



University of Iowa Honors Theses

University of Iowa Honors Program

Spring 2017

The Storyteller's Apprentice

Kaycee Pancake

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.uiowa.edu/honors_theses

 Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Copyright © 2017 Kaycee Lynn Pancake

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#). For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

THE STORYTELLER'S APPRENTICE

by

Kaycee Pancake

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the English

Matthew Brown
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2017

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
English have been completed.

Marie Kruger
English Honors Advisor

THE STORYTELLER'S APPRENTICE

by

Kaycee Lynn Pancake

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
graduation with Honors in the
Department of English

Matthew Brown
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2016

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
Department of English
have been completed.

Marie Kruger
Honors Major Advisor

THE STORYTELLER'S APPRENTICE

by

Kaycee Pancake
Spring 2016Matthew Brown
Thesis Mentor from University of Iowa English Department

J. R. R. Tolkien was a master story-teller, and I am his apprentice. As a narrator in this thesis, I am a nontraditional student studying creative writing in the pursuit of my dream to write fantasy novels for a living. I've been writing since my childhood across various scales and genres, and have completed the first of a five novel fantasy series that takes place in a universe called Terralus. As a fantasy writer however, I have much to learn, as writers always will. I've also been an avid fan of *The Lord of the Rings* since high school, and ever since then have wanted to unearth all that Tolkien could teach me about writing fantasy.

This creative nonfiction thesis is a bibliomemoir capturing my conversation with Tolkien, or the conversation we would have if we could "sit down by a fireplace, he with his tea and I with my Mountain Dew." Writers love to talk about writing: their inspiration, their process, their joys and pains, and that is just what this thesis allows me to do with Tolkien. We discuss how we started writing, the role writing plays in the whole of our lives, the best ways to wield the power we have in our pens, and the ways in which Truth as defined by our Christian faiths can influence our fantasy.

There has of course been much scholarly material produced over the years concerning Tolkien's life and work, giving me a wide range of biographical information, literary material, and Tolkien's own ideas toward writing craft to work with. I also pull in the voices of other fantasy authors using their websites, blogs, and interviews—authors who have also influenced the way I see and treat fantasy: Kristin Cashore, Suzanne Collins, Ted Dekker, Philip Pullman, and J. K. Rowling. I don't think Tolkien would mind, given the social nature of his own writing career from the T. C. B. S. through the Inklings. Writing itself is a solitary activity, but the ability to approach other authors both encourages and challenges us.

Tolkien was never very excited about the idea of being studied, considered highly, or having his life pulled apart for anything that could be construed as a clue to something hidden in his work, and in a way I am doing all of these things. I hope he doesn't mind having a conversation with a rookie sub-creator and letting me tell both of our stories together.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Chapter 1	
A Love of Language	9
Chapter 2	
Escape, Expression, and Exploration	18
Chapter 3	
Concerning World-Building	27
Chapter 4	
Of Theoretical Magic.....	33
Chapter 5	
Art Over Allegory.....	44
Chapter 6	
Leaves and Sandcastles.....	52
Reflective Essay	
The Dragon’s Flamethrower.....	63
Bibliography	71

Introduction

It started with the movies. I'm a terrible English major.

Christopher Lee read the entire trilogy every year for decades before taking on the role of Saruman in Peter Jackson's film adaptations of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. I just happened to walk through the living room one day while Dad was watching one.

Dad always spent far more time watching movies than reading books, but movies are stories too, and so in that I learned that our universes could briefly intersect. The scene playing on the screen at the time snagged my attention, and when I asked Dad what was going on in the story, he didn't even try to summarize as he usually could when I walked in on one of his movies. "You'll just have to watch it," he said this time.

I was hooked the first time I saw it: the intriguing story, the thematic content, the complexity of the plot and subplots, the range of characters, and the journey out of this world and into the breath-taking fantasy realms of Middle Earth. *The Lord of the Rings* held everything I have ever loved about stories. "I bet you'll be sick of them after six weeks," my older brother, Kyle, insisted. He couldn't understand at the time how anything without four wheels and a motor could have possibly been interesting. He woke up every morning that summer to the sound of Uruk Hai marching, and I credit my ability to recite every line of the movies to his dare.

When I read the books, I learned that Tolkien's complexity ran so much deeper, reached so much further than Peter Jackson could have ever hoped to put on the screen. The mythologies, the histories of each race, the back stories of each character—Tolkien had taken "world-building" to depths I'd never seen before. The fanatic declaration "Frodo Lives!" that appeared tagged in subways as the movies were coming out was probably born from the impression that a universe as intricately detailed and completely expressed *has* to be real *somewhere*.

So I started picking up tidbits of information about the man who masterminded Middle Earth, and I became acquainted with a quirky intellectual who preferred creating hobbits over grading exams, a linguist who knew secret capabilities hidden in the aesthetics of language, a Christian author who vehemently refused to use allegory, a man who wrote stories so that his mind didn't have to be trapped in the global war that held his physical existence captive. That one got to me—I learned it watching the behind-the-scenes DVDs upstairs in my bedroom where I hid from screaming voices and slamming doors, writing stories because they were my only way out of the house.

Tolkien wields a power as a writer, a power that I can sometimes relate to as a fellow novelist, but other times I can't understand. How do you create such a vast universe without getting lost? How do you write stories that remain relevant across generations? How do you speak through fantasy without the use of allegory?

How does a Christian writer live a life that can so accidentally change the world?

I struggle with social anxiety, but it's so easy for me as a writer if I am in a room full of other writers to walk up to another person and start asking these kinds of questions. Writers love to talk about writing with one another. "How long have you been writing?" "What do you write?" "I've tried that before, but it didn't work out; did you ever have a problem with such and such?" "That's amazing, I'd like to try that!" "Maybe I'm just crazy, but this is what it feels like when I write." "Yeah, that's exactly what it feels like!" Writers have a bond: our brains work within an idiosyncratic operating system with high-speed pathways between inspiration, logic, speculation, myth, theme, language—pathways that somehow break down when they come too near the tongue for many of us. I so desperately wished I could have known Tolkien when I learned that he stuttered when he spoke too quickly in much the same way that I do (Zettersten

5). Verbal eloquence or not, writers know other writers. We aren't strangers to each other as most people we don't know by name are. It is for this reason that I've always wished I could sit and talk with Tolkien, to ask him these questions, to see his writer's heart, and then open my chest to show him mine.

But I am a quiet, nontraditional student in Iowa City, and he an accomplished philologist at Oxford. Now after his death, his life and works are both published and protected by his estate, making movie deals and endorsing biographies; I'm embarking upon the mission of knocking meekly at the doors of literary agents in hopes of finding one who wants to know my name. Tolkien was raised Catholic, and I Southern Baptist. Even if he and I lived at the same time, I would never make it into his study, and why would he travel from England to drink Capanna coffee with me?

If we are writers though, can ink be enough to connect our dots in this crazy universe of ours?

The chapters that follow then are my conversation with Tolkien as we talk about our lives as writers. In the first chapter, we share our origin stories. Iluvatar began his creation of Middle Earth with music in *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien began with language, I with gel pen. Tolkien might laugh at that, and may ask what exactly a gel pen is, and as a proud child of the nineties I'd describe to him the way that the colored ink bleeds from its tip like Hemmingway's veins at his typewriter. Then I'd describe the feeling I first encountered when I was eight years old of seeing the story from my head appear on the paper with such sparkling beauty and clarity, and the understanding that this is what I was created for.

In the second chapter, Tolkien and I talk about what writing has meant to us. It's an intimate subject, one that the stereotypes of writers tend to miss. We don't write simply to

satisfy a hyper-functioning fancy that keeps us from operating in society like “normal people.” We write because we have to. We write because this life in this world can be unbearable at times, and like Tolkien says, it’s our duty as prisoners of reality to try to escape (“On Fairy Stories” 148). Writing gives us a means of saying that which we cannot say. Writing heals wounds inflicted by trauma that would fester and infect our minds and drive us mad—both in the sense of unleashing a rabid insanity and by consuming our joy as well as that of leaving us nothing but bitter anger—if we didn’t treat them. Writing allows us to cope with a reality that threatens every day to destroy us.

Tolkien and I compare the tools of world-building in chapter three: how we bring about names and maps to construct a realm for our readers to enter. In chapter four, we talk about how we bring those readers into that realm. As every writer is taught that he or she should also read, I am intimately familiar with the magic experienced when opening a book filled with the story of a capable wordsmith. Tolkien knew that power too, and he taught me a lot about how to wield it. The infrastructure of a fantasy holds it up, but the details and language and magic with which the author colors it is how a reader is seduced to abide within the story.

Much of my own writing is faith-based, driven by my belief in a loving God who offers redemption to everyone through faith, and that same belief played into much of Tolkien’s writing and the way that he approached stories in general. However, as I discuss in chapter five, he was strongly opposed to the idea of allegory. I ask him how he balances his staunch avoidance of the genre with a faith-based desire for deeper meaning, and in his answer we come to discuss how fantasy creates any kind of meaning at all. A good story is never just a story, so what are we trying to accomplish anyway?

But I tend to trap myself in corners with all of this hidden meaning and ulterior motives, so scared of misrepresenting what I believe to be True that I am terrified of my words getting out into the world. Tolkien faced a similar fear, demanding perfection from his work before allowing it to be published. But in chapter six, I remind Tolkien that being perfect was never what God called either one of us to do. God Created us, loved us, redeemed us, and gave writing to us as a gift. We don't have to fashion flawless mythologies or strategize how to maintain the most responsibility over how our message will be received. We have only to write.

Tolkien left behind countless drafts, notes, and revisions. *The Silmarillion* and *The Children of Hurin* couldn't even be published until after his death. Meanwhile, I have been waiting on the sidewalk outside the doors of the publishing industry for two years now, too scared to go inside. As I try to tell Tolkien of the freedom we have to write for the sheer joy of it, he's telling me to open those doors and walk inside, because I'm a writer, and that's all that it takes to belong there.

Chapter 1: A Love for Language

“How long have you been writing?”

This question belongs to a set of inquiries that is asked of my generation of upcoming writers fighting to become authors, alongside inquiries such as “What do you like to write?” or the inevitable “So, what do you want to do with your degree?” (commonly asked by annoying realists with a generous slathering of skepticism). Many of the writers I have come in contact with answer that first question in a similar way: “All of my life,” “As long as I can remember,” or “Ever since I was a kid.” It’s only on a rare occasion that I encounter a writer who came into his or her craft later in life, perhaps even with reluctance after trying to conform their writer’s heart to the logic of those realists. Christian fantasy author Ted Dekker was a successful businessman before falling in love with the pen and becoming a bestselling author (“About Ted”), and he is even an anomaly among those I’ve met who found the written world as adults: many of them write nonfiction. But along with Philip Pullman (*His Dark Materials* trilogy) (Pullman) and J. K. Rowling (*Harry Potter*) (Rowling), novelists often are born with ink in our veins.

The “Author of the Century” (*Author of the Century* xvii) did not even begin his literary career writing stories. J. R. R. Tolkien’s creative foundations actually lay more in the realm of linguistics than narrative. His love of words and sounds existed at an even earlier age than when my writing peers started to pick up a pen. I wrote my first “book” on notebook paper in gel pen when I was eight: Tolkien spoke four languages by that age.

Educated as a child by his mother, he learned Latin, French, and German as she also nurtured in him his creative spirit through painting, sketching, and piano (Pearce 14-16). In the midst of this development of Tolkien’s young imagination, he did recall once writing a story at

the age of seven. It was about a dragon, not that we should have expected anything else from him. “I remember nothing about it except a philological fact... My mother said nothing about the dragon, but pointed out that one could not say ‘a green great dragon,’ but had to say ‘a great green dragon’. I wondered why, and still do. The fact that I remember this is possibly significant, as I do not think I ever tried to write a story again for many years, and was taken up with language.” (Pearce 15).

He would go on to study Gothic, Anglo Saxon, and Welsh—extracurricular, and to the detriment of his grades, as the curriculum called instead for Latin and Greek (Pearce 32). He attributed his academic struggles to “idleness,” when I would argue that it was ambition: a thirst for more languages than his formal education had to offer. His study of languages reached further and ran deeper than his program did, but manifested on his transcripts as a distraction. It seems that higher schooling has a tendency to discourage those whose efforts it does not understand, then has the ability to make us feel that our differences with the system are shortcomings of our own fault. It breaks my heart that Tolkien thought that he was “idle.”

As a nontraditional student, I myself tend to feel like a failure for taking eight years to complete what most do in four. I’m a first-generation college student putting myself through school: I made it through two years at Metropolitan Community College on a scholarship while living at home, but things got complicated when I came to the University of Iowa. I had to take a year off of school to establish residency, and then I had to work full-time to support myself, which only leaves the time and money for one or barely two classes at a time. Perhaps if Tolkien and I could sit down by a fireplace, he with his tea and I with my Mountain Dew, we could exchange his stories of professors insisting to him that Gothic is irrelevant to his education with

mine of fighting for a place in classes I could fit into my lunch break while my daycare kids are sleeping.

