



Elijah Wood as Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*: Don't spoil a perfectly good movie by reading the book first.

# Too bad about Tolkien

Dry, boring, overwritten — *The Lord of the Rings* is a remarkable film achievement, considering what critics think of the books

By BLAINE KYLLO

It's too bad about J.R.R. Tolkien. In *The Lord of the Rings* he had a great concept; characters with depth, a world with history. But the book ... well, let's just say it suffered for not having an editor. On Wednesday, when Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Two Towers* is released, Tolkien may just get what he deserves: a good edit.

I'm not arguing that *The Lord of the Rings* isn't something special. It is. It just could have been better. And it certainly could have been shorter.

A good book should flow. Characters, episodes, and description that originate as words on a page must transcend and become people, events, and images that are conjured in the mind of the reader. Editors are there to make sure that readers never become aware that they're reading a book, that they simply step into the story and go.

*The Lord of the Rings* was never edited, structurally or otherwise. Rayner Unwin, the man who more or less discovered Tolkien, admits as much in an interview taped for the DVD release of Jackson's first film, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. "The only contribution I can claim to make to *The Lord of the Rings* is that I caused it to be divided into three parts," he says.

Tolkien always insisted that *The Lord of the Rings* was one book, despite its first publication as three volumes.

Unwin's father, Stanley, chairman of George Allen and Unwin publishers, contracted his young son Rayner as a "first reader" — someone who provides reports on manuscripts that might otherwise languish in the slush pile. In 1935, Rayner read one of these submissions, *The Hobbit*, and recommended it for publication.

Rayner soon abandoned his duties to attend school and serve time in the military, and during this period, Tolkien submitted *The Simarillion*, which tells of the First Age of Tolkien's Middle Earth. Stanley Unwin rejected Tolkien's second effort.

Sixteen years later, Rayner returned to the publishing world, and contacted Tolkien, who sent him the manuscript of *The Lord of the Rings*. After running the financials, which take into account such factors as the length of a book and its projected sales, Rayner thought the book (which was long enough to use more than the usual amount of paper), might lose up to £1,000. His father reflected on this and came back with this advice: "If you believe this to be a work of genius, then you may lose £1,000."

Rayner believed it was a work of genius. Now, I'm sure that copy editors changed a



J.R.R. Tolkien: Despite his idiosyncrasies, the books rival the Bible in sales.

comma here, corrected a spelling there, but there were no substantive editorial changes. Said Unwin: "You did not go around editing Tolkien. That would have been the absolute, final sin." This was most likely because Tolkien believed that since Middle Earth was a place he created, no editor was competent to suggest, let alone implement, changes to the text.

Working with Tolkien, even a task as simple as correcting typographical errors became a long drawn-out process. New impressions of *The Lord of the Rings* include a "Note on the Text" by Douglas Anderson, in which he documents the trials of getting the text right. "Tolkien experienced what became for him a continual problem ... including well-intentioned 'corrections' of his sometimes idiosyncratic usage."

Despite this, Tolkien's books, including *The Simarillion*, have gone on to rival the Bible (another book that could possibly benefit from some serious editing) in sales, but just because a book is commercially, and even critically, successful does not mean it couldn't have been improved.

Tolkien was the first to concede he wasn't writing for readers. "I desire to do this for my own satisfaction, and I had little hope that other people would be interested in this work,"

he once wrote. "Especially since it was primarily linguistic in its inspiration."

As a result, like so many history books we've all suffered through, *The Lord of the Rings* is often dry and boring. Even the staff at *Time*, not exactly literary critics, called the book "overwritten." Consider: "Their way wound along the floor of the hollow, and round the green feet of a steep hill into another deeper and broader valley, and then over the shoulder of further hills, and down their long limbs, and up their smooth sides again, up on to new hill-tops and down into new valleys."

Tolkien was a great creator, but he lacked discrimination as a storyteller. And in the fantasy genre that he effectively invented, the art of storytelling is paramount.

*The Hobbit*, which I first read at the age of nine, frustrated me. So much of its content seemed irrelevant that I didn't read *The Lord of the Rings* until last year, when I knew the movie was about to come out.

Don't get me wrong: I am awed by the complexity of its construction, the detail of the world it documents, the depth of its invented history. But I also think that we need to read the novel the way we would read Jane Austen: with an understanding of the era — and the style — in which it was composed. I just think the book could have been better had an editor worked with Tolkien to excise some of the extraneous material.

The Tom Bombadil section, for example, instead of intriguing, pulls readers out of the act of reading. It tells how Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, on their way to Bree, get lost in an ancient forest, get attacked by a tree, and get saved by Tom Bombadil. Aside from establishing that the ageless Bombadil has existed since the beginning of the history of Middle Earth, these pages do nothing to serve the story at hand. Whenever I read *The Fellowship of the Ring* I am tempted to flip ahead until the hobbits' journey resumes.

I'm not advocating purely plot-driven books. When integrated properly, varied elements help to create richly textured books with layers of meaning. Details can be what separate literature from pulp. For example, the story of the Balrog, the fiery creature that confronts the fellowship as they trudge through the mines of Moria, is relevant and interesting.

As an editor, I would have recommended that Tom Bombadil, while possibly having merit in Tolkien's complete history of Middle Earth, did not belong in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which is concerned with Frodo carrying the ring of power, first getting to Rivendell, and then beginning his journey to destroy it.

Likewise, *The Two Towers* could have been improved structurally. As it exists, we don't learn anything about Frodo and Sam until the

second half of the book; the first half tells what happens to the rest of the broken fellowship. I would have advised Tolkien that abandoning important characters for so long is a mistake. Then I would have suggested that he alternate chapters: one chapter about the trials of Merry, Pippin, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli; the next about the journey of Frodo and Sam. This would not only avoid reader frustration, but would serve to better pace the concurrent stories.

Film director Peter Jackson has accomplished what so few directors have come close to: he has created a movie that is better than the book — or at least he had the insight to cut that inane Tom Bombadil section. Jackson decided that the first film should simply be about Frodo carrying the ring. "What does Tom Bombadil, ultimately, really have to do with the ring?" Jackson mused. "It's not really advancing our story; it's not really telling us what we need to know." Other characters, scenes, and episodes were omitted, too, in the interest of creating a film that would cause the audience to be lost in it.

And I hope that in the film version of *The Two Towers*, Jackson focuses not on the winding journey of Frodo and Sam, but on the adventures of the others, with periodic cuts back to the Ring Bearer and his companion, so we can see how they're faring.

Jackson has said that he set out to make a movie that Tolkien would have enjoyed, not the movie that Tolkien would have made.

Of course a 400-page book contains far more material than can fit into a two-hour film. Jackson (and cowriters Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens) had to make some tough decisions about which sections of the original text were to be included, and what had to be dropped. What's dropped or left out often angers and frustrates fans of the book, who hope to see on screen what played out in their imaginations while reading. But with this series of adaptations we may finally be able to admit that removing a story from a context that is primarily "linguistic," as Tolkien argued his books were, to one that is visual, can be beneficial. And even more importantly, that the cultural ownership of the product may not rest forever with its first creator. After all, a book has its own stages of life. It is developed first on the page by the author, and next in the imaginations of its readers. In this case, Jackson has created his own *Two Towers*, and if we're lucky it'll be as seamless as his *Fellowship of the Ring*.

So, if you plan on seeing *The Two Towers*, and haven't yet read Tolkien's novel, I recommend you wait. You wouldn't want the book to ruin a perfectly good movie.

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