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The Ring Of Words: Tolkien And The Oxford English Dictionary



Synopsis

Tolkien's first job, on returning home from World War I, was as an assistant on the staff of the OED. He later said that he had "learned more in those two years than in any other equal part of his life." The Ring of Words reveals how his professional work on the Oxford English Dictionary influenced Tolkien's creative use of language in his fictional world. Here three senior editors of the OED offer an intriguing exploration of Tolkien's career as a lexicographer and illuminate his creativity as a word user and word creator. The centerpiece of the book is a wonderful collection of "word studies" which will delight the heart of Ring fans and word lovers everywhere. The editors look at the origin of such Tolkienesque words as "hobbit," "mithril," "Smeagol," "Ent," "halfling," and "worm" (meaning "dragon"). Readers discover that a word such as "mathom" (anything a hobbit had no immediate use for, but was unwilling to throw away) was actually common in Old English, but that "Mithril," on the other hand, is a complete invention (and the first "Elven" word to have an entry in the OED). And fans of Harry Potter will be surprised to find that "Dumbledore" (the name of Hogwarts's headmaster) was a word used by Tolkien and many others (it is a dialect word meaning "bumblebee"). Few novelists have found so much of their creative inspiration in the shapes and histories of words. Presenting archival material not found anywhere else, The Ring of Words offers a fresh and unexplored angle on the literary achievements of one of the world's most famous and best-loved writers.

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Customer Reviews

Only those in a persistent neurovegetative state could be unaware of The Lord of the Rings, J. R. R. Tolkien's massive epic and the estimable films it inspired. Tolkien has won acclaim as the most beloved author of the twentieth century, and his mythic inventions of lands and creatures are read all over the world, and not just by young people devoted to fantasy. Tolkien is less well known as a sub-editor to a work at least as influential, the Oxford English Dictionary. In fact, he was carried off the fields of World War One with trench fever, and wound up in Oxford in 1916, when he was 24 years old. He joined the dictionary's staff for two years, and said, "I learned more in those two years than in any equal period of my life." What he learned was dictionary-making and the lexicographer's way looking at the history of certain words, but his word endeavors also fired his imagination. In The Ring of Words: Tolkien and the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford University Press), Peter Gilliver, Jeremy Marshall, and Edmund Weiner have examined Tolkien's contributions to the OED, and they are in a perfect position to do so: they are among the current editors of the dictionary themselves. They wanted to write the book "to examine Tolkien's word-hoard with a lexicographer's eye." Anyone interested in either the history of the imaginary Middle Earth or the great dictionary will find richness here. Years later Tolkien wrote of the job offered to him as "kindness... to a jobless soldier in 1918". Most of the dictionary, issued alphabetically, had been done, and Tolkien was assigned as subeditor for a portion of words beginning with W, sorting each word into its subsenses, drafting definitions for each, and researching the etymology.

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