In spite of his “idleness,” Tolkien graduated with first class honors in English with an emphasis on Old Icelandic from Exeter College in 1915. Sixty-eight years later, the library at Exeter where he worked the most would be haunted by J.K. Rowling, struggling through her own degree in French at her parents’ insistence that she study something “useful” as opposed to keeping with her own desire to study English Literature, which held no promises for her future—the battle fought by countless English majors today, myself a humble chief among them. “When you graduate, you can be an English professor, or go to law or business school so you can get a real job,” a professor of mine once suggested to a classroom full of English Honors students.

Or there are my father’s doubts: finally quieting now that I have been fighting for my degree in Iowa City since leaving Nebraska in 2011 to go to college against his will. He sat at the kitchen table once with a flyer from a high school guidance counselor soliciting parental support of college plans. It was probably an informational meeting on how financial aid works or the dates for some college visit or another. My parents never paid much attention to these things—unlike my big brother, I got good grades, so they largely left me alone to handle school on my own. But Dad had just happened to open the mail and I just happened to be at the kitchen at the same time, trying to finish doing Mom’s dishes so I could leave for youth group. “You can’t afford college,” he said.

“Well, that’s what financial aid is for, isn’t it?”

“No, Kaycee, those are all loans,” he said with that non-teaching tone of his. He used it a lot. It never felt like he was giving me new information I’d never seen before, but rather that he was telling me something I should have already known but was too stupid. “People get buried

alive in student debt all the time, you don't borrow money for college." I started the dishwasher and dried my hands, then turned to leave the room with a dismissive "Oh"—like response and planning on looking into it later to see if he was right. "And what kind of job can you get with a Creative Writing degree, anyway?" he asked.

"I can write books," I told him, smiling at my own little spark of excitement. It was all I'd ever wanted to do.

"And you can actually make money doing that?" he scoffed. It wasn't really a question, so I didn't have to answer, I just left to go see friends who knew how much I loved writing.

Tolkien solved the English major career crisis by remaining in academia for his livelihood. His letter of application for the Professorship of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford in 1925 tells how he tutored, worked for the Oxford English Dictionary, and was the Reader in English Language at Leeds University. During his time at Leeds, he essentially established a linguistics program that interacted with the literature program but was still its own entity, including discussion classes and student-lead clubs within five years of Tolkien coming to the school (*Letters* 12-13). He had moved through academia collecting languages as he went, and spreading his passion and wealth of knowledge behind him.

In 1931, Tolkien delivered a lecture entitled "A Secret Vice" in which he describes his peculiar hobby which grew from this profound curiosity about languages: making languages of his own. One of his primary examples in this essay is a tongue known as Nevbosh, a language he created with his cousin when they were children (*Zettersten* 70). In the essay, Tolkien gives me a taste of his linguistic passion—he shows me how to listen to language like I never have before. He writes about it in terms of "pleasure": how pleasure is produced by finding sounds to represent ideas. Tolkien took joy from language, he writes, in the same way a painter or

musician takes joy from their art. Language for Tolkien was about so much more than translations and grammar, but about aesthetics, about enjoyment, about beauty. Gothic was one of his favorite languages, one of the languages that had been a “distraction” for him. “I discovered in it not only modern historical philology, which appealed to the historical and scientific side,” he wrote, “but for the first time the study of a language out of mere love: I mean for the acute aesthetic pleasure derived from a language for its own sake, not only free from being useful but free even from being the ‘vehicle of a literature.’” (*Letters* 213). Tolkien didn’t study languages in order to better communicate with other cultures or to study literature, he studied language because he was passionately in love with the relationship between sound and meaning.

The stories came later.

In the same essay, Tolkien proposes that those seeking to create “an art-language” should also create an accompanying mythology. “The making of language and mythology are related functions; to give your language an individual flavor, it must have woven into it the threads of an individual mythology,” he writes. “Your language construction will *breed* a mythology.” (“A Secret Vice” 210-211). This was his link, his doorway into writing fantasy. For Tolkien, it started with language.

The idea of this potential was born in Tolkien’s mind in the presence of the “Tea Club and Barrovian Society,” or the T.C.B.S., an informal and semi-secret society consisting of Tolkien, Rob Gilson, Geoffrey Smith, and Christopher Wiseman. They formed at King Edward’s School in 1911 and remained a close fellowship of literary minds through World War I (*Letters* 8-9). In December of 1914, the four held the “Council of London” in Wiseman’s home: a weekend gathering spent smoking pipes and talking around the fire, feeling a quadrupling of

their own intellectual size according to Wiseman. It was at this council that Tolkien started to understand himself as a poet, and he immediately began developing his voice. As the year turned, he found his random composition of independent poems to be unsatisfactory, and he turned to some of his earliest poetry concerning the character of Earendel, who many years later would become Earendil, the grandson of the king of Gondolin in *The Silmarillion* (Carpenter 73-75, 92).

Whether the relationships are close like the T. C. B. S. or if it's a first-time conversation, whether it's the genesis of an epic mythology or simply stories in general, writers love to talk about where we get our ideas, even if the discussion leads far beyond our own understanding. Perhaps we like to talk about it as a way to help us understand it ourselves, or maybe it's a way of feeling like we aren't alone in our solitary art. We open such discussions with "I have no idea where this comes from," but then chase the winding trails of our various muses in an attempt to map their courses. Some writers start with characters, like Kristin Cashore's *Graceling*. She knew who her characters were and erected a universe around them (Cashore). Suzanne Collins wrote *The Hunger Games* as a rethinking and repositioning of ancient myth and history: the labyrinth in Crete and the colosseum in Rome (Margolis). Ted Dekker begins with a theme and finds a story to illustrate it from a pool he keeps of ideas for characters and plot devices (*ReWrite: The Ragged Edge*). *Harry Potter* first came to J.K. Rowling on a four hour train ride as her imagination found a boy who didn't know he was a wizard on Platform 9 ¾ (Rowling).

My own inspiration tends to come in a cascade of "What If" questions until my trivial curiosity has altogether borne me hence from reality. During my last two years of high school, the entire front of the school was being rebuilt to create updated office spaces, additional classrooms, and ceilings that wouldn't fall down in the middle of class (I was luckily at a

doctor's appointment the day a ceiling tile fell and landed on my desk in the middle of my history class). They left the original front doors while they built the addition to partition the chaos off from the student body, but the doors were glass. We could still see the dirt floor, the cinder block walls, support beams, hanging wires, plastic curtains, workers with lamps strapped to their hard hats like miners. It was dark and dismal and somehow made me think of a prison yard—perhaps less because of how it looked and more because of how I thought of high school. We were told where to go, what to do, when to eat, and we needed written permission to deviate, even if it was just to go to the bathroom. Being late could get us in trouble, having a backpack could get us in trouble, carrying a purse that could be considered a backpack could get us in trouble, taking food out of the cafeteria without a pass could get us in trouble, reading the wrong book in class could get us in trouble. From eight in the morning until three fifteen in the afternoon, I was locked inside of this building under this oppressive authority in a culture of peers who couldn't decide if they wanted to like me because I was nice or spread rumors about me because I was weird. After all, I actually believed that God created the world, I was friends with the fat kid that drove everyone else nuts, I never had a boyfriend, and I didn't know anything about sex because my mom sent notes to excuse me from health class, so there was clearly something was wrong with me. They just couldn't figure out what. I couldn't either. I just knew I didn't quite fit, but I couldn't get out either.

Walking through the prison that was now starting to look like a prison, I started wondering. What would make a public high school even more like a prison than it already felt to me? What would friendships and rivalries look like in a prison-like school? How would I handle attending such a school? Just as Tolkien's "nonsense fairy languages" had bred a mythology, my nonsense wonderings bred a fictional tale as I answered those questions by

creating characters who could play out their answers. By the time I graduated and left Papillion-LaVista High School, I had written a novel about it.¹

In all of the various ways in which novels find their authors, whether from characters, stories, or situations, this is perhaps the most unique facet of Middle Earth's conception: Tolkien's mythology came from Tolkien's languages. While I'm looking at the world around me before probing ideas to make a story, Tolkien's primary inspiration came from within his own mind. Both sources however—his internal and mine external—lead us to the same place: the creation of alternative worlds.

In 1916 while participating in military training, Tolkien wrote a letter to his then-fiancé Edith Bratt. “This miserable drizzling afternoon I have been reading up old military lecture-notes again:-- [sic] and getting bored with them after an hour and a half. I have done some touches to my nonsense fairy language—to its improvement. I often long to work at it and don't let myself 'cause though I love it so it does seem such a mad hobby!” (*Letters* 8). I don't understand why we writers so often feel guilty for doing what is such an integral part of who we are, but I hear Tolkien's point. I have homework and a day-job (never mind laundry and dishes), he had his studies and his military training, and in the midst of all of our duties to society, our creative endeavors are often simply “mad hobbies.” The “nonsense fairy language” that so seductively called to Tolkien's muse however was Quenya, which would become the original tongue of the Elves of Middle Earth. The language truly did “breed” the mythology, developing into different dialects such as Sindarin as the history of the Elves unfolded across Middle Earth.

¹ *Speechless* was a young adult novel set in such a prison-school, the Thomas Jefferson Youth Education Center, a product of a futuristic government reform of the education system in which high schoolers were taken from their parents and placed in these schools in order to guide them all into more common value systems—primarily the belief that the Christian faith, with its exclusive theology, has no place in American society. The novel followed the first weeks of Jackie in TJYEC as she entered high school, was reunited with her older brother who had started three years earlier, and learned the power her strong and steadfast faith had to change the world around her.

The borders were breeched, and in spite of academics and warfare, Tolkien found his creative heart in the realm of the story.

Chapter 2: Expression, Escape, and Exploration

When I started writing novels—long before I knew that I didn't know what I was doing—the purpose stories served in my life was a combination of escape and expression. As for escape, my stories gave me somewhere else for my mind to be. For expression, I found that once there I could say things that couldn't be said in reality.

I lived in a yelling house. Our family got it the most from my dad. "I'm not yelling, I'm getting passionate!" we quote him to joke about it now. My older brother would yell back. My mother would cry back, but when Dad left, would then yell at us. My little brother was speech-delayed as a child, and so would become frustrated at his inability to communicate and just scream. The acquisition of language did not quiet him. I'm an introvert, an observer, a peacemaker, and my tiny voice of frustration was painfully inaudible over all of the other emotional volumes in the house. But I could write a fight scene and see the validation of my own seemingly silent emotion on paper. That paper cared for what I had to share with it. By definition, people don't seem to pay attention to us when we feel alone, but the paper listened to every word I wrote about a girl trapped in her own bedroom, her bedroom that looked uncannily similar to my own². In some ways, this is the role writing has played in the life of J. K. Rowling: dementors embodying the clinical depression she struggled with after the end of her first marriage and the Mirror of Erised creating a tangible image of her struggle to move forward from her mother's death (Rowling). Writing expresses our emotion, it moves it into the world outside of us.

² "An Open Window" was a novella I wrote in high school about Samantha who "escapes" her abusive father by locking herself in her bedroom and never setting foot outside of it, her only companionship found in a deaf girl with whom she passes notes through the window.

Tolkien shared my desire for escape. This was why he created his “nonsense fairy language” that he wrote to Edith about while training in 1915: it provided something else to engage his mind in the midst of the mindlessness of military life. This allowed him to combine the academic discipline of philology with the therapeutic act of creating, using both to leave his circumstances, if only in his mind. He writes in “A Secret Vice” of a day he sat next to a man who turned out to be doing the very same thing during some military lecture or another (Tolkien couldn’t remember the topic). “Yes, I think I shall express the accusative case by a prefix!” the man said to himself in the middle of the lecture. “How far he ever proceeded in his composition, I never heard,” Tolkien writes. “Probably he was blown to bits in the very moment of deciding upon some ravishing method of indicating the subjunctive. Wars are not favourable to delicate pleasures,” (“A Secret Vice” 199-200).

Tolkien did not often discuss his experiences of combat in World War I beyond relating to military life while writing to his sons during World War II and to say in the preface to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* that, by the end of the war, all but one of his close friends had been killed. He declined any recognition of his service and avoided any kind of autobiographical recording of his experiences. Having worked and spoken with Tolkien later in his life, Arne Zettersten suggests that all of this was because he had found fiction to be a better medium with which to express the trauma he experienced there (Zettersten 108-109). We artists find our own ways of expressing things when we cannot speak.

