
THE RED BOOK OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN TOLKIEN STUDIES

J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe: Context, Directions, and the Legacy.

Edited by Janka Kascakova and David Levente Palatinus. New York and London: Routledge, 2024. Pp. ix + 188. ISBN 9781032525587 (pbk), ISBN 9781003407171 (ebk).

Reviewed by Norbert Gyuris
gyuris.norbert@pte.hu

The Routledge Studies in Speculative Fiction presents a systematic survey of the history of Tolkien Studies in Central Europe in the same way as Bilbo's manuscript of the journey "There and Back Again" and "The Tale of the Great Ring" compiled by Frodo were handed over to Samwise Gamgee at Grey Havens. However, *J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe: Context, Directions, and the Legacy* edited by Janka Kaščáková and Dávid Levente Palatinus goes further than the found manuscript of the Red Book that serves as a fictional basis for *The Lord of the Rings*. The nine chapters of the volume written by Hungarian and Slovakian scholars is a "necessary and long overdue contribution" (3) to Tolkien studies and the broad scholarly evaluation of the fantasy genre. The three parts of the book give a profound insight into how the Hungarian, Slovakian, and Czech translations and their reception evolved during the last decades of the twentieth century. In addition, the volume also demonstrates the ways in which Tolkien studies can evolve both in Central Europe and in the wider context of the contemporary twenty-first-century assessment of Tolkien as a cornerstone of the fantasy genre. Although Poland would belong to the Central-Eastern European region, it has been apparently left out from the scope of study, because of its own "burgeoning fantasy tradition" (3). However, the volume is a precious and worthy contribution to the reception of Tolkien's heritage in Central-Eastern Europe, as it reveals how Tolkien has been assessed in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The collection aptly recognises that Tolkien studies are "lagging behind" (2) in Central-Eastern Europe and offers a significant contribution to the understanding of the evaluation of Tolkien's works in the past few decades. The volume highlights that after the film versions of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* came out, Tolkien's effect on the Central European fantasy scene gained momentum. Moreover, Tolkien's "popularity and centrality in the cultural domain since the 1930s have been frequently attributed to its ability to channel, among other things, cultural perceptions and imaginaries of transgression, sublimity, instances of escapism and otherness, as well as the intricate relation between politics and power" (3). Thus, the

volume sets out to combine cultural, literary and media studies to show how Tolkien's work became increasingly incorporated into the critical thinking of communist and post-communist Central Europe and how literary scholarship of the popular genres reflects the Anglophone cultural influence in the area. Most importantly, the volume tries to find the answer for several vexing problems. The first question concerns the reception of Tolkien's works as well as the "political, economic, and cultural anxieties in Central Europe" (4), while the second question is directed at the legitimacy of an independent conceptualisation of fantasy in the historical setting of Central Europe. The third question the volume attempts to answer is derived from the former two, as the articles explicitly try to find out what the history of Tolkien's reception reveals about the negotiation of Eastern European and global cultural values. The volume also poses the complex question of "how fantasy's worldbuilding helps circulate ideas about racial, political, and geographic otherness, femininity and masculinity, domination and equity, practices of exclusion, and, finally, mythological conceptions of good vs. evil, from communist times through to today's media-saturated culture" (4). The studies of the book seek answers to these questions and provide a plethora of possible approaches to fill in the relatively empty space of critical thinking connected to Tolkien studies and fantasy in general.

The reconceptualisation of fantasy and Tolkien's heritage brings along a confluence of perspectives. Based on the underrepresented nature of Central European fantasy writing and the scarcity of research related to Tolkien's works, the volume combines several different approaches. First, it tries to bridge the demarcation line between local and global to depoliticise the historically charged field of reception by considering the most recent phenomena of transnational fandom. Second, by considering the lessons learned from cultural theory, literary scholarship, and media studies, the book attempts to explore the fundamental processes behind the special Eastern European cultural and political givens. Third, it necessarily draws attention to a well-established and insightful Eastern European take on the Tolkien subject and thus brings fandom and the critical approach closer to each other. To reach this goal, the volume is divided into three parts. The first deals with the translations of Tolkien's texts and their reception in Hungary. The second section focuses on the same issue in the Czech and Slovakian context. The third part investigates the possibilities of how the evaluation and interpretation of contemporary Tolkien studies can develop in the context of young adult fiction and transmediality.

Part One, titled "Reception and Translations of Tolkien in Hungary," is dedicated to the Hungarian aspect. Both chapters of the first part are written by Gergely Nagy, one of the leading and most prominent Tolkien scholars from Hungary. In the first chapter, Nagy gives a rigorous and meticulous survey of the translations of Tolkien's work and their critical reception from the early 1970s to the turn of the

century. The chapter offers the minutely detailed publication history of Tolkien's works and their place in the literary and socio-cultural context. The second chapter is devoted to the same aspects in the 21st century and it provides an equally thorough historical assessment of all the possible aspects of Tolkien studies in the Hungarian setting in the aftermath of Peter Jackson's films. The literary, historical and cultural context of the new translations of Tolkien's earlier works and the revision of the older translations are carefully inspected, including the founding of the Hungarian Tolkien Society and the role of a new generation of Tolkien scholars whose work opened up novel vistas of study.

