

# AN INTERVIEW WITH HOLLY ORDWAY

*On Tolkien's Modern Reading  
and Cultural Apologetics*

*In order to detail Tolkien's modern literary influences, you had to read as many of the books Tolkien had read as you could — which means first you had to play detective and discover what works he read. What provoked you to take up this massive challenge?*

The short answer is: intellectual curiosity!

I've been interested in Tolkien and his work ever since I read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as a young girl, and read "On Fairy-stories" as a teenager; the latter experience, I realize now, is what inspired me to become an academic and a literary critic myself. I've been thinking seriously about his work for more than thirty years. Ten years ago, I realized that there were some very interesting questions about *The Lord of the Rings* to which I couldn't find satisfactory answers. So I decided to investigate.

The first question was "How much did Tolkien read of the modern fantasy authors who came

before *The Lord of the Rings*? And what did he think of their work?”

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the development of the modern fantasy novel, which entailed reading massive amounts of fantasy literature from the Victorians up to Tolkien, and then from Tolkien through the 1990s. Tolkien had such a strong influence on the writers who came after him that it's now almost impossible to conceive of the genre without him — and this can obscure just how innovative and distinctive *The Lord of the Rings* was. It was fascinating to discover the diversity of pre-Tolkienian modern fantasy (writers like Lord Dunsany, E.R. Eddison, William Morris, H.P. Lovecraft, and Robert Howard) and by this comparison to see Tolkien's work from a fresh perspective.

From Tolkien's essay “On Fairy-stories” and the *Letters*, I knew of his familiarity with at least some modern authors of fantasy; I began to wonder how many he had read, and whether they had influenced him. There was enough scholarship out there to suggest that this was an area worth exploring, yet nothing that fully answered my question.

The second question was “How can we account for the power of *The Lord of the Rings* for modern

readers if we assume that it's basically medieval in inspiration?"

I had accepted that Tolkien was fundamentally and exclusively a medievalist, at best indifferent to the modern world and modern culture. After all, his own authorized biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, definitively stated in his group biography of the Inklings that "the major names in twentieth-century writing meant little or nothing to [Tolkien]. He read very little modern fiction, and took no serious notice of it." I was untroubled by this image of my favorite author: in fact, it was largely responsible for my initial desire to be a medievalist myself. (I started my graduate studies in Old and Middle English, with a particular interest in the Arthurian legends.)

But if Tolkien had been such a thoroughgoing medievalist, how did he manage to make *The Lord of the Ring* speak so powerfully to the issues and concerns of the 20th and then the 21st century? Furthermore, I realized that Tolkien's writing style has distinctively *modern* characteristics; this was especially clear in comparison to William Morris, whose fantasies are essentially pastiches of medieval literature, archaic language and all. Tolkien was clearly using medieval materials, but something else was going on as well. I began to

wonder about Tolkien's engagement with modern culture in general. Was he perhaps more widely read than I had hitherto assumed?

These questions had been in the back of my mind for years. Then, in a relatively short span of time, I read two important books that opened up new possibilities. Diana Pavlac Glyer's *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community* showed that the prevailing view of Tolkien as immune to influence was incorrect. If that assumption was over-simplistic, perhaps so too was the idea that he was only interested in medieval language and literature. John Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War* showed that Tolkien had been profoundly influenced by that most modern of catastrophes, World War I.

And so, finally, I thought to myself, "These are interesting questions. I think I'll try to find some answers." Little did I know what I was getting myself into!

*This undertaking took you a decade. How would you compare your conception of the project at its inception to its completed form?*

My initial idea for the book was titled *Tolkien Before and After*: since I didn't expect to have much

material with regard to his modern reading, I intended the second half of the book to address his subsequent influence on other writers. Obviously, that's not the book that I ended up writing! One of the essentials of good research is that you have to follow the material where it takes you, even if it means radically overhauling your original plans.

I revised my approach and adopted the working title of *Tolkien's Modern Sources*. Then I realized that there was so much material that, to keep it manageable, I had to focus exclusively on the "certains" — the books for which I had evidence that Tolkien knew or at least owned them. The distinction between "certain" and "probable" is a vital one in this book. Scholars can indeed productively talk about the "probables," but it's important to be precise and clear about what things we have evidence for and what things are the subject of speculation or hypothesis.