The majority of Tolkien’s time in active combat passed during the Battle of the Somme, beginning on July 1, 1916. The battle was fought using trench warfare: soldiers coming up out of their own trenches on ladders and marching across no-man’s-land laden with sixty-five pounds of equipment each toward the German lines. The soldiers were told that the German

defenses were practically wiped out and that the barbed wire had been cut. They found neither of these to be true, and when they were stopped by the barbed wire, they were torn apart by German machine guns (Carpenter 82). Tolkien's unit wasn't sent into the trenches until July 14. Having specialized in signaling—not surprisingly preferring the work of words and communication over commanding a platoon (Carpenter 78)—he struggled to adjust from his training to the reality of the trenches. The equipment was tangled and muddy, and the Germans had tapped the telephone lines, rendering much of his training useless.

And among the mud and mice, there were mutilated bodies in every corner (Carpenter 83).

When Tolkien's unit was finally relieved after three days in the trenches with little rest, he returned to camp to find a letter from Geoffrey Smith, one of his friends from the T. C. B. S. with whom he had been able to spend time behind the front lines. Rob Gilson, another T. C. B. S. member, had been killed.

All of this was in Tolkien's first two weeks at the front (Carpenter 84).

The trench warfare continued for Tolkien until his liberation from combat came in the form of "trench fever," an infection brought on by the damp conditions and carried by lice. He fell ill on October 27 and had returned to England by November 8, 1916 (Carpenter 85). Tolkien struggled with his health from then until the autumn of 1918, spending his time in and out of hospitals, on sick leave, and in service away from the front lines (Zettersten 112). While the illness spared him personally from further combat, he was not free from the war. On December 16, 1916, he received a letter from Christopher Wiseman, the fourth member of the T.C.B.S. who had been serving in the navy, informing him of Geoffrey Smith's death. The last letter Tolkien had received from Smith included the lines: "My chief consolation is that if I am scuppered

tonight—I am off on duty in a few minutes—there will still be left a member of the great T.C.B.S. to voice what I dreamed and what we all agreed upon. For the death of one of its members cannot, I am determined, dissolve the T.C.B.S. ... May God bless you, my dear John Ronald, and may you say the things I have tried to say long after I am not there to say them, if such be my lot” (Carpenter 85-86).

It was while Tolkien was ill, recovering from his illness, and ill again that he began “the epic” as Wiseman called it: the mythology that we know today as Middle Earth. It started in a cheap notebook and with the help of his wife Edith, titled in pencil across the cover: “The Book of Lost Tales.” It wouldn’t be until after Tolkien’s own death that the tales he wrote in those days would be published as *The Silmarillion* (Carpenter 90).

Tolkien understood what I would come to learn decades later: the gentle healing that could be found in writing simply as a way to express thoughts and emotions. He wrote to his son Christopher in 1944 as he was serving in the military during World War II: “I think if you could begin to write, and find your own mode, or even (for a start) imitate mine, you would find it a great relief. I sense amongst all your pains (some merely physical) the desire to express your feeling about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering” (*Letters* 78). He is writing from experience here, describing that mode of expression that Zettersten suggested allowed him to deal with the trauma of the trenches, the war, and the loss of his close friends. He may have been unable to describe the dirty details of his exact experiences, but never once does he shy away from the violence and horror of the battles in his fiction (Zettersten 108-109).

I have never been in combat, I’ve never seen violently mutilated bodies, I’ve never faced machine gun fire or poison gas, but I do know the freedom of expression a writer has behind the

veil of fiction. As an adolescent, I could never find the words to describe or the audience to hear how the screaming through the darkness of my parents' house tore at my heart; how the chaos, both emotional and physical, crushed me with an anxiety that only my dog understood. Thunder was our pound-puppy, a labrador-basset hound mutt with a fear of men and long objects. She would lay in the corner behind my bed, head on her paws, her entire body shaking as Dad would yell about budgets and logic and disrespect while Mom cried. I would curl up next to Thunder, rest my tear-stained cheek on her head, and stroke her fur as I promised her that it would be okay. We'd eventually feel the front door slam and hear Dad's tires scream angrily down the street.

If the arguments ever did move into the physical realm, I never saw it: I was trapped in hiding, threatened enough by the toxicity of anger and mistrust seeping under my bedroom door. After Dad would leave and Mom would go to bed, I would sneak out of my room in the dead of the night and see if straightening up the living room or cleaning in the kitchen might ease some of the tension when everyone woke up in the morning. When the fights shifted from Mom versus Dad to Parents versus Brother, my secret missions came to include stealing Kyle's cigarettes and pictures of his girlfriend, as if throwing away souvenirs of his rebellion might somehow create peace. It wasn't until a couple of years after I'd moved away to Iowa City and my family had finally learned to reconcile their differences and work together as a family that I even considered confessing my covert operations in the war that was waged in that house.

But I could write about Valarie being trapped in a closet, fearing that her captor would beat her if she tried to get out³. I could write about Samantha's locked bedroom door and dream

³ *Weapon of Choice* was my first novel, started in the sixth grade and finished in the ninth. The protagonist was Valerie Sheldon, a spunky middle-schooler with a stalker. The plot is one kidnapping after another fight scene until the stalker is killed, at which point I decided I didn't want to be done writing the story and so I sent Andrew's father after the Sheldon family with a vendetta for vengeance.

about the friend she made through the open window. I could even pretend to be a war hero in Afghanistan from my helpless hiding place⁴. Yes, Tolkien and I know how to escape our own skin with stories. After all, “Why should a man be scorned, if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it” (“On Fairy-Stories” 148). Our stories had a way not only of healing our pain, but of letting us see the hope outside of our own prisons. Our stories broke the chains and opened the gates like the angel that freed Peter from Herod’s jail (Acts 12:6-10), bringing us out of our own traumas and into something much bigger.

The merciful thing about trauma is that it is not eternal. “Yes, scars are eternal reminders of wounds, but they also prove our healing.”⁵ As Tolkien and I grew both as writers and people, as we found freedom from our pain and learned to move on, Tolkien to Oxford and I to the University of Iowa, our fiction no longer needed to be personal triage. We had the skills to escape reality when necessary, and we now knew how to easily express the emotional turmoil that comes with navigating life, but escape and expression were no longer the sole and desperate purpose for our writing. At some point for each of us, it became exploration.

One such point for Tolkien was demonstrated on the night of September 19, 1931, fifteen years after the Battle of the Somme, when Tolkien went for an after-dinner stroll with a fellow professor and friend of five years, C.S. Lewis, and their mutual acquaintance, Hugo Dyson. The topic of discussion: the role mythology plays in humanity, and the discussion would last until

⁴ “The Mission” was a novella I wrote as the war in Afghanistan was on the front pages of every newspaper I delivered. The story’s protagonist was a teenage boy who stumbled upon AlQueda intel and somehow managed to make it to the Middle East to do something about it. I was in Jr. High, and could only dream about getting out into the world outside of my parents’ house, let alone leaving the country to fight terrorists, but I liked the idea of becoming a hero.

⁵ “Life is War,” a slam poem I wrote and performed at a Salt Company worship night.

four in the morning. By the conclusion of the conversation, Lewis—who had been raised with a prejudice against Catholicism but doubted his own reluctant agnosticism—would choose to not only believe in God but trust in the salvation story of Christ (Pearce 57-60). Lewis would go on from that moment to write a wide range of works: fiction from the children’s series *The Chronicles of Narnia* to the more intellectually complex epistolary novel *The Screwtape Letters*; his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*; and a hefty collection of Christian apologetics including *The Abolition of Man*, *Mere Christianity*, and *The Great Divorce*.

Through the course of this conversation, Lewis insisted that mythologies were all “lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver,” (Pearce 57) but Tolkien disagreed. He argued that mankind as sub-creators echo our own Creator, using myth to express what is true in the only flawed and broken way that we can. Myths, he told Lewis, are just retellings that direct us—albeit inadequately—to the one myth that actually happened: that mankind was fallen and needed a savior, and Christ came into our world to sacrifice Himself for our redemption.

This faith-based explanation for why we write fantasy made a lot of sense for me, giving words to a previously invisible sense of how my faith and my writing are entwined. “Sometimes we find a poet, or a painter, or a musician who functions like a key that unlocks a part of ourselves we never knew was there,” Philip Pullman writes of William Blake, the abstract master of his own writing apprenticeship as Tolkien is for mine. While it may seem out of place to use the sentiment of an atheist to expound upon how Tolkien describes mythology’s role in humanity, the way that Blake resonates within Pullman’s heart is the same way Tolkien’s take on tales opens up a previously unknown space in my own writer’s soul.

When I began to grow into my writing, my writing shifted from escape and expression into exploration. I could place characters in situations that reflected my own circumstances in some ways and see how they behaved, watch how they handled changes, gauge what kind of growth it would take in their character to overcome the odds that I felt I was facing in reality. The month that I started to lose hope in “fairy-tale endings” as a single woman suffering from what I swore at the time was one heartbreak too many, I killed my protagonist’s love interest to see what it would take to survive alone⁶. I’d started writing Nira’s story shortly after high school in 2009, and in 2012—after Nira had been locked in a marriage treaty, kidnapped to break that treaty, traveled all over Nostras with Tutelae facing battles for the first time and learning first-hand what her people needed from her; and after I had loved and lost and battled an eating disorder and graduated from Omaha Metro and moved to Iowa City by myself—it was finally time for Nira and me both to lay down our swords and start enjoying our happy endings. But then a silly boy from campus ministry who wasn’t even supposed to know that I liked him broke my heart, and so I killed Tutelae along with my belief in fairy tale endings.

But somehow I will sometimes sit down at my keyboard to find the answer to one thing, and God will have something entirely different to show me. Tutelae was a member of an elite group of warriors I created called the Tenebrae Bellatori who taught themselves to focus above their own emotions, needs, and pains so that they could do what they knew needed to be done. Instead of transforming me into a stone-cold medieval ninja who could defy the human need for food and sleep more than my chaotic schedule already did however, God taught me how the sensitivity of my heart that I sometimes so desperately despise makes me uniquely qualified to speak in ways that others can’t. In my attempt to forge my protagonist into a hard-core warrior

⁶ *The Fifth Ruler* is the first novel in a projected series of five, *The Tales of Terralus*.

princess who could spend the rest of her days on a horse leading armies against her enemies, I learned that making myself into something I'm not will never make me any stronger, but rather just as false as every battle speech I tried to force through Nira's lips. I was exploring, but couldn't understand how my own plots could betray what I was trying to make them tell me until Tolkien taught me that my stories were a part of humanity's cauldron of mythologies that simply point back to the Truth: that God knows what He's doing in this crazy life of mine, and that if I trust Him with my eternity, I can trust Him in this finite life as well.

Chapter 3: Concerning World-Building

My first three novels—two of which will never again see the light of day⁷, and the third of which will only peek through curtains when no one is looking⁸—were “realistic fiction.” They took place in this same world that we live in, because it’s the world I knew well enough to work with. I occasionally played with “fantasy” using stories grounded in this world that the characters then got to leave for a while, or perhaps simply by bringing in a supernatural element, but I could never make it work. I would create, for example, these beasts of terror that spawned from a person’s own trauma and would inspire such fear and hopelessness that most humans could not survive an encounter with them, and then call them something stupid and ruin the entire effect⁹. Tolkien would have shaken his head at me and never read another page.

I solved the problem years later with the discovery of an online English to Latin dictionary and practice with manipulating the sounds of Latin words into things that could roughly be assumed as names. Nira’s name for example was derived from the Latin word for “Beginning,” as she is the protagonist that starts the cascade of events that will alter the course of her entire world, Terralus (from the Latin word for “earth”). Tutelae—her protector, teacher, and friend—was named for the word “guardian.” Tolkien’s passion for the aesthetics of language and each tongue’s unique characteristics gave me an awareness that different nationalities through their languages do—and indeed should—sound differently, and therefore I created the names of fairies in Terralus using a French dictionary and of dragons using a German one¹⁰. I’m not sure if Tolkien would be proud of my solution or consider me a cheater: perhaps for my next

⁷ *Weapon of Choice* was the first. The second, *The Eastside Brotherhood*, was a story similar to *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, and served a similar purpose in my life as *Weapon of Choice* had in terms of their violent plots that had no planning.

⁸ *Speechless*

⁹ My frustration with the project kept me from finishing it. I never even gave it a title.

¹⁰ The dragons don’t come into the story of Terralus until the second book: *The Fourth Son*.

race of beings, I'll seek his approval by finding an English to Gothic dictionary. But it was in this way that I forced my own entry through a busted—out basement window into the genre of Fantasy.

The next problem I encountered was that of cartography. Cashore's "Middluns," Lewis's "Narnia," and Tolkien's "Middle Earth" all include spiffy maps of where things are, and the more time I spent writing in worlds that weren't the one I live in, the more I realized that these maps weren't just cool additions to awesome stories. Knowing where things are is an integral part of world-building. So I would take a sheet of barren printer paper and stare at its emptiness, begging a shape to appear. I don't often experience the anxiety of a blank page when I sit down to write fiction, but I did every time I tried to construct a map. I needed something to start with.

