright (Derek Jacobi) to ask to be transferred to his course of study.

The acting in the film is generally good. Jacobi is a scholar obsessed by his field, and Hoult has the right proportions of enthusiasm before and discouragement after the war.

Tolkien's induction into the military, and the depictions of battle on the Somme in 1916, are vivid and affecting scenes. The nightmare visions of thousands of soldiers are here: the piles of corpses, the maddening artillery barrages. One gets a sense of the suffering and carnage that Tolkien saw in that battle, one of the worst in human history.

But the film makes completely misguided attempts to

locate these experiences in the development of Tolkien's art. At one point on the Somme, feverish, he goes on a journey through the trenches to find his TCBS friend Christopher Wiseman (Tom Glynn-Carney). He is accompanied by a soldier conveniently named Sam (the name one of the characters Tolkien uses in an epic journey in *The Lord of the Rings* 20 years later). Clouds of shell smoke form themselves into the shape of wraiths that resemble those of the Peter Jackson's film version of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The rest of the film also indulges in this kind of oversimplification of the sources of Tolkien's artistic work. When Edith asks John Ronald to tell her a story, he begins by saying, "It's about journeys, the journeys we take to prove ourselves," leading the viewer to assume that Tolkien already had in mind the kind of journeys that form the basis of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

While *Tolkien* was a flop at the box-office, it is true that anything associated with Tolkien is potentially worth millions. In this case, the film was disavowed by the Tolkien Estate, which announced before the film was released that it wished "to make clear that they did not approve of, authorise or participate in the making of this film." The estate has taken authors and business to court several times, and it sold rights for a television series based on his works to Amazon for \$250 million in 2017. The company is said to be investing over a billion dollars in the production of this series.

Tolkien is loosely based on a biography by John Garth that covers the same period in Tolkien's life, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-Earth* (2003). Garth has also raised doubts about the accuracy of the film.

Garth's biography is a better effort. Overall it sticks to the facts of Tolkien's life. It makes some interesting observations about the work that Tolkien began writing when he was convalescing from trench fever and was associated with the mythology that later became the backdrop to *the Lord of the Rings*.

Garth, however, uses the same method as the film does when he fails to identify the place of World War I in history, to trace the conceptions that formed Tolkien's sensibility or to compare his time on the Somme in any detail with those of other writers who experienced the war. There is little in his book about the immediate postwar period and the enormous impact of the war on European society and politics.

While the war unquestionably had a profound effect on Tolkien—years later he called it a "utter stupid waste" and "an animal horror"—the real question is, what impact did World War I and the next 20–25 years, which saw the rise of fascism, the depression and the coming of a second world war, have on him and his creative work.

Any assessment of the effect of the war itself would have to be weighed in that context, especially since his work about Middle Earth did not appear for nearly two decades. The complexity and richness of a whole historical period during which Tolkien worked out his languages, mythologies and fiction is missing from the book as well as the film.

The immediacy of the war came full force and gave expression to the feelings and thoughts of millions of active-duty soldiers, in works such as Henri Barbusse's novel *Under Fire* (1916) and the poems of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, which were also published during the war.

But other works by soldiers took time to develop. Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* was not published until 1928, for example, and William March's *Company K* not until 1930.

In fact, few authors had a less immediate response to the world around them than J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien, who invented his own mythology and even whole languages, passed through a prolonged development, 19 years between the end of the war and the production of *The Hobbit*.

Understanding Tolkien's life is an entirely legitimate project, especially for what it can reveal about the social, artistic and personal influences on his work, but the film unfortunately fails to give a broader sense of the times in which he lived.

Tolkien is not in any way critical of British society before the war. The viewer is as surprised as the characters when war is declared and when it turns into a disaster. The film offers few insights into the character of the war, aside from its bloody violence, and it does not show a world transformed by the war. At best we get a sense of what it did to Tolkien, but not to European society. This method does not help us understand the 20th century, the artists that it produced, or Tolkien's own work.



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