Part Two is entitled "Reception and Translations of Tolkien in Czechoslovakia and Its Succeeding Countries," and its four chapters survey the history of the translations and their after-effect in present-day Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The first chapter "Mythologia Non Grata: Tolkien and Socialist Czechoslovakia" by Janka Kaščáková investigates the history of the Slovakian and Czech translations and their reception in the last two decades of Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia. The detailed description of the censorship and the hostile politico-cultural context in which the translations found their way to the publishers, and finally to the public, evokes the times when reading Tolkien counted as an illegal underground activity. The systematic study reveals how the mere fact of reading Tolkien's works meant belonging to dissident circles and presents a sad memento of the times when reading certain works and entire genres was thwarted by the authorities. Tereza Dědinová's contribution to the volume bears the title "'Through darkness you have come to your hope': The Dynamics of J.R.R. Tolkien's Work Reception in the Czech Context" concentrates on how the independent Czech Republic from the 1990s on provided a new scene for the publishing of Tolkien's works and how the reception changed due to free speech and the unrestricted circulation of formerly forbidden literary works. The article also surveys the most paradigmatic Czech scholarly works on Tolkien and merges the historical insights with the evaluation of a slightly detached electronic survey conducted among contemporary young readers, which finds that Tolkien's "texts retain their autonomy over time and remain relevant to today's young readers" (90). Jozefa Pevčíková and Eva Urbanová's article "J.R.R. Tolkien in the Slovak Press Situation After 1990," translated by Jela Kehoe, constitutes the fifth chapter of the volume. The authors give the history of the three waves in which Tolkien's works were published in Slovakian and, focusing primarily on scholarly literary periodicals, daily magazines, fanzines and other popular forms of media, they cite several translation inaccuracies to indicate the main points of criticism the translations received by various constituents of the Slovak academic and popular scene. The last chapter of Part Two concludes the historical contextualisation of Tolkien's works published in Slovak and Czech. In "Unknotting the Translation

Knots in *The Hobbit*: A Diachronic Analysis of Slovak Translations from 1973 and 2002,” Jela Kehoe compares the two existing Slovak translations of the novel. Kehoe focuses on the different translations from the vantage point of the emblematic terms and names in *The Hobbit* and investigates those instances which required a surplus amount of creativity from the two translators, but the chapter also enumerates cases in which one or both translations failed from a stylistic or semantic point of view.

After the historical aspects of the first two sections of the book, Part Three offers an insight into the new contemporary approaches to Tolkien studies in the region. Martina Vránová in the seventh chapter titled “Growing Up in Fantasy: Inspecting the Convergences of Young Adult Literature and Fantastic Fiction” offers a merging of Tolkien’s heritage and young adult fiction, resulting in young adult fantasy. The study concentrates on recurring themes that are present both in Tolkien’s works and young adult literature, such as identity formation, the role of the quest, and rites of passage. The chapter concludes that the substantial marketing success of young adult fantasy is based on the transposition of the disappearing phenomenon of the ritual into this new subgenre of fantasy. The penultimate chapter of the book is written by Nikolett Sipos and bears the title “One Does Not Simply Teach Fantasy: How Students of English and American Studies in Hungary View the Genre and Tolkien’s Legacy.” The study looks into how Hungarian university students enrolled in English and American studies programmes evaluate the fantasy genre and Tolkien’s works in general. The article is centred around a survey conducted at two Hungarian universities, and its findings underline the importance of the applied merits of fantasy in the teaching process. The last chapter of the volume is written by Dávid Levente Palatinus. The article, titled “From Niche to Mainstream? Screen Culture’s Impact on Contemporary Perceptions of Fantasy,” highlights one of the possible futures of Tolkien studies and the genre of fantasy as it investigates the effects of streaming platforms on fantasy. The study examines the technological, commercial, budgetary, entertainment, aesthetic, and generic aspects of the proliferation of fantasy both as a form and mode in screen culture and finds that the medium of the streaming platform changes fantasy into a “multifaceted, mainstream narrative and cultural mode” (173).

Like the *Red Book of Westmarch*, which serves as the fictitious basis for Tolkien’s probably two most important works, *J.R.R. Tolkien in Central Europe* is a groundbreaking work that puts the Hungarian, Slovak and Czech merits of Tolkien scholarship on the map of international fantasy studies. The volume conforms to the extensive renewing, hybridising and worldbuilding attributes of the fantasy genre, aptly demonstrating that the reception of Tolkien in the Eastern-European region is a worthy contribution to an already established international field of scholarly and popular interest.