I found it sitting in a lecture, as I think a follower of Tolkien should. I think it was speech class, but also as a follower of Tolkien I can't remember for sure, and I was staring at my hand instead of whatever was happening at the front of the room anyway. After elementary, junior high, and high school classrooms in which each teacher "owned" a room and adorned it with charts, posters, and books, the emptiness and utilitarian nature of college classrooms was depressing. At the Sarpy County campus of Metro, all of the rooms are gray or beige—I'm sure the designers were proud of themselves for not having used white, but it might as well have been. The tables were gray, the plastic chairs cheap, the boards clean. The only thing that differentiated the rooms from one another were the numbers on the wall outside of the door. If the material being presented at the front of the room wasn't engaging, there was literally nothing else outside of my brain to do. Sometimes I would start writing in my notes when I encountered this problem: I would print class-related notes when it sounded like it would be on the test so I

should probably know it, but I would really be covering my paper with cursive in whatever story I was drafting at the time.

That day though, I had nothing. *The Fifth Ruler* only existed in snatches of creative shadows and needed more context before I could start drafting the story. I knew that coming up with a map would solve a lot of the problem, but until I could better build what would become Nostras, I didn't even have a novel to look at in that empty Metro classroom. I was staring at my hand because it was the only thing there, and I started to absently dissect it into different regions, and at one point grabbed my pen and literally drew lines across the creases in my palm, looking at the shapes and wondering what they would mean if they could hold any meaning at all. Through my mental wanderings, I remembered my cartographic frustration, how I needed a shape to start on my map. What if these shapes could be my map?

And then I imagined the underside of my knuckles as mountains, and the crease across my palm to the heel of my hand as a river.

I suddenly had a map.

And what if this region didn't like that one?

I suddenly had a political context.

And where do the Tenebrae Bellatori live? What is their role in this political context? And what if this princess character I've been thinking of lives here by my thumb? The random ideas and tiny plot snippets that I didn't even know could be connected fell into place as my word count climbed. And as I completed the first book and started the second, sending secondary characters out of Nostras¹¹ and into the surrounding realms to be used in later stories, the entire series took shape as the kingdoms of Terralus started to reach out beyond the palm of

¹¹ The kingdom whose map is on my palm, the setting of *The Fifth Ruler*.

my hand. The terrain that each story needed was enough for me to extend the cartography: the forests of Messena, the deserts of Baratha, the lakes peppering Lascagar (so cleverly named after playing with the Latin word for “lake.”) All I had needed to do was find a map.

With his passion for the way in which language represents things, naming people and places was little problem for Tolkien, so then where did he find his map? “I have, I suppose, constructed an imaginary *time*, but kept my feet on my own mother-earth for *place*,” he wrote (*Letters* 283). In a letter to the *Daily Telegraph Magazine* in which he makes several careful corrections to an article they had interviewed him for about his work, he writes (in the midst of his emphatic point that Middle Earth does not correspond with Nordic Europe, “please!”, but rather “*Northern* is usually better,”) that the story takes place in the equivalent of the coastlands of Europe to the northern parts of the Mediterranean Sea, with Hobbiton and Rivendell corresponding to Oxford, Minas Tirith to Florence, and the Mouth of Anduin to ancient Troy (*Letters* 375-376). In Tolkien’s mythology, man does not originate in Middle Earth, but come from “the East.” Once they arrive in Middle Earth, it is clear that something terrible happened to them before their arrival, but they do not speak of it: Shippey argues that this was the Fall in Eden, after which fallen man comes into the realm of Middle Earth. In this way, Tolkien’s tales fit geographically into our own planet, simply existing outside of our time (Pearce 85-86).

The cartography of Middle Earth was imperative for Tolkien’s writing process. In his “garage library,” the place in his home that served as his study later on in life, was adorned with maps alongside translations (Zettersten 7), giving the place of his fantasy an importance at least comparable to the language. He drew many of his own maps, and had frequent correspondences with publishers concerning copies and updates. Even when it came to the second edition of *The*

Lord of the Rings, Tolkien often found himself sticking more closely to the maps and adjusting the narrative to them (Fonstad 82).

My map of Nostras is still on my hand. A river, a road, some mountains, and about five key points. Once I've survived my academic career as a nontraditional student and I start the publication process, someone with more knowledge and skill than I is going to have to draw the thing. While Tolkien often berated his own artistic skill in his letters, his maps and drawings from Middle Earth not only aid in his story telling, but communicate the construction of his entire mythical realm.

Karen Wynn Fonstad, a cartographer who has taught geography at the University of Wisconsin, took it upon herself to create an atlas of Middle Earth, the first edition of which was released in 1981. In it is infinitely more than maps sketched out by an author to keep track of characters. Fonstad was able to map and sketch not only places such as Lake-town (108), Hobbiton (118), and Minas Tirith (138) in great detail based solely off of Tolkien's maps and drawings, but she even managed to use the details within Tolkien's prose to find that everything down to the climate, terrain, and vegetation of Middle Earth was consistent and completely expressible by cartography. Tolkien's understanding of distances and how easily what manner of race or beast could cover them was so precise that Fonstad was not only able to trace the movements of every person or party in all three ages of Middle Earth, but could also do the math to find where everything was in relation to everything else.

Between his maps and his prose, Tolkien's world-building was detailed enough that a cartographer could come along after his death to create an entire atlas of Middle Earth with the detail of a geologist. I hold that atlas in my hand, the closest thing I have to a map of any

kingdom in Terralus, and I begin to understand how very much more I have left to learn from Tolkien.

Chapter 4: Of Theoretical Magic

The characters were dynamic, the setting sinister, and the plot quick. I was already a devout fan of Frank Peretti after his novel, *This Present Darkness*, showed me that a Christian novelist doesn't have to write Amish romances in order to address issues of faith. I'd read the sequel, *Piercing the Darkness*, along with *Monster* and *The Oath* (which I should mention is about a dragon), and was ready for my next Peretti fix, my next journey out of this world and into a fictional one. I'd found a book in the wondrous realm of Half Price Books that he had written with another author I'd never heard of before.

House was my gateway drug to Ted Dekker.

It was a Friday night back in high school when I was a newspaper carrier, meaning Mom and I would have to leave for the *Omaha World Herald* warehouse at three thirty Saturday morning to go roll papers, meaning I was supposed to go to bed at a reasonable hour. Like any good bookworm, I told myself "one more chapter" too many times in a row to keep track of until I was no longer registering the chapter breaks as the characters tried desperately to escape the house with its malicious inhabitants and the "tin-man" keeping them all inside, demanding a dead body by dawn. They were all split up, but Jack finally made it to the back door. If he could only escape the evil, he could get out and find help. Or maybe if he could just see the outside world, he could find a way to get his wife out. And here was the door. He could do this. It would all be okay. He opened it.

It didn't lead outside. In some freak instance of impossible architecture, he was back in the boiler room again.

And then my mom opened my bedroom door to wake me up so we could leave, and I screamed, so deeply engrossed in the story that I thought she was the tin-man himself.

There are many different ways to experience reading. I read “Good Readers and Good Writers” by Vladimir Nabokov in a high school AP English class that insisted a thorough reading require the reader to detach from his or her own thoughts and experiences, that nothing else matters besides the words that the author put on the page. This was Nabokov’s interpretation of the New Criticism movement, established by Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks’ 1938 *Approach to Literature and Understanding Poetry*. New Critics, a favorite topic of discussion in the university’s “Introduction to the English Major” class with which I began my study in Iowa City in 2012, tend to value detachment as a form of engagement—fighting against politicizing interpretations of literature in the 1930’s.

Over the course of my education, I’ve found other writers who value similar forms of distance between the writer and reader. Bertolt Brecht called it “alienation” in the theatre realm: the actors can do things like directly addressing the audience in order to remind them that they are merely an audience. It deliberately destroys the illusion. The idea shows up in creative writing workshops when a classmate does something to remind the reader that it’s a piece of writing: nothing less, nothing more. “I love how you broke the fourth wall in this paragraph,” someone will say. In prose, this is easy to accomplish through metafiction: intentionally exposing the piece of writing as a piece of writing. It lets the writer play with the ideas a little differently, it makes the reader look at the ideas a little differently. It’s an incredibly intellectual technique. Edgar Allen Poe uses it often, placing the text as a barrier between the narrative and the reader.

These are all interesting theories and valuable studies, but I am no New Critic (I’m far too big of a fan of authorial intent and reader experience), and several years after “Introduction to the English Major,” I received a refresher’s course in literary criticism in the English Honors

Seminar “Reading and Writing American Gothic Fiction,” in which Professor Laura Rigal emphasized the need for each person to identify what perspective(s) from which we tend to interpret literature. I am more than capable of exploring these theories of distance, but they are not how I identify myself as a reader, and therefore certainly not how I approach writing.

Perhaps my own theory only works in “pleasure reading,” perhaps it only belongs in commercial fiction, but as both a reader and a writer I believe that there is a specific magic that occurs, a spell that is cast, when a book can take me on a journey to somewhere else, when a writer can take me by hand and walk my mind into those pages until hours later I find myself shocked to be staring at ink letters arranged into paragraphs on paper instead of running through a doorway into wherever else besides this room. When I speak of the magic of a story—Tolkien would call it “art” (“On Fairy Stories” 132)—I’m speaking of its ability to let me enter it, and find myself somewhere else through it. This idea of magic is no substitute or replacement for cognitive work, simply a different theory of reading, an approach of friendly closeness between the reader and writer rather than one of distance. It’s a magic I’ve learned through apprenticeship more so than theoretical instruction. There’s a tender intimacy that takes place between a writer and a reader when the words on the page pull the reader into the story itself, affirming the reader’s existence as opposed to hijacking it. Poe and Nabokov use their theories to try to force me to set my own vision aside and fill me with their own while Brecht pushes me out of the fiction I’m trying to exist in. Peretti, Dekker, and I prefer to gently invite our readers into the page. While I can easily respect the works of Poe, Nabokov, and Brecht, this is why I do not personally enjoy reading them.

Tolkien knew about this magic, and thought a great deal about how it functions. In “On Fairy-Stories,” he looks at Samuel Coleridge’s phrase “willing suspension of disbelief” as that

process through which a written story can take a reader elsewhere. Coleridge's thought was that, if the fiction is compelling enough, the reader will choose to ignore the implausibility of the narrative. Tolkien disagreed—or rather found the sentiment to lack precision, and it has become clear to me that Tolkien valued precision.

To refine Coleridge's idea, Tolkien uses his term “sub-creator,” the name he gives to himself as a writer as well as any other producer of creative works. The term resonates back to Tolkien's belief about mythology—how stories are reflective of the True Story, the one told by our Creator, but here it also explains specifically how a writer wields that magic through which a reader can journey into a story. In this piece of Tolkien's theory, the sub-creator makes a secondary world, as opposed to the primary one in which reality exists. The reader can enter the secondary world and, inside of it, everything that the reader takes as “true” is what corresponds with the laws of that world, and the reader believes it for as long as the reader is inside of that secondary world. “The moment disbelief arises,” Tolkien writes, “the spell is broke; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. If you are obliged, by kindness or circumstance, to stay, then disbelief must be suspended (or stifled), otherwise listening and looking would become intolerable. But this suspension of disbelief is a substitute for the genuine thing... to find what virtue we can in the work of an art that has for us failed.” (“On Fairy-Stories” 132).

Tolkien offered practical application of his theory in his essay, and examples of it in Middle Earth. He writes about how Fantasy “certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make” (“On Fairy-Stories” 144). His sentiment recalls to my mind a common saying that appears in posts

and memes on social media today among writers: “Reality is stranger than fiction: Fiction must make sense.” If the fiction isn’t reasonable, the reader cannot enter the secondary world. Once inside, if the laws of the secondary world aren’t consistent, they push the reader out every time they are broken. A creative writing class I took once described it as a story needing to follow its own rules. It’s okay if those rules aren’t the same as the ones we live with in the primary world, but if the story isn’t consistent with itself, the fiction fails. Tolkien found that the easiest way to accomplish this was to closely resemble the primary world, as seen in the way Middle Earth’s cartography is so parallel to Northern Europe. He used the primary world that he knew to build a sub-creation to share clearly with his readers.

