

## Hooking Adults on *The Hobbit*

by Catherine J. Johnson

J.R.R. Tolkien has captured the imagination of adult readers of *The Hobbit* just as thoroughly as he has captured the hearts of children. His quirky, unexpected sense of humour appeals to adults and keeps the story fun from the outset when Bilbo, upon hearing that some of the group might not return from the journey ahead, feels a shriek well up inside him. "It burst out like the whistle of an engine coming out of a tunnel. All the dwarves sprang up knocking over the table," (Tolkien 1937). Gandalf strikes a light with his magic staff to see what is going on, and there is Bilbo, "...kneeling on the hearth rug shaking like a jelly that was melting," calling out, over and over, "...struck by lightning, struck by lightning!" (Tolkien 1937). This is classic *Hobbit* humour that adult readers remember with glee.

Then there is the origin of the game of golf as explained by Tolkien. A foe is vanquished by the blow of a hobbit's sword, the enemy's head flying through the air then disappearing down a rabbit hole. A grisly bit of humour indeed, but how can anything be *really* awful if a rabbit hole is involved? Shock value is part of the humour here. One does not see this coming, nor does a present day reader expect it in a 1930s children's story.

Naivete is good for a chuckle, and Bilbo Baggins supplies plenty. When trolls catch him practicing burglary in their pockets, he's afraid they'll "throttle him" and cook him. The trolls ask if there are more of his sort around so they'd have enough to make a pie, and Bilbo says, "Yes, lots." Quickly remembering he shouldn't give his friends away, he adds, "No none at all, not one," (Tolkien 1937). Luckily for him trolls are a bit thick. Archetypes aside, Tolkien's "elves serve as a model for Men's aspirations, (and) hobbits provide a touchstone. Their lives display a basic goodness, a conservative pastoral simplicity," (Foster 2007).

"No spider has ever liked being called Attercop, and Tomnoddy of course is insulting to anybody," (Tolkien 1937). *The Hobbit* is full of Tolkien's inane wit, and he has us doing double-takes. It is silly stuff that jolts us back to childhood, when entertaining ourselves with nonsense was the norm. "You would have laughed (at a safe distance), if you had seen the dwarves sitting up in the trees with their beards dangling down like old gentlemen gone cracked and playing at being boys," (Tolkien 1937). The author's quirky word choice adds to the inanity, as does some of his archaic turns of phrase. Both are often evident in the text's songs:

*Swish, smack! Whip crack!*  
*Batter and beat! Yammer and bleat!*  
*Work, work! Nor dare to shirk,*  
*While goblins quaff, and goblins laugh,*  
*Round and round far underground*  
*Below my lad!*

Bilbo's growth and development contains messages which adult readers can relate to on a deeper level than can children. When we meet Bilbo the hobbit he is introverted, fearful and a bit staid. He finds himself out of his comfort zone, "wondering if he is the man for the job," (Tolkien 1937), but he eventually emerges as a mature, courageous fellow, capable of analyzing situations and making quick, insightful decisions. We're reminded of our own struggles and our continual process of becoming.

A high point in Bilbo's "growing maturity and capability" (Wytenbroek 2011) is his formulation of a brilliant plan to rescue his friends, gently packing them in barrels and sending them downriver to freedom. This feat is equalled only by his rescue of the Company from sure death by devourment when they are caught by spiders and hung up in webs to cure. Bilbo begins to recognize his own reserves when the dwarves "praised him so much that (he) began to feel there was something of a bold adventurer about him after all, though he would've felt a lot bolder still, if there had been anything to eat," (Tolkien 1937). And upon returning to the Shire after the long journey, Bilbo discovers that the townsfolk now regard him as a queer sort, but the best discovery is that he doesn't care.

Readers are heartened to see that Bilbo's maturation includes the ability to see beyond his own small life, and act for the greater good. A prime example of this is when he barter's his share of the treasure to regain peace. As well, the adult reader is reminded through Bilbo's actions that the "common man," "the little guy," can be instrumental in bringing about change. This reminder is one we all need, to help free us from feeling stuck and helpless.

According to Tolkien scholar Dr. John D. Rateliff (2007), "I...had never come across anyone who cared about trees the way I did before discovering Tolkien." Some adult readers will appreciate Tolkien's love of nature, trees in particular, and his environmental references, as in the treeless desolation caused by Smaug. The author names both tree and plant species throughout the story, such as pine and fir, sage and thyme and we are consistently graced with details of nature.

Food and drink are an ongoing theme in *The Hobbit*, supplying adult readers with plenty of enjoyment. During a huge feast at Beorn's house, Gandalf ate "two whole loaves with butter, honey and clotted cream and drank a quart of mead, (Tolkien 1937). We relate to overindulgence as being fun on occasion and we chuckle knowingly at the drinking references—Tolkien supplies us liberally with ale, beer, mead, and red wine—and there is something especially funny about innocent fantasy characters imbibing. For example, Gandalf asks, "What's that? Tea! No thank you! A little red wine, I think, for me," and Thorin chimes in, "And for me," (Tolkien 1937).

Then there is Tolkien's salute to food, glorious food. It's universal, we all need it, we all think about it. Bilbo is a foodie and beyond, and relishes "a nice little breakfast and a nice little second breakfast." He was "consumed by hunger" even while thinking for his life during the riddle game with Gollum. And the truth is we do think about food at unexpected or inappropriate times. Adults relate to this. There has been plenty of opportunity for this to happen during our lives.

Not only does Tolkien (1937) give us particular foodstuffs to think on—seed cakes, buttered scones, apple tart, mince pies, pork pie, salad, cheese and bacon—he supplies details of food preparation, further adding to the story's realism and characterization. "The trolls were toasting mutton and licking gravy off their fingers;" "The elves were cooking dinner;" "The Company was roasting rabbits, hares and a small sheep." And who of us hasn't at some time been a house guest where our hosts didn't seem to eat much? Not so at Elrond's house, as "it was perfect if you liked food," (Tolkien 1937). How inviting! Similarly, huge feasts were consumed amidst much merriment at Beorn's house. But there are dark times along the journey when food is scarce, weighing heavily on Thorin and Company. If it were not for the hospitality of others and the resourcefulness of the characters, starvation was not long off. Adult readers can appreciate the gravity of these situations while rooting the characters on in their quests.

Adventure and magic are big drawing cards for adult readers of *The Hobbit*. Who of us didn't dream of becoming something exciting like an explorer, an archaeologist, a pirate or magician? Well, we can dream those dreams again as we journey through Tolkien's remarkable Middle Earth on our quest for treasure, thrilling at each discovery whether it be a talking tree, a magic ring or eagles swooping down to save us. The journey itself is pure adventure, and very much akin to our yearning for travel, for different places and people, and to have our complacency or routine shaken up. We want to "get away from it all," escape boredom, feel courageous and new, and we get this vicariously on our quest through Middle Earth with Thorin and Company.

*The Hobbit* provides an escape for adults into an innocent and fantastic world, where life is much simpler, yet still filled with adventure. “The pastoral fantasy (which has been) invented is, after all, an image of a world in which men and women feel at home with themselves, with each other and with nature, a world in which harmony reigns. It is an ideal...” (Curry 1994). Besides providing fun, *The Hobbit* is a comfort book. Like comfort food, we know we can turn to it and feel good.

## Bibliography

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