

Tolkien's Triptych: Cinematic Universes and *The Children of Húrin*

I can't remember life before *The Hobbit*. I first read it when I was probably five or six years old, and I have since revisited it more times than any other book; it remains perpetually entertaining and relevant, full of magic and whimsy that doesn't seem to age even as I do. Tolkien's place as the grandfather of fantasy would have been secure had he only published *The Hobbit*, but he followed it with what is probably the most influential fantasy novel ever written: *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien has a substantial body of work beyond these two books, much of which was edited by his son, Christopher, and published posthumously—translations of poems written in Old English, meaty histories of Middle-earth that detail the dense lore of his fictional world—but his reputation rests on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I'd like to argue, though, that there is a third book that forms a Tolkienesque triptych along with the other two, and they create together what we might call a cinematic universe.

Cinematic universes—stories of various tones and genres, targeting different demographics, which share the same world and cross over with one another (the word “cinematic” is used loosely here, as it doesn't necessarily apply only to film)—are all the rage these days. Marvel, of course, popularized the concept with movies such as *Iron Man*, *Thor*, *Captain America*, and *The Avengers*, but they are hardly the only ones doing it; *Star Wars* is on its way to becoming a cinematic universe, and the concept is gaining a foothold in the literary world as well.

Stephen King has been building a cinematic universe across his enormous bibliography for decades now, Brandon Sanderson has made it almost mainstream with his Cosmere, and David Mitchell is known for the subtle references and crossovers between his novels. “I'm bringing into being a fictional universe with its own cast, and that each of my books is one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovel,” a piece in *The New York Times* cites Mitchell as saying. “Of course, it's important that each of the books works as a stand-alone, so that readers don't have to read everything else I've written to make sense of the novel in their hands. But I write each novel with an eye on the bigger picture, and how the parts fit into the whole.”

But Tolkien, in his way, was creating his own cinematic universe long before doing so was popular—although it didn't come to fruition until after his death. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are his two most famous works; the third, *The Silmarillion*, wasn't published until 1977, four years after he died. It's a sort of Biblical account of Middle-earth, chronicling its origins and myths and pivotal stories in the thousands of years before the events of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. *The Silmarillion* is not a novel, however, and it doesn't quite fit in as the third piece of the puzzle.

What's missing is *The Children of Húrin*, a section of *The Silmarillion* and a similar book called *Unfinished Tales* that was edited and expanded by Christopher Tolkien and published as a stand-alone novel in 2007. Sacrilegious as it may be, *Húrin* is actually my favorite Tolkien book—it's dark, mythic, bloody, resembling something closer to George R.R. Martin or even Shakespeare than traditional Tolkien. It's for that reason that it feels of a whole with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, despite the disparity: it completes a tonal and demographic span in his work.

The Hobbit is a story for all ages, a fun and lighthearted romp that rests easily alongside the likes of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. *The Lord of the Rings* is a sweeping fantasy epic for adults, a rousing tale of good and evil that set the entire genre alight with a fire that burns to

this day. And *The Children of Húrin*, in the vein of the great Greek and early modern playwrights from Euripides and Sophocles to Marlowe and Middleton, precedes the dark fantasy subgenre where writers such as Joe Abercrombie and Peter V. Brett are currently doing their work.

These three novels form the microcosm of a cinematic universe, a breadth of tone, genre, and demographic targeting that all take place within the same coherent world that is Middle-earth. Tolkien proved before so many others that it was possible for radically different stories to exist adjacent to one another, and it's time we acknowledged him for that. It's time to complete the Tolkien triptych and induct *The Children of Húrin* into not just the formal canon of Middle-earth, but the popular canon as well. Tolkien didn't write one masterpiece, or even two; he wrote three. *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Children of Húrin* are wildly different books—and they go better together.

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