This practice of Tolkien’s in his fiction greatly aided the film makers of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Because Tolkien had for example based the creation of Rohan in Anglo-Saxon folklore, Peter Jackson and the Weta Workshop were able to use that piece of history to create the costumes, armor, and architecture of Edoras. The two conceptual artists who worked on the movies also dealt with this idea of basing the secondary world in the primary one: John Howe was incredibly knowledgeable about armor and weaponry, and so could look at Alan Lee’s sketches and tell him that this blade was unrealistic or that handle would be completely impractical. In turn, Lee was aware enough of the anatomy of animals that he could point out to Howe that there was no way the crazy spines he’d sketched onto the wings of one of his versions of the Fell Beasts could be at all functional. “They’re cool,” Howe replied, “leave me alone.” No matter the art form, every sub-creator is aware at some level the tension between their secondary world and the laws of the primary one.

So which side wins? Well, the spines in Howe’s drawing didn’t quite make it to the screen in their original form, but the Hobbits did still eat tomatoes with their sausage and nice,

crispy bacon on Weathertop. It had been pointed out to Peter Jackson that tomatoes were discovered in the Americas, and Middle Earth was the equivalent of Northern Europe long before anyone crossed the Atlantic. My dad, as a highly rational person, gets his kicks out of finding inconsistencies in the stories he consumes, and this was one of them. With the Behind-the-Scenes DVD still playing in the background, we found ourselves debating the nature of world-building and plot-holes right there in the living room. “Dad,” I finally said to him, “it’s a world of elves and orcs and magic rings, they can eat tomatoes if they want to!”

Long after that conversation, after I’d survived every fight that shook that house and after I’d picked a few of my own trying to escape it, I finally made a primary world journey of my own. I packed up my life and shifted it four hours east to Iowa City. Every relationship in the house at that point was strained over bitterness and mistrust. Dad felt disrespected. Mom felt mistreated. Kyle had left on sore terms and was now having to figure out how to make a marriage work better than the one we had grown up under. Kenny was struggling with ADHD but Mom didn’t want him to know for fear of how he would handle the label, and so he had no tools with which to cope. As for me, I couldn’t understand who I was or what I felt submerged in everyone else’s emotional chaos—except for feeling like Cinderella, tired of cleaning up messes made while I was out searching for anywhere besides home to be. The chaos was in more realms than I could deal with, and secondary worlds were no longer enough to escape it.

Dad didn’t think I’d make it. He hadn’t thought I would be able to navigate the reality of adulthood with its responsibilities and bills and bureaucracy when I’d first started threatening to leave when I was eighteen. In the state of Nebraska, adulthood doesn’t legally kick in until age nineteen, and with Mom’s claim that Dad would disown me if not call the cops on me if I left, I’d honored his desire for me to stay. After I’d received my associate’s degree though, the next

step was a bachelor's. It was time to go, and there was no longer anything legally keeping me from doing so.

I didn't know what I was doing. My plan was no more specific than getting to Iowa City and going to school, but I didn't have access to scholarships as an out-of-state transfer student. "Scholarships are for the students who are completely immersed in and dedicated to their educations," an advisor in the university's honors program told me that year. I'd never lived away from my parents' house before. I'd never had a full-time job. I was well-versed in hoarding non-perishable food in my car and dresser drawers to avoid the familial chaos centered in the kitchen, but because my parents' kitchen was always a pit of crusted, moldy dishes that was stocked with condiments instead of food and inspired stress and tension, I knew little to nothing about cooking for myself. I was twenty, and I didn't know anything more than I had when I was eighteen except that I couldn't wait for Prince Charming to come riding in and magically save me. I only knew what I had known before: I needed out.

After coming to terms with the fact that I wouldn't be swayed—that I would load up my car with as much as I could and leave him with all of my leftover stuff if I had to—Dad helped me load the trailer, haul it to Coralville, and unload it into a cheap apartment with cockroaches and no right-angles that we now fondly refer to as "the Dump." Then he left me there with nothing beyond two job interviews in terms of providing for myself, assuming I'd be back within months. He didn't think I'd make it, and he was ready for me to need him to help me pick up the pieces of my failed adulthood because I didn't understand how the primary world worked. He was right, I didn't. I'd been more comfortable in secondary worlds since that very first gel-pen story when I was eight.

I surprised the both of us. I was working full-time at LaPetite Academy within a week, starting a career in the field that I've been in ever since. I figured out how to enroll for insurance. I kept up with rent, including the security deposit that I'd accidentally overlooked in my plans. After I paid my bills, I spent my first paycheck celebrating with a smoothie at Starbucks and buying a new hairbrush. (Mine had broken the morning of my job interview, and so I'd been using half a brush ever since, but I was doing okay.) With part of my second paycheck, I bought a butter dish and salt and pepper shakers and figured out how to fry Tilapia. All four burners on the stove were crooked, the roaches kept coming out to see what I was doing, and I used too much oil that splashed onto the wall and left stains. The floor wasn't flat, and every step I took in the kitchen rattled the knick-knacks on my desk in the next room, but this was *my* kitchen. I was relieved to find that I am good at grocery shopping: I knew the staples and what to make with them, so there was always something to eat in my kitchen. I wasn't very good at keeping up with the dishes—I'd done so many at my parents' house that it was now my least favorite chore, but at least now when I ran out of bowls it was my own fault.

I wasn't the only Pancake who made a journey when I moved. Kyle's marriage continued to strengthen—perhaps helped by the fact that I was no longer there stealing his wife for our various creative escapades. We used to joke that he'd married Rianne more because she and I were supposed to be sisters than because they were supposed to be married, but the jest may have become too much of a reality. Rianne and I are still sisters, but now she and Kyle are lovers, too. Kenny saw what I had done, and it showed him how attainable crazy artistic dreams are, no matter what Dad thinks of art or higher education. I like to think that I paved the way for him to go to college: he's studying music at the University of Nebraska in Omaha.

In that first month after I left, Mom took a trip down to Kansas to visit a friend, and that time alone in the car missing “her Dolly Face” gave her the chance to reflect on our family, on the struggles we’d faced, on the ways that the circumstances in the house had played a part in pushing me away. She knew that God had forgiven her for the time she’d spent trying to be my friend so that I could be hers rather than being my mother, but she’s also told me how God gave her a peace about it: that if I hadn’t had my family pushing me, I might never have left, and both of us know that Iowa City is where God meant for me to spend this part of my life.

After those first couple of months, I was walking back through the crooked front door of the Dump, bringing in the mail and talking on the phone with my dad. Wearing a LaPetite polo covered in mashed potatoes and toddler snot and surrounded by windows that weren’t set straight in their walls, my daddy said to me: “I admit, I didn’t think you’d make it out there in Iowa. I was sure you would end up moving back home. But you’ve made it, you got a job, and you’re taking care of yourself, and I’m proud of you.” But even when he learned that I was far more capable of navigating the primary world than he thought, he never could understand my life in secondary worlds. He was proud of me for becoming a successful adult, but that had been a very minor issue of my move to Iowa. Even my need to escape their house to learn how to be Kaycee outside of the Pancake baggage was only half of it. My move was a step in my writing career, and that’s something that my dad can’t understand how to support.

After a few years of learning how to appreciate each other’s differences and work together as a family (even with a 250 mile gap), I decided I wanted to try one more time to invite him into my writing world: I asked him if he would read my novel. He said yes, and so I sent it along. He started it, thinking that I was asking for critical feedback. Feedback is always fun (we writers try to tell ourselves), and I didn’t want to risk pushing him away from this budding

interest in my writing, so I told him he was welcome to give it to me. He read the first few chapters.

Then he asked me what time period I was trying to set my story in, because it seemed medieval to him, but in medieval times they wouldn't have had glass windows or worn gloves while washing dishes.

Within those chapters, I had slaved over creating the political context of the war that had gripped Nostras for four generations. I hate politics. I hate following them in the primary world and reading them in secondary worlds, and up until this novel had actively avoided writing them. But in order to challenge my mother's belief in the inevitability of generational sin, I'd had to work out the politics of Nostrian history to prove that the cycle could be broken. I'd looked through notes from World Civilizations classes mining for inciting instances until I'd found one that could fit, I'd listed all of the ways that such a long war could change the culture of a kingdom, I'd spent hours on a timeline of kings and events in their lives that would never see the paper just so that one fairy could say in one conversation that she hadn't seen Sator in "nearly fifty years" (just in case my math was off). I'd constructed a marriage treaty, the public opinion thereof, and the conspiracy of the Tenebrae Bellatori by which it would be broken.

Politics aside, those chapters also held Nira's engagement ball. She shared a dance with her own father showing the father-daughter relationship my dad and I had once shared when I was a little girl but lost somewhere along the way. She was then kidnapped from her bedchamber in a swift action scene to introduce the physical prowess of my sub-created warriors ("who are basically ninjas," I say when introducing the Tenebrae Bellatori in conversation. "But cooler.")

Of all of the world-building errors that could possibly have been present in the pages that he read, my father chose windows and gloves.

Dad never got around to finishing the novel, but I got him hooked on the TV show *Criminal Minds*. He can analyze the logic of every case the BAU takes, and I can show him how character development works while he picks on me for my crush on Dr. Reid. The FBI is close enough to the primary world for Dad to be more comfortable with it anyway.

The castle in Austrin Nostras still has glass windows.

Chapter 5: Art Over Allegory

Much of my understanding of allegory is indebted to a class that was called “Epic Failures.” It was an English Honors Seminar at the University of Iowa that explored, among other things, Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. The work itself was intended to be an allegory for the English Protestant faith in which each book represented a virtue (Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, etc.). As we worked through the piece that semester however, we probed every week the space between trope and character, parable and fiction. We challenged the allegory not because Spenser’s argument was false, but because when we read about the Redcrosse Knight, we didn’t see a symbol for holiness; we saw a character who grew and developed as he learned to be more holy.

In one aspect, Spenser and Tolkien were trying to accomplish the same thing: Spenser through poetry and Tolkien through mythology both wanted to create a national story for England (Petty 12). There is however an integral difference between the two men that is found in Tolkien’s preface to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*: “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence” (Zettersten 117).

Tolkien’s distaste for allegory, which I first learned of from Shippey (*The Lord of the Rings: Extended Edition: Appendices*), confused me. The Oxford English Dictionary describes allegory as “a symbolic representation; an extended or continued metaphor.” Tolkien’s work is so centered on good versus evil, and I could sense in the stories echoes of Christian redemption, but what kind of role could Tolkien’s beliefs play in a narrative that he insisted was never meant to be allegorical? How does fantasy reach for anything deeper than mere story without symbols, representations, and metaphors? I have not been the only one to cock my head at Tolkien here.

“Some have puzzled over the relation between Tolkien’s stories and Christianity,” Carpenter writes, “and have found it difficult to understand how a devout Roman Catholic could write with such conviction about a world where God is not worshipped” (91). There is an odd tension between Tolkien’s faith and the quiet ways it speaks into his writing against his staunch denial that his work contains a hidden meaning.

The answer lies in that same preface that Tolkien wrote, the part after he gaged on the idea of allegory: “I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author” (Zettersten 117). Authors like to insist that they only write for themselves and never for the sake of their audiences, but that’s not what Tolkien is saying here, and I don’t know if that is the most honest thing writers say to themselves anyway. There is often a concern for how a story will be read and an awareness of the purpose for writing it. Stories are rarely just stories. Tolkien himself wrote once that that “the more ‘life’ a story has the more readily will it be susceptible to allegorical interpretations: while the better a deliberate allegory is made the more nearly it will be acceptable just as a story” (*Letters* 145). He explained to a concerned reader that, while “[*The Lord of the Rings*] was written to amuse (in the highest sense): to be readable,” stories that adults enjoy must seem relevant, must reflect something worth considering beyond the simple adventure on the page, and in drawing up from those deeper reservoirs of meaning, the author’s thoughts and values “will inevitably get worked in” (*Letters* 232-233).

Ultimately, Tolkien wasn’t against his work having meanings that ran deeper than the ink on the page: he simply didn’t like the idea of being chained to a form in which A must always equal B in the entire work. He would have wanted the Redcrosse Knight to have the freedom to

be a cocky boy in a story that would teach him how to be holy rather than to be shackled to a didactic idea that would teach a moral lesson. This doesn't remove that hidden layer of significance from our fictions, but rather opens up that magical space to teach us in the way that only fiction can. This is how I can sit down to write a story that says one thing, but have my own characters turn back to me and teach me something entirely different. This is how fiction allows me to explore my own reality. Lewis said it best in a letter he wrote defending *The Fellowship of the Ring* against an allegorical interpretation: "My view would be that a good myth... is a higher thing than an allegory (into which one meaning has been put). Into an allegory a man can put only what he already knows; into a myth he puts what he does not yet know and could not come by in any other way" (Zettersten 119).