Even then, the book took another turn. I had to reckon with the fact that Carpenter was simply incorrect about Tolkien's attitude toward modern literature, and he was mistaken in other ways that arguably affected the accuracy of his portrait of Tolkien. Normally, one biographer's over-generalizations about his subject would not be a big deal, but in this case, it is. Tolkien has been the

subject of few major biographies compared to other contemporary literary figures of equal significance, and most of Tolkien's biographers base their work on Carpenter's biography. Consider, for instance, that Robert Frost, Tolkien's almost exact contemporary, has had at least four major biographies that, to various degrees, challenge or correct each other's interpretations of Frost's personality and writings; the same is the case for C.S. Lewis. I researched what Carpenter himself had said about his work on Tolkien and the Inklings, and I looked at the history of scholarship on Tolkien as a modern writer, finding that before Carpenter's biographies, scholars were much more likely to consider Tolkien alongside other modern authors.

To be sure, a good many Tolkien scholars had already noted various errors and biases in Carpenter's work, and many had written thoughtfully about exceptions to the apparent rule of Tolkien's lack of interest in modern literature; however, the various pieces hadn't been fitted together into a whole picture. Certainly, the wider public view of Tolkien was as a Luddite, a man stuck in the past. I felt that my argument would be incomplete if I didn't at least try to address how and why this faulty perception arose and has persisted. This line of investigation eventually led me to

realize that multiple factors were involved — including Tolkien’s own self-presentation! It’s an enormously complex topic and I’m sure that I haven’t gotten to the bottom of it, but I hope that my work will stimulate more research and analysis from a fresh perspective.

Eventually I realized the book had to be called *Tolkien’s Modern Reading*, because “Sources” was too limiting. For one thing, I had come to realize that Tolkien engaged creatively with his reading in many different ways: sometimes as source-material, yes, but we can also trace more subtle modes of influence, including what I call influence-by-opposition, in which his dislike or disapproval of something he read prompted him to show how it ought to be done! (*Smith of Wootton Major* is the prime example of the latter, as Tolkien himself explains that it is a reaction against George MacDonald’s “The Golden Key.”) I also realized that even when there isn’t a direct influence to be traced, Tolkien’s interest in modern literature — what he read, what he thought about it — sheds a great deal of light on his personality and his creative process.

In 2011, I had not the slightest idea that I’d end up drawing these conclusions. It’s been an exciting journey of discovery, and I am profoundly grateful for the opportunity to have taken it.

*Given your now considerable understanding of Tolkien's reading habits, his literary inputs, and his approach to (sub)creating stories, have you been able to glean any new or surprising insights about Tolkien in light of your research?*

Many! Let me name just three.

I discovered that Tolkien read and admired the work of many female authors, including Mary Renault, Agatha Christie, Beatrix Potter, and Edith Nesbit -- and that he had a wider range of female friendships and academic collaborators than is usually assumed. As just one example, he was good friends with Dorothy Everett and Elaine Griffiths, two of his Oxford faculty colleagues. Much ink has been spilled on the subject of the Inklings being a male-only group, but hitherto no one seems to have realized that "The Cave," an Oxford literary and social club that Tolkien co-founded, had both female and male members (including Everett, Griffiths, and other women academics).

I also learned that it's simply not true that Tolkien hated Narnia! To be sure, he wasn't enthusiastic about *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (we must allow for personal taste) but the idea that he hated the books or was jealous of Lewis for their ease of composition is incorrect. In fact, he

later called the Narnia Chronicles “deservedly very popular.”

Lastly, one of my most intriguing discoveries was a gradual realization of the significance of the sheer *Englishness* of Tolkien’s personality. I spend about three months of the year in Oxford, and have done so for more than a decade now, and over the years I’ve gradually come to a greater and greater awareness of the subtle ways in which the English differ from Americans in their mode of expression. For instance, Tolkien is characteristically English in the way that he tends to be hyperbolic about the things that he dislikes or disagrees with, but self-deprecating and understated in talking about what he most values or finds important (for the English, ‘not bad’ is a term of high praise).

*In Not God’s Type, you mention an aversion to the kind of literary criticism that treats stories and poems “as language games,” going so far as to say it was one of the reasons you wrote your doctoral dissertation “on the little-regarded genre of fantasy.” Does the academic study of literature always tend to squelch its appeal? Are certain genres — such as fantasy — more immune than others from such a tendency?*

Sadly, the academic study of literature does have the potential to squelch or even destroy one's appreciation of the subject. There's a certain type of literary critic who tends to view enjoyment of literature as a kind of childishness, a sign of shallowness and lack of critical insight, and many academic works of literary criticism are written in a kind of insider jargon that is neither intelligible nor interesting to anyone outside that particular small corner of the academy. Too often, literary studies also means making literature fit the Procrustean bed of whatever theoretical or socio-political views are fashionable at the moment. None of this fosters love and appreciation for literature as something (dare we say it!) that we *enjoy*.