While Lewis was quick to defend Tolkien's approach, the author of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was obviously far more comfortable with allegory than Tolkien was. In his *Chronicles of Narnia*, there exists a God-like figure in the character of Aslan: the lion powerful enough to conquer enemies but gentle enough to love each of the children in the series, the only blameless being able and willing to take the place of a traitor and pay that price to not only satisfy the Deep Magic, but break the stone table on which he gave his life. Aslan is an allegorical figure for Christ, something Tolkien never tried to do. "The Incarnation of God is an infinitely greater thing than anything I would dare to write," he once said (*Letters* 237). On a theological level, I couldn't agree more. Trying to describe God in and of itself is an utterly impossible feat. What words have I, a product of humanity's fall, with which to describe infinity or perfection? I struggle to understand in my own mind a God who is both completely holy yet also completely loving, how the God of ten thousand galaxies can possibly care about what I write and why, I just believe that He is and does. In a way, it is because He is so far beyond

myself and what I can comprehend that my faith works. What good would it do me in such a chaotic world to trust something small enough for me to wrap my feeble mind around? I have a child's faith in the God mankind will never completely comprehend, how could I ever think I could capture such a character on paper?

But because Lewis tried, he showed me through Aslan God's tender grace towards me. When Aslan walked up the hill to the Stone Table and allowed himself to be bound, shaved, and killed (*The Chronicles of Narnia* 180-181), it brought fresh life to that True Myth, the one where Christ chose to die in order to redeem humanity. In the same way that stories allow me to put something on paper and look at it, Lewis uses Aslan to not just entertain us with a story of a fantasy realm, but teach us about the relationship our faith gives us with God.

Dekker doesn't shy from writing incarnate God-figures either. In *House*, he and Peretti write Susan, a girl that the other characters find within the house who sacrifices herself to the Tin Man's darkness in order to set the characters free. In *The Circle Series*, Dekker writes of Elyon, the God of Other Earth, who takes on the form of Justin in *Red*, the second book of the series. Justin is executed in a way that echoes Christ's crucifixion, providing a cure to the literal disease that plagues Other Earth, just as sin plagues our own world. In Dekker's fantasy universe, he moves a narrative that functions as an allegory from the Garden of Eden through modern Christianity, showing me not only the relationship between an individual and God as Lewis does with Aslan, but also how God has been romancing humanity from the dawn of time, saving us from our human condition from the moment that the fruit was eaten. Both levels cause me to see something differently, to look at my faith and understand a little better who God is and what His love for us means.

Are these perfect allegories? No, of course not. Aslan does not exist in a trinity, and while the idea is whispered, is not omnipresent. When Susan enters the plot of *House*, she seems a fellow victim that Jack must rescue, an image of helplessness that I somehow doubt Jesus ever portrayed. And Thomas Hunter's glorification as a hero in *The Circle Series* allows him to outrank Justin in a way, which contributes to the surprise when Justin's identity is revealed, but confuses the dynamic of who we are in comparison to who God is. Tolkien was right: the Incarnate God is far too great for mankind's ink to perfectly portray, but that doesn't keep some of us from trying.

My own God-figure's name in *The Tales of Terralus* is Sator. "It was believed by some that he was some kind of deity," Nira's father tells her when she asks him about this person who steps into her nightmares to rescue her, "an all-powerful being who existed everywhere and knew everything at once, and could even take different forms to appear anywhere he wished when it suited him. The people of Nostras at the time believed that he had a plan for the good of Nostras, and he had a power to bring that plan about. They believed that he could intimately know every human heart and could fill it with love and peace, if it was willing." An earlier king turned his back to Sator, and so Sator waited generations for a ruler of Nostras to turn back to him—waited generations for Nira, the fifth ruler, who will defy what everyone else thinks she should do and choose instead to follow Sator's plan. Sator crosses cultures in Terralus, appearing as a fellow gypsie to Orpah¹², the giver of power to the Manufortians¹³, a carpenter

¹² The gypsies are nomads: peasants who have bought or been otherwise given their freedom but own no land of their own, and so they come together to create a mobile culture of their own, traveling to find work and molding a life that moves "by the speed of a horse pulling a wagon."

¹³ Five peasants from the Eurian mines meet Sator in a hidden chamber in *The Fifth Ruler* where they are given a mark on their right hands, and with it the power to create water, shake earth, throw fire, kill in battle, and heal afterward. This new race of people are crucial to the final battle in the War of Nostras, and central to the third book of the series.

and teacher of the young Terfavirtus¹⁴, and ultimately the leader and unifier of all of the realms in Terralus against Ritus, the common enemy in each tale.

While Tolkien was right that Lewis, Dekker, I, and many others will never be able to capture God's infinitely perfect character on paper (not that any of us claim to), each of us are deeply in love with and indebted to a God we cannot touch or completely comprehend, and writing these characters are our way of knowing Him more intimately ourselves and sharing that understanding and experience with the world. I know that God loves me tenderly: the Hebrew word Abba used for Him in the Bible translates better as "Daddy" than "Father," and I write Sator this way as Nira fights with the doubts of her people and those of herself. He challenges her to boldly lead her people as no one has ever thought that she could without ever getting frustrated with her fear and hesitation. I know Abba loves me tenderly, but I know it differently—more deeply—through Nira and Sator when I fight relapses with anorexia and feel like an idiot. Relapsing always feels stupid to me, knowing that I have the coping skills and just can't apply them for whatever reason feels like I'm failing, and then I get frustrated with myself which makes the next meal even harder. But God has never demanded perfection from me. He challenges me to be more than I think I can be, but there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1). God isn't the one telling me I'm dumb, He's standing behind me as Sator did for Nira, correcting the grip on my bow as I draw my arrow, waiting for me to be ready to fire.

I may have defied Tolkien by writing Sator in the first place, but it was Tolkien who taught me how to use this character. Dekker, Lewis, and I use our fantasies to explore God's character while Tolkien uses his fantasies to explore themes. He and I conduct our explorations in the same way. It is Tolkien's themes that make his work so timeless: issues of survival,

¹⁴ The young friend of Prince Ebeco and illegitimate child of the Messenian king in the second book of *The Tales of Terralus, The Fourth Son*.

friendship, mortality, these things and more are factors that play a part in the human experience no matter the time or place (Petty 14). Rather than turning to any level of black-and-white allegory, these themes appear in Middle Earth through every shade of gray. Different characters in different tales respond in different ways, allowing a variety of perspectives on each theme (Petty 21). No one in Middle Earth is perfect: Bilbo is complacent and has no desire to change the status-quo, Pipin is careless and mischievous, Aragorn is hesitant and fears the past, Boromir is seduced by the Ring—even Aule, one of the Ainur given the responsibility of creating Middle Earth, is impatient and defies Iluvatar’s plan. On the other end of the spectrum, the villains of Middle Earth are not created evil in their essence, but rather corrupted on various levels. This lack of polarization is what allows Tolkien to encounter falls from grace, vengeance, risk, love, from different points of view, look at them through different lenses, explore those shades of gray. It’s what I loved about Tolkien from the first time I watched *The Lord of the Rings*: there were more than enough characters facing more than enough struggles to either find myself or challenge myself in every scene. There are nine companions in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and more social media quizzes about which one you are most similar to than about which Hogwarts House you would be sorted into. No reader falls through cracks in Middle Earth.

Watching Tolkien explore themes in this way showed me how to explore God through Sator. I identify strongly with Nira as a young and sheltered woman who had to leave home to learn what she was called to do, and so much of her interactions with Sator were written from that place of similarity. But God is so much more than a nurturing encourager. Through young Terfavirtus, a little boy who likes to dream and wants perhaps a bit too badly to fight, I can see Sator as a counselor and teacher. Terfavirtus shows me how to accept God’s discipline, to trust Him even when He’s telling me something I don’t want to hear. Through the Manufortian

prisoner Pollentae, I can see Sator as a redeemer. Pollentae shows me not only that God can save me from my past, but also use my future. Through Amnis, a bitter outcast, I can see Sator as unconditionally loving. Amnis shows me that no amount of disillusionment will ever persuade God to value me less. Through the fairies, tale-keepers responsible for remembering the stories of Terralus, I can see Sator as sovereign. They show me how to remember the greater picture and be more aware of the story God is writing and less consumed by the one I am living. The Manfortian race are born though a violent flood, sweeping them away from one another so that each of their experiences of Sator marking them as his own and giving them power is different, much like each Christian has a different story of how they came to find salvation in Christ. Through different characters from different backgrounds and with different strengths and weaknesses, I can use my fiction to see more of Sator, and I can use Sator to see more of God.

Sator is an allegorical figure, but I do not write allegories. Much like Lewis said about allegory concerning *The Fellowship of the Ring*, I don't want my fiction to be limited to what I know and have the words to teach; I want to use my fiction to learn things that I can't learn any other way. If Tolkien could maintain a respect of Lewis after he wrote Aslan, perhaps he could forgive me for using his method to implement Sator, explore the gray areas, and learn through myth what cannot be come by in any other way.

Chapter 6: Leaves and Sandcastles

The title character in Tolkien's short story "Leaf by Niggle" was a painter. Not a very good one: he was much better at drawing leaves than trees, and the masterpiece to which he devoted much attention often overwhelmed him with its vastness and frustrated him in how far beyond his skill the idea laid, but he loved painting. Unfortunately for Niggle, his time was limited by visitors, obligations to society, a particularly needy neighbor, and a looming "journey" that would end his time to work on his art.

Of course, this is not an allegory. Niggle is his own character, not a symbol (*Letters* 321). Any resemblance to any person, dead or alive, is completely coincidental.

Whether the resemblance is mere applicability as Tolkien would say or allegory in spite of his claims as Shippey argues (*Author of the Century* 265-277), "Leaf by Niggle" illustrates the mundane yet terrifying reality that Tolkien, I, and many other writers face: distraction and procrastination, the vocational struggles of a writer. Ironically, the process by which "Leaf by Niggle" was drafted was strangely productive—especially for Tolkien. "I woke one morning with it in my head, scribbled it down," Tolkien wrote of the story. "The printed form... hardly differs from the first hasty version at all" (*Letters* 320).

In 2014, I attended *ReWrite: The Ragged Edge*, a writer's conference hosted by The Fedd Agency and Ted Dekker. He described writing experiences such as Tolkien's with Niggle as going into a "flow state": sitting down to write and the words just "flow" onto the paper or keyboard, and when the writer finally comes up out of the piece and back into reality, there are ten pages of pure magic, and no one else in the building has any idea what just took place. "Has everyone in here experienced that?" he asked, his rock star hair hanging over his dark eyes. "Does everyone know what I'm talking about? Has anyone ever *not* had this happen?" I have.

It's those moments that I live for, they are the epitome of productivity for vocational writers. At the table across the aisle from me to my left, an elderly, white-haired woman in a floral-print blouse raised her hand timidly, looking around at the rest of us nodding. Like a good little observer, I'd eavesdropped on one of her conversations that morning while settling into a room of so many strangers, and find it interesting to note that she was a nonfiction writer.

Dekker saw her. "Really?" he said, sliding immediately to our side of the stage. "Oh, man, you've got to try it! It's like having an orgasm!"

"Leaf by Niggle" was a huge anomaly for Tolkien. He was a perfectionist, as demonstrated by his passionate distinction between the terms "allegory" and "applicability." Carpenter put it this way: "Nothing was allowed to reach the printer until it had been revised, reconsidered, and polished—in which respect he was the opposite of C. S. Lewis, who sent manuscripts off for publication with scarcely a second glance at them. Lewis, well aware of this difference between them, wrote of Tolkien: 'His standard of self-criticism was high and the mere suggestion of publication usually set him upon a revision, in the course of which so many new ideas occurred to him that where his friends had hoped for the final text of an old work they actually got the first draft of a new one.'" (Carpenter 138).

In spite of the vast differences in their self-imposed standards, the twentieth century has Lewis to thank for the publication of Tolkien's work: it was Lewis who encouraged Tolkien in his writing, opening him up to the possibility that his work interested people beyond himself and his family, that his fantasy needed to be more than a mere "hobby" (Pearce 56). Beyond that point, Lewis was one of Tolkien's most valuable Beta readers. Knowing how hard Tolkien was on his own work, Lewis got creative with the feedback he offered, "which he jestingly couched in the form of a mock textual criticism, complete with the names of fictitious scholars

(‘Pumpernickel’, ‘Peabody’, and ‘Schick’) who suggested that weak lines in Tolkien’s poem were simply the result of scribal inaccuracies in the manuscript, and could not be the authentic work of the original poet.” Lewis noted that Tolkien’s reaction to criticism could go to either of two extremes: complete dismissal, or scrapping the entire thing and starting over—though it was usually the latter. He took criticism of his work very seriously (Carpenter 145). “When he [Lewis] would say, ‘You can do better than that. Better, Tolkien, please!’ I would try,” Tolkien once said of this process. “I’d sit down and write the section over and over” (*Letters* 376).

I have found that this level of revision and self-criticism complicates the creative process. It takes more time, it requires more rethinking, and then leads to more rewriting. Tolkien’s letters and interviews demonstrate this, scholars who have studied his process describe this, the amount of incomplete work he left behind attest to this, but I already knew this. I knew this before I started studying Tolkien’s perfectionism.