Fortunately, it doesn't have to be this way — and indeed this attitude is, historically speaking, an aberration. Samuel Johnson, possibly the greatest critic in the history of English literature, certainly didn't take this sort of sterile approach! C.S. Lewis was an outstanding literary critic, among his other gifts (*An Experiment in Criticism* is a must-read). Tolkien himself models, in "On Fairy-stories," an approach to literature that is fundamentally appreciative even while it is intellectually rigorous.

When I began my doctoral studies, I thought that the only way to avoid doing the sort of literary

criticism that “murders by dissection” was to focus on a genre that had escaped much attention from literary theorists. That’s no longer the case for fantasy, but I also no longer feel that hiding away is the right reaction. Turning inward can be tempting, as a protective measure, but it can also lead to a reluctance to think critically and deeply about one’s favorite texts and authors. In the end, bad scholarship will fade away, but good scholarship will endure — if we do the scholarship. If we leave literary criticism to be done by those who *don’t* love what they read, then of course we won’t be happy with the results!

This leads me to note that one of the most important influences on *Tolkien’s Modern Reading* is Michael Ward’s *Planet Narnia*. Not only does Michael present a compelling and well-argued thesis that is, in my view, completely convincing, he also writes in beautifully clear and elegant prose that is a pleasure to read. What’s more, this book both illuminates its subject and enhances appreciation of it: after I read *Planet Narnia*, I re-read the Narnia Chronicles and found that not only did I understand them more deeply, I enjoyed them even more fully than I had before. That, in my mind, is the gold standard of literary criticism. Michael showed me that it can be done, and that it is worth doing.

*Tolkien's influence on fantasy has been so comprehensive that the genre is now almost oversaturated with Lord of the Rings derivatives (from Dungeons & Dragons to made-up languages to memes). But then, The Hobbit has been characterized as Beowulf fan-fiction. What is the difference between pop-culture mashups and Tolkien's creative integration of material from various sources?*

I think the key difference is expressed in the word “integration.” Tolkien himself used the image of “leaf-mould” for the material that nourished his creative imagination. The brown, fertile mulch that we find on the forest floor is made up of leaves fallen from many trees that, over time, break down and enrich the soil, with nutrients eventually drawn up into the tree to form new leaves. Tolkien’s own “Tree of Tales” was nourished by leaves from trees across centuries, indeed millennia, and it grew over time. There was nothing hasty about Tolkien’s imaginative growth!

Pop-culture mashups derive much of their interest from the reader recognizing their components and enjoying the clever or funny juxtapositions that the creator has made. Therefore, they’re always going to be evanescent. What is staler than last year’s favorite meme — or last week’s?

(Interestingly, Tolkien did write something that could be called “*Beowulf* fan-fiction,” and it’s the story “Sellic Spell”: his attempt to imagine the folktale that was source-material for the *Beowulf*-poet. It appears in his *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*.)

The authors of imitative works have often been profoundly and genuinely moved by *The Lord of the Rings*, but what they are aiming at is, in effect, to recreate the experience of a favorite book. Once the appeal of “this gives me an experience *similar to* my favorite book” wears off, the derivative work doesn’t have enough of its own merit to last.

Creative integration is essential for a work that stands on its own and holds up over time. And as we consider Tolkien’s own creative imagination, we should remember that it wasn’t just his reading that contributed to nourishing his Tree of Tales, but also his life experiences, his faith, his scholarly work, his friendships, his very environment. Part of Tolkien’s genius is in the way that he assimilates and integrates all these elements, making something that is uniquely his own.

*In 2017 you published *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination* which essentially explained and unpacked Lewis’s claim that “reason is the natural*

*organ of truth; but the imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination . . . is not the cause of truth but its condition.” Your book showed how metaphors create the meaning necessary for evaluating truth and applied this principle to several important apologetic topics such as the incarnation and the problem of pain. Where do you see the culture in 2021 most misunderstanding the meaning of Christianity?*

I think that one of the basic and most significant issues has to do with the meaning of *choice*. I would say that one of the basic misunderstandings is that Christianity is seen as a belief system that one can choose or reject, in whole or in part, rather than as an account of reality that may be true or false. And I think this is important to note because Christians are also part of the culture; this is not a problem for “those people out there” but also for “us in here.”

Choice — the ability to say ‘this, and not that’ to anything and everything — has become increasingly a dominant and harmful feature of our culture. To be sure, the ability to make meaningful choices is indeed a basic part of what it means to be human; we are moral beings precisely because we can, within certain limits, choose between right and wrong, good and evil, in any given situation. But our ability to choose is neither arbitrary nor infinite. We

can choose between right and wrong because there *are* such things as right and wrong, and they are not of our making. Objective value is real, and is accessible to every human being at some level, even without divine revelation to clarify, guide, and deepen our understanding of the moral law. (That's why C.S. Lewis's prescient book *The Abolition of Man* is increasingly important for us today!) There are other things that are 'given' and not chosen, including the basic fact of being born at all. A person can (tragically) choose to end his or her life, but cannot choose never to have existed at all. Ultimately, we must all come to grips with the existentially terrifying fact that, as Bishop Robert Barron puts it, "your life is not about you."