I created Nostras—the creative seed for the rest of Terralus—on my palm in a classroom of Omaha Metro in 2010, and drafted about a quarter of *The Fifth Ruler* while I worked on my associate’s degree, and then I experienced my only case to date of writer’s block. Philip Pullman doesn’t believe in writer’s block: “Plumbers don’t get plumber’s block, and doctors don’t get doctor’s block; why should writers be the only profession that gives a special name to the difficulty of working?” he asks on his website (Pullman). There was much speculation about whether or not J. K. Rowling’s three-year gap between *The Goblet of Fire* and *The Order of the Phoenix* was the result of writer’s block (she denied it, but at one point admitted that she had considered breaking her own arm to have an excuse not to write the book) (“J. K. Rowling’s Struggle With Writer’s Block”). No matter what it is called or how much validation it is given, Tolkien knew the miserable silence of the muse that authors can sometimes experience. He

called it “*dead stuck*... I did not know how to go on,” and spent the time finding and fiddling with inconsistencies in the storyline and world-building instead of writing the story (*Letters* 321).

Dead stuck for me came through my romantic relationship with Beau. I was attending class full-time, working for the Gallup Opinion Poll twenty hours a week, staying up all night most nights doing homework and texting him while he worked the night shift, and spending every waking moment with him. There was no time for writing, I was too busy being in love. I was dreaming of being Mrs. Beau Burleson, dreaming of being a mother, preparing for the challenge of being a military wife, and digging a grave for my high school dream of studying Creative Writing at the University of Iowa. How could I move away from the man I loved? Why would I want to?

Things started to crumble about six weeks before the end, but as I scrambled to snatch up the pieces, the shards started to slice my fingers one Saturday, nine months into our relationship. I’d spent the day with my sister-in-law finishing a procrastinated Art History project, and he’d felt neglected and ignored. “I just don’t know if you really love me,” he told me when he came to pick me up.

“I do love you,” I told him. I was panicking, heart pounding, mind scrambling for the evidence but tripping over the question: *How can he not see that?*

“You ignored me all day,” he told me. “I didn’t have anything to do, I was by myself all day, I was so alone.”

“I’m sorry, Love. I had to get this assignment done.”

“And it took you all day?”

It had been an acrylic replica of a Georgia O’Keefe painting. I’d been proud of it when I’d left Kyle and Rianne’s apartment moments before. It was still inside, I was coming over to

finish it tomorrow. “Painting takes a long time,” I offered simply, like a child’s excuse that she knows won’t fly.

He did that frustrated little huff through his nose that always broke my heart. “And you couldn’t text or anything?”

“I had paint on my fingers, and I left my phone in the other room.”

“All day?” he whined. “Honey, I was alone all day. I don’t know what I would do without you, I would kill myself if I lost you, but I just don’t know if you still love me.”

I looked at the deep scar that still had some healing to do on the inside of his left wrist, the one that matched the half dozen others that covered both forearms under his uniform sleeves. The pocket knife he’d used was clipped to the cargo pocket of his pants.

“I have to take you home and get to work,” he said, starting the car. “We can talk about it later.”

I kept it together all the way home. I made it into the house—the house that Beau was supposed to be saving me from. Usually, it was the place I had to leave before it was safe to cry. This time, I closed myself inside and watched him drive away, and then started sobbing. I went upstairs to the bathroom and started dry-heaving. My display woke up my parents. We went downstairs and Mom held me while I asked Dad what the repercussions would be for Beau if I reported to the Air Force that one of their airmen was suicidal... because of me.

We did talk the next day. “I’m not actually suicidal,” he said. “I just really need to know that you love me. I needed to know if you’d care if I did kill myself.”

I didn’t believe him. I was on suicide watch. When I wasn’t with him, Aimee was. Aimee was my church friend and our third wheel.

Aimee was Beau’s Plan B.

After a week of this, I was sick. I'd cried every day; demanded a perfection worthy of Tolkien's standard of self-criticism from my every word and action, testing it to see if it demonstrated my love for him; texted him through every night shift to be certain that he wasn't alone. I was on my third migraine and had accidentally over-dosed on Ibuprofen. I was cooped up at Rianne's place sick to my stomach, and he was supposed to come see me that afternoon. I'd taken him to work that morning, so Aimee was going to pick him up and take him back to his truck so he could come over.

He was three hours late, and he was only answering about half of my texts.

I finally sent one to Aimee: "Have you picked Beau up yet?"

"Yeah, we're hanging out at my house playing video games. Want to come over?"

I switched back to Beau. "Do you want to hang out with Aimee or with me?"

It took him fifteen minutes to answer. "Aimee's taking me home now, do you want me to come over?"

"No, I want you to answer my question. Do you want to hang out with Aimee or me?"

His reply was so non-committal that I can't even remember what it said, only that it included his favorite statement that week: "I just don't know if you love me."

"Fine," I said. "Go back to Aimee's. I don't want to see you."

I hit Send, and then I threw my phone across Rianne's living room and watched it skid across the kitchen floor and under the bird cage. That was the last time I talked to Beau.

Every time I sat down to write for five months after that, it was a journal entry. What had I done wrong? Why wasn't I enough?

Then came anorexia: the knowledge that Beau had at least thought that my abs were sexy even if my hair made me look like a twelve-year-old, and if I gained back the ten pounds I'd lost

over the stress and emotional turmoil, I might get fat and lose the only thing I had going for me—I clearly had nothing else with which to hold a man’s attention. So then I lost fifteen more. Suddenly all of the attention I should have been giving to writing was going to recovery: I was literally writing conversations between myself and a thing I named Demon about whether or not I was going to eat lunch. Every time I looked at the pink binder that held my manuscript, all I could think about was the night Beau had gotten jealous because I’d asked someone besides him to read it. He didn’t even like to read.

It took months, and it took several shorter pieces—mostly poor ones—but eventually I found my way back to fiction, and eventually I remembered my writing dreams. I’d lost the future I’d wanted with Beau, but I’d recovered the one I’d sacrificed for it. I was still me. I could still write.

By the time I was writing again, I was a different person. I’d loved and lost and survived an eating disorder and moved to Iowa all my myself, and the story about the young princess trying to be what her kingdom needed her to be had changed so much that I had to reimagine all of Nostras. A year later, I started taking classes at the University of Iowa, and I had to put my novel away. Attending class, working forty hours a week, and maintaining a social support system make writing time slim, and I do my best work in six hour stretches anyway. I would pull it out every winter and every summer between semesters, but every time it came out, I was a little different, a little older, a little wiser, a little more jaded, and a little more aware of plot holes and world-building errors. I broke up with Beau in November of 2010. I didn’t finish *The Fifth Ruler* until the Spring of 2014, and even now as I start looking for a literary agent I am considering one more pass for revisions. I’m stalling every bit as badly as Tolkien, perfectionism and self-criticism lying as speed bumps on the road of our vocation.

The Silmarillion was the seed for Middle Earth—it's the book he began after the Battle of the Somme. It was "largely in existence from 1937 on," Tolkien had eighteen years after the publication of *The Return of the King* as well as retirement to work with, so why did he fail to see the publication of the work of his heart, *The Silmarillion* (*The Road to Middle Earth* 170)? Carpenter explains a number of factors: academic and other shorter works that distracted him, and he also spent a lot of time replying to letters from various magazines and newspapers, publishers, readers, and friends (Carpenter 241). My generation has a special term for these kinds of distractions: we call it "Author Platforming." In order to succeed in the modern commercial publishing industry, a writer has to maintain a website, a blog, and social media in order to have an online presence, create engagement, and build a following of fans. This requires flirting daily with the biggest vocational distraction of my generation of authors: the internet. At *ReWrite: The Ragged Edge*, I learned that it takes a tribe of ten thousand readers to make a viable career of writing full-time. It took me three hours of prayer during the drive back home to swallow that one. "God, I know You've called me to write. I know that I have to do this. But God—*ten thousand readers*? How in the world are You going to do this?" Tolkien wrote letters, I write web content, and both of these things are a part of our writing careers, but they do not directly move our manuscripts toward bookshelves.

And then, much like poor Niggle (whose very name means, interestingly enough, "to trifle, fiddle, or waste time on petty details" according to the Oxford English Dictionary), there were the smaller distractions. Niggle had visitors, his garden, and his needy neighbor; Tolkien had the telephone, running errands with Edith, and keeping up with the newspaper; I have the daycare, homework, and campus ministry. While distractions do make writing difficult however, I am inclined to side with Pullman here: writing is hard, we have to do it anyway. Why should

writers get special excuses? In this way, Carpenter points out that Tolkien's inability to get his creative work done was, at least in part, his own fault. "And this in itself depressed him, and made him even less capable of achieving much," (Carpenter 241). Largely, Tolkien simply struggled with the vocational challenges of writing.

Because I possess a common penchant for distraction, tendency to "niggle," and painfully slow output of product, looking at Tolkien frightens me. He never got to see *The Silmarillion* in print, and no one got to see *The New Shadow*: the story of what happens to men in Middle Earth a century after the events of *The Lord of the Rings* (Resnick 42). Christopher Tolkien was almost a miracle: he grew up with his father reading to him and telling him of Middle Earth, he joined The Inklings himself during his time at Oxford, and he contributed a lot of creative energy and assistance to his father's work (Zettersten 35). Because of Christopher, Middle Earth didn't have to die completely with Tolkien.

I have no son. I am the only Pancake I know who writes. There are five novels that take place in Terralus, and I am the only one who knows about them.

"You can go to law or business school so you can get a real job," as if I can just set this aside.

So I waste precious time slaving over my platform and I niggle my novel and I fear that I'll live my whole life taking care of other peoples' kids and living in crappy apartments with a worthless degree, and no one will ever read about how Nira trusted Sator to be what Nostras needed her to be, and then I realize that that is precisely my problem. Sure, I could continue to fear the vocational challenges of writer's block, perfectionism, and internal criticism. Or I could let Nira teach me how to trust God and simply be the writer I need to be.

Some of us are simply called to write. Every social circle Tolkien had been a part of for his entire life pointed him towards writing, and everything from his military service to his livelihood and all of the sub-creating in between revolved around the use of language. A teacher once wrote a letter to Lewis's father saying "You may make a writer or a scholar of him, but you'll not make anything else" (*Surprised by Joy* 183). Likewise, there's never been anything else I've ever wanted to do, no other route has ever made sense. Mark Batterson, a Christian nonfiction author who spoke at *ReWrite*, pointed out that if we are called by God to write and we don't do it, then we are in direct disobedience.

"What can you do with a creative writing degree, anyway?"

What could the Biblical character David do with five rocks? That poet became a king.

So if God has called me to write, then it is my job to trust that and write.

"It's like building sandcastles," Dekker explained at the conference, hopping around the stage as his hands danced into a gesture for every thought and speaking faster and faster in that Indonesian accent of his as he got more and more excited about it. "It's like we're a bunch of kids on the beach, and we're just playing and building sandcastles. We'll try digging a moat, see how high we can make the walls, and we look to our Heavenly Father and we say 'Look, Daddy! Look what we did!' And our Heavenly Father says 'Wow, that is so awesome! I am so proud of you!' And then a wave comes in and messes it all up, or one of those bully kids—that would be the critics—they come in and kick our sandcastle over, and we're just like—"

He stopped in the middle of the stage, mouth open, eyes wide, and hands spread, demonstrating the reaction of a child, shocked, betrayed, and heartbroken over the destruction of their creation.

But then his eyes lit up and he grinned as he modeled what the children in his story get to do after that: “Let’s build another one!”

The man is 53 and didn’t start writing until he was an adult, and he has written forty eight books that way.

I could blame the distractions. I could continue to niggle. Tolkien would understand.

Or I could build sandcastles.

Reflective Essay: The Dragon's Flamethrower

The day I learned about the opportunity I had as an honors student to write a thesis, I knew I would be writing about Tolkien. I've been obsessed with Middle Earth and curious about the process by which it was built for years, and this was my chance. I finally had the time and excuse to sit down and pick Tolkien's brain, learning all I could from him as a writer. The catch: it would be a scholarly research project. That's where my excitement dissipated.

In the year prior to beginning my project, I had taken the creative nonfiction seminar with the university's undergraduate Creative Writing Track. My dad, eternally skeptical of my college career as my thesis discusses, didn't get it. "Creative nonfiction? How do you get creative nonfiction? It's either fact or it isn't!" Though I couldn't properly defend it at the time, I have come to recognize the many genres that "creative nonfiction" covers and the roles that writing craft plays in it. *The Devil's Highway* by Luis Alberto Urrea was essentially a research project—a year's worth of combing through records, files, and interviews; visiting scenes; and conducting new interviews—but used dialogue, images, scene building, and form choices to construct a reading experience similar to that one would have with a novel. *Voices from Chernobyl* by Svetlana Alexievich was written solely from the words spoken in conversations she'd had with survivors of the Chernobyl disaster, revealing to me the range of choices that writers can make outside of merely choosing words. Micro decisions such as paragraph breaks and punctuation and macro ones such as form and which accounts to place next to each other all contribute in ways that are easy to overlook. Essays, memoirs, historical renderings, and even poetry can convey records, tangible facts, research, and things of what Tolkien would call the "primary world" without sacrificing craft. Indeed, "nonfiction" covers significantly more ground

than textbooks and newspapers, and there is much creativity to be found in those sometimes less-explored territories.

With this perspective in mind, I decided to take a “creative nonfiction” approach rather than a scholarly one. I wanted my thesis to explore Tolkien, not regurgitate research that had already been done and done again. My primary strategy for accomplishing this was to use a narrator—myself, essentially—to not only explore Tolkien’s ideas, but to interact with them and direct the discussion towards the creation of fantasy, as one writer would describe it to another. My thesis would still tell his story, but my narrator would focus the discussion into a writer’s perspective.

In the first few weeks of workshopping however, I encountered a problem with my plan. My peers who were reading the early pages as they unfolded liked the parts that discussed myself significantly more than those that discussed Tolkien. This became a struggle because I hadn’t wanted to tell my story, I’d wanted to tell Tolkien’s. Even deeper than that, I found the problem of authority: who was I to have any? What place did I have to narrate Tolkien’s life and work? What merit did I have in the genre of fantasy as my novels waited in corners until summer breaks and are still nowhere near publication? Who was I to speak to Professor J. R. R. Tolkien?

One attempt to solve my dilemma involved bringing in the voices of other fantasy writers I have read and studied outside of school—Ted Dekker, Kristin Cashore, J. K. Rowling, etc.—writers who are still writing (and more importantly, publishing) fantasy today. As I was fighting with that approach, a few of my classmates in the workshop were writing braided essays, and I started to wonder if that was the direction that my project wanted to go: a combination of Tolkien’s method, my own story, and the commentary of current writers on creating fantasy. The project, I realized at that point, was so much more than a simple retelling of Tolkien’s

thoughts on and experience of writing. If an honors thesis is a dragon to be slain, I felt like instead of sneaking stealthily into its hoard, I had handed it a flamethrower.

My new strategy became to pound out pages and see what happened. I had a list of questions that I wanted to ask Tolkien, so I kept asking those questions, researching their answers, and going back to my workshop and my advisor, Tom Simmons, for validation. I found myself calling it “genre blending,” a term I’ve heard in various writing classes while reading marginalized but “edgy” pieces of literature that are studied in universities, but not popularly marketable. When a literary agent receives a query containing the phrase “blended genres,” that query is usually immediately deposited into the slush pile. Professor Simmons especially was invaluable at this point, encouraging me much as C. S. Lewis had encouraged Tolkien himself, telling me that my narrator’s story not only had a place in the thesis, but was what made the thesis something unique, and in fact something new that would be interesting to read. So I kept writing, not even knowing the genre of my project.

Just as my project started to reach a comfortable balance between Tolkien’s story and my own, Professor Simmons unfortunately had to take a medical leave from the University. In the midst of the concern, confusion, and mild panic of losing not only the leader of our workshop but my project advisor as well, in addition to the stress and struggle of a difficult semester as a nontraditional student, Tolkien helped me “escape” as writing has always done for the both of us. Both explaining the project to various people within the department as well as working through some personal struggles also pressed me to embrace the authority I was slowly finding to exist in the thesis. Writing my thesis became every bit as helpful and healing as writing fiction has ever been for me.

Doris Witt took over for our workshop, and we spent much of that first class period describing our projects to her before workshopping abstracts (which was perfect timing). Explaining what my thesis was still proving to be difficult, especially standing behind my chair shifting from one foot to the other because I was too caffeinated to sit still. She mentioned that evening a faculty member who was preparing to teach a graduate class on bibliomemoir, a genre I had never heard of before, but in which I would find the vocabulary with which to describe the form my thesis was taking on. Matt Brown agreed to take on my project and give me an emergency crash-course on the genre.

Bibliomemoir is a form of autobiography, reflecting on the events of a person's life and following an arc in that life. As the name expresses, bibliomemoir does this through the lens of reading material, taking a tonal stance towards that material from which to tell the memoirist's story. As this genre develops, we find that the form carries few particulars beyond this. Nicholson Baker speaks of his own life as a writer while reflecting on the works of John Updike in *U and I: A True Story*. *How to be a Heroine* examines Samantha Ellis's developing feminist identity through the heroines of the books she has read throughout her life. The genre also includes Phyllis Rose's *The Shelf* in which Rose went to the library and chose a shelf of fiction to read: from LEQ to LES. "An Adventure in Extreme Reading," she calls it. Gerald Graff uses the genre in his shorter piece, "Disliking Books at an Early Age," to tell the story of how an experience with literary criticism of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is what led him to an interest in reading that he hadn't possessed until that point in college. There is a lot of freedom in the form that this genre takes and the direction that it flows: how many books it flows from, how many authors, how many characters. But the genre provides a forum for bibliophiles to share their experiences through the material that we read.

This thesis pulls the genre a bit in another direction. Because the original plan had been to write Tolkien's story, its structure tends to tell of Tolkien's experiences and draw mine in as it goes as opposed to the other way around. The essential course of it is Tolkien's life, not mine. But as the chapters unfolded, it worked out well that way, because the arc of this bibliomemoir isn't necessarily the chronological tale of my life, but rather how I have become a fantasy writer. The conversation that I'd wanted to have since I very first decided on the use of a narrator functioned even better than I'd thought that it could: while I was asking Tolkien to teach me about writing fantasy, he seemed to ask me for my story. Our "origin stories" as writers are found in chapter one, the function that writing serves in our lives in chapter two, and the exploration of craft that I wanted so desperately from Tolkien are in the following three: how to go about building fantasy realms, how to cast spells on our readers, and how to convey meaning through the genre. The discussion of writing fantasy over those three chapters also brought me from the imaginative seeds of Terralus that I found while attending Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, making the journey to Iowa City, and since then finding my voice and purpose as a fantasy writer.

The final chapter was taking shape through the 2015 Fall semester both as I sought authority in my thesis and as I began to strategize the next steps in my writing career, and the ultimate premise for that chapter came from a workshop peer who suggested that I end the thesis with something that I could turn around and teach Tolkien. The chronology of the thesis had brought me to the end of Tolkien's life and the final question that I had to ask him: how could you leave so many stories untold? And how can I avoid making the same mistake? The chapter brought me to the end of Tolkien's story and, in some ways, the beginning of my own. Outside of completing this academic journey of mine here in Iowa City as a nontraditional student, the

next step in my writing career is to be published: this lesson that I had to teach Tolkien was what I needed to take that next step myself. During my last meeting with Professor Simmons as my advisor, we spoke of the process of querying literary agents, and that night I sent out my first letter in search of representation for *The Fifth Ruler*.

By the time the draft of this thesis was complete, I was feeling more secure in what it was, but the dragon still had a flamethrower: I now had to go back and make each chapter obedient to what the project was as a whole. It was much like revising *The Fifth Ruler*: by the time the thing was drafted, the end was something different than the beginning. I have also learned over the semesters that I experience many differences between writing fiction and writing nonfiction, and the draft of my thesis suffered from one of these in particular: when writing stories of the primary world, I struggle to gauge what actually makes it onto the paper. Because I know what happened (and if I'm writing about it, I know it intimately and vividly), I do not always realize how much or little of that story is given ink, and it takes a second (or third) pair of eyes to show me how much or little of my point is being made. I don't have this problem in fiction. In fiction, I'm creating it on the paper, so it's either there or it isn't. In nonfiction, I tend to need a little extra help.

Professor Witt and Professor Brown were both of great assistance in this area. Professor Witt's feedback on the draft at the end of the fall semester were an excellent springboard into a bibliomemoir form. There was one place in particular in the fourth chapter of that draft that glossed over a lot of story by saying that I left Nebraska to escape the "abstract chaos" of my family. "Abstract chaos is exactly what the reader feels here," she said. I have written extensively and spoken a lot of the Pancake dysfunction in other contexts and capacities since moving to Iowa and was so afraid of beating a dead horse, becoming a stereotype, or coming

across as whining that I hadn't been aware of the fact that my thesis never directly described the situation I left behind in my parents' house. When the clarity of that chapter came into question later on, that missing strand became the thread with which to pull together the lyrical idea of writing journeys—both from the primary world into secondary ones and from Nebraska to Iowa. Professor Witt was also an encouragement through the transition in advisors and a support for the evolving project. By the end of that initial draft, she summed up her feedback with: “Ultimately my advice boils down to suggesting that you take a little breather from getting advice and think about what feels right to you.” With that, my authority question was answered, and I could begin to delve more deeply into the question of genre.

Professor Brown probed extensively the memoir sections to make that side of my thesis stronger. He was able to find the stories that were missing details, the parts that weren't coming through as vividly for the reader as they were playing in my own mind. His external point of view from a bibliomemoir perspective was helpful. The thesis also benefited directly from the revision process specifically because, due to unforeseeable episodes of confusion concerning who would be directing my project, that process ultimately happened very quickly. The voice and tone of each chapter became more and more uniform as I reworked more than one chapter at a time and returned to earlier chapters while rewriting pieces of later ones. The feedback and the deadline involved with this project forced the revision process to flow with more power of momentum behind it than I'd had with revising *The Fifth Ruler*, preventing Tolkienesque niggling by demanding a product. I ultimately learned not only about the genre of bibliomemoir, but also what it practically looks like to produce writing because it must be done as I discuss theoretically in the final chapter of the thesis.

Professor Brown and Professor Witt were extremely helpful in shaping this thesis into its final form. I am also indebted to Professor Simmons for his encouragement and understanding which guided the project toward the journey that it needed to take, and I profoundly regret him missing these final steps of it. My workshop peers have been wonderful, both in the fall semester and even through to the end as we finished off our projects, cheering me on the entire way, tolerating every hesitation while gently nudging to see how far they could help me go. I'm also grateful for Campus Christian Fellowship, my family-away-from-family as well as my community of nerds who have been all too willing to "talk Tolkien" with me through this entire process and continually encourage me in my faith, both writing it here and living it every day. My coworkers and director at Corridor Christian Early Learning Center were also incredibly tolerant and supportive of my caffeinated self along this process, celebrating victories with me and absorbing my vented frustrations along the way. And obviously, this thesis owes its existence to Professor J. R. R. Tolkien. I thank God for Tolkien's life and work, as well as the ink He put in our veins with which we have the freedom and privilege to—in our own, imperfect ways—reflect His glory.

Bibliography

- "About Ted." *Ted Dekker*. KiWone Inc, 2016. Web. 20 Mar. 2016.
- Carpenter, Humphrey, ed. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Print.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *Tolkien: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977. Print.
- Cashore, Kristin. *This is my Secret*. Blogspot, n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2016.
- Dekker, Ted. *ReWrite: The Ragged Edge*. Renaissance Marriott, Austin, TX. 27-28 Feb. 2015. Writer's Conference.
- "J.K. Rowling's Struggle With Writer's Block." *YouTube*. YouTube, 26 June 2015. Web. 20 Mar. 2016.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. New York: HarperEntertainment, 2005. Print.
- Lewis, C. S. *Surprised by Joy*. New York: Harcourt, 1955. Print.
- The Lord of the Rings: Extended Edition: Appendices*. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen, Viggo Mortensen. New Line Cinema, 2006. DVD.
- Margolis, Rick. "A Killer Story: An Interview with Suzanne Collins, Author of 'The Hunger Games.'" *School Library Journal*. Wordpress, 1 Sept. 2008. Web. 20 Mar. 2016.
- Parsons, Deke. *J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard and the Birth of Modern Fantasy*. Vol. 47. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2014. Print. Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy.
- Pearce, Joseph. *Tolkien: Man and Myth*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998. Print.
- Petty, Anne C. *Tolkien in the Land of Heroes*. Cold Spring Harbor, New York: Cold Spring, 2003. Print.
- Pullman, Philip. "Philip Pullman - QAs." N.p, n.d. *Philip Pullman*. Web. 20 Mar. 2016.
- Resnick, Henry. "Interview with Tolkien." *Niekas*, vol. 18 (Late Spring, 1967), 37-43.
- Shippey, Tom A. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. Print.
- Shippey, Tom A. *The Road to Middle Earth*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982. Print.
- Rowling, J. K. *J.K. Rowling*. J. K. Rowling, 2012. Web. 20 Mar. 2016.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "A Secret Vice." *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983. 198-223. Print.

Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-Stories." *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983. 109-61. Print.

Zettersten, Arne. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Double Worlds and Creative Process*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.