I venture to suspect that at least some of what is identified as "relativism" among the religiously non-affiliated or the "spiritual but not religious" is an over-application of this emphasis on choice. After all, if we tell young people repeatedly, "you can be *anything* you want to be!", it's not unreasonable that they'll internalize this not simply as (rather bad) career advice, but as a basic truth about the way the world works. People do learn what we teach them; it's just that sometimes we don't realize exactly what we're teaching.

That's why I have increasingly been emphasizing, when I speak or write about the importance of meaning-making in apologetics and evangelization, the need for every Christian to strive for a life of personal holiness. Insofar as we, individually, are able to internalize what it means to be a Christian — to conform to *reality*, not just our personal preferences — to that degree our witness will be more effective. The Christian faith is true, however flawed its messengers are, but one of the most convincing indications that it *is* true is the extent to which our lives are in accord with the reality we proclaim.

As St Philip Neri said, “The great thing is to become saints”! Fortunately, he also advised that “we must not wish to do everything at once, or become a saint in four days.” We must be patient with ourselves, and persevere as we try to grow in holiness, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.

*A decade ago, you were already in the vanguard of what is now broadly known as cultural or imaginative apologetics, and you have spent the better part of that time working with leaders in the field and training future apologists. How has the specifically cultural/imaginative aspect impacted the public*

*square? Where do you perceive God is making good use of cultural/imaginative apologists?*

I have been greatly encouraged by the steady increase in attention to cultural, imaginative, and literary modes of apologetics in the last few years. From the academic to the widely popular level, we're seeing more books that take the imagination seriously, or at least give it an acknowledgement! I've also noticed more Christians reviewing secular films, music, and books in ways that thoughtfully engage with the culture: discerning what does and does not accord with the faith, yes, but not in a dismissive or harshly judgmental way: rather, in a way that looks for ways to plant and water the "seeds of the Word" in the wider culture. This is an extremely positive development. If we are to share the good news of the Gospel, we need to meet people where they are. Where else can we possibly meet them?

The impact of cultural and imaginative apologetics is deepened, I believe, by the fact that it's taking root ecumenically. I think we can see God's grace at work in the way that this approach to apologetics and evangelization is growing stronger in both Evangelical Protestant and Catholic contexts. For instance, HBU's work in apologetics is

continuing to thrive and grow, and I'm honored to continue to have a connection as Visiting Professor. And it's fitting that, in my work now for the Word on Fire Institute, my title is the Cardinal Francis George Fellow of Faith and Culture. Faith *and* culture!

I venture to say that imaginative approaches are resonating with people precisely because we live in a culture that is starved of real meaning. People are grasping at anything that seems to offer some significance to their lives — and all too often, settling on alluring but ultimately insubstantial, unsatisfying, or even poisonous substitutes. Helping people discover meaning in *reality*, with all its natural and supernatural splendor, is a massive, even daunting endeavor, but it's the work at hand. We may be tempted to say, like Frodo, "I wish this need not have happened in our time," but we must heed Gandalf's reply: "So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

Finally, I would say that one of the most beautiful aspects of the rise of cultural and imaginative apologetics is that, in my observation, it is growing in the context of community. Etymologically, the word "culture" derives from the

Latin *cultura*, meaning the tending of crops. It is related to the word “cult” in the sense of “system of religious worship.” which derives ultimately from the Latin *cultus*, which includes among its meanings the tilling of the earth. Faith and culture are thus linguistically rooted in an activity, agriculture, that requires a community working together for planting, tending, and harvest — sharing hard work and seasonal feasting.

The work of *An Unexpected Journal* is itself a beautiful example of this kind of work in community. It is one of the greatest gifts to a teacher to see students going out into the world, using and building upon what they have learned. And my students have given a great deal back to me, as well, in helping me to shape and refine my work. For instance, my next book, *Tales of Faith* (planned to release in summer 2022) is a discussion guide for using ancient and medieval literature for evangelization and discipleship. It is an answer to the question that my HBU students often asked me: “When will you write a book based on your teaching?” It is a book designed *for* community, that arises *from* community.

Indeed, in my own work as a writer and academic, I am extraordinarily blessed to have people in my life who provide encouragement,

feedback, practical help, fellowship, and friendship. This kind of community is vital both for doing the work that we have at hand and for our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health. We can't, and shouldn't, and mustn't, try to go it alone. Let's help each other to become saints