

Worldbuilding in Tolkien's Middle-earth and Beyond

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Abstract:

The field of worldbuilding in literary studies is experiencing a revitalization and it is therefore unsurprising that interest in Tolkien's Middle-earth is renewed. Many aspects of Tolkien's world have been analyzed and discussed, but it remains a relevant topic for both specific questions concerning Tolkien's world and general questions concerning worldbuilding in literature. *Sub-creating Arda*, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Thomas Honegger, makes a valuable contribution that expands on both theoretical areas, applies theories of worldbuilding to Middle-earth, and draws interesting parallels to other fictional worlds. Because the field of worldbuilding is incredibly rich, *Sub-creating Arda* is not exhaustive, but nevertheless makes significant contributions to contemporary academic problematizations of the field and will undoubtedly inspire new arguments and new approaches within the field of worldbuilding.

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The timely boom of scholarly interest in both fantasy literature generally and worldbuilding specifically has already generated much useful work on sub-created worlds and their function in literature and other media. Notable recent examples include Mark J. P. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (London 2012), which serves as almost a handbook of narratology and worldbuilding and upon which this volume, *Sub-creating Arda*, draws heavily. Other recent and notable works include Mark J.P. Wolf's *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds* (London 2018) and Alice Bell & Marie-Laure Ryan's *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology* (Lincoln, NE 2019). These are merely recent examples—academic interest in possible worlds is not a phenomenon that started recently. There has been somewhat of a revitalization in the field where a closer look at worldbuilding in fiction serves as a foundation from which to talk about important issues at some length. As such, worldbuilding has not only a mechanical function in a text (although this is an important aspect), but also influences other interpretations and may highlight cultural, political, personal perspectives, or expand the landscape of textual analysis to also include considerations about transmediality, literary atmospheres, and moods in texts. Another contemporary book that deals specifically with transmedia worldbuilding and includes many popular texts is Dan Hassler-Forest's *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics: Transmedia Worldbuilding Beyond Capitalism* (London 2016). This trend shows how there is still much potential for worldbuilding to significantly influence how we read and understand texts, fictional worlds, and ultimately how we understand our own world.

It seems unsurprising that renewed interest in the theory of worldbuilding has culminated in a new volume on Tolkien's world; or Arda, which is the name Tolkien gave to the fictional earth that houses all the characters, locations, and events of Middle-earth (a land mass on Arda).

When investigating fictional worlds and the related theory, one will find that Tolkien's name keeps appearing. Indeed, it hardly seems possible to discuss (the theory of) worldbuilding without referencing either Arda or Tolkien's seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories" from 1939. The quality of individual essays in *Sub-creating Arda* corresponds in a fair and logical manner to the individual levels of experience of the respective authors and their mastery of the subject. I find it refreshing and encouraging that the book draws on both established experts as well as relative newcomers to the field. The differing levels of detail and abstraction do not detract from a contribution to Tolkien Studies that overall remains convincing. Especially well-known figures like John Garth, Gergely Nagy, and Tom Shippey have all made excellent contributions to *Sub-creating Arda* with their usual skill and insight.

The book is roughly divided into three sections. The first part of the book focuses primarily on theoretical essays, where Massimiliano Izzo's "Worldbuilding and Mythopoeia" and Péter Kristóf Makai's "Beyond Fantastic Self-Indulgence: Aesthetic Limits to World-building" stand out. They appropriately criticize aspects of post-Tolkien worldbuilding in fantasy literature. Particularly interesting to note is the departure from strict adherence to Mark J. P. Wolf's notions of invention, completeness, and consistency, where especially Makai indirectly references the New Weird literary movement with its worldbuilding style that counters (or at least differs from) Tolkienian fantasy. This alone might breathe new life into discussions about worldbuilding strategies. Even though the book focuses on Tolkien, it seems noteworthy that Tolkien's style of sub-creation is simply one among many and, while the fantasy genre in several ways is still heavily influenced by Tolkien, his approach is not the only viable strategy.

In the second part of the book, which largely focuses on applying theories of worldbuilding, Gergely Nagy's "On No Magic in Tolkien: Resisting the Representational Criteria of Realism" provides a strong argument against the existence of magic in Middle-earth in the traditional cultural historical sense, an important discussion that also influences other realms of fantasy scholarship, especially with regards to ontology as well as genre definitions and limitations. Magic often provides in fantasy what *novum* does in science-fiction and, as such, is useful for identifying worldbuilding properties and ontological rules in a storyworld. Nagy argues specifically for two types of magic: one focusing on the supernatural which is changed or influenced via rituals, objects, or actions; and on the other hand, magic that deviates from a purely scientific worldview. A guiding principle in Tolkien's sub-creation is the hierarchy of

power; Nagy correctly identifies that when major characters like Gandalf or Galadriel produce what can best be described as magic, then that magic is possible because of their place in the power hierarchy. Put differently, this magic is an *inherent power* which differs from the magic strategies used by, for example, Brandon Sanderson and Robert Jordan in their worlds (these are referenced at other points in *Sub-creating Arda*). This all leads Nagy to describe Middle-earth as being a “pansemiotic world model” – in this model, all magic and inherent power refers back to, and is linked with, the creator of the world. Nagy’s identification of this world model seems promising and may be a useful tool for discussing not only Middle-earth but also other fantasy storyworlds – both Tolkenian and others.

The third part of the book is more comparative, drawing many parallels between Tolkien and authors such as Andrzej Sapkowski, Austin Tappan Wright, Ursula K. Le Guin, George R.R. Martin, and Michael Swanwick. Several of those authors, despite their stylistic and thematic differences, are nevertheless easily grouped together as fantasy authors and thus fulfill Mark J. P. Wolf’s criteria for worldbuilding. It would have been interesting to explore or compare worlds that differ significantly, for example the New Weird texts that Makai references in his article. Tom Shippey’s contribution, “The Faerie World of Michael Swanwick”, is a joy to read, with timely criticism of ‘subversive’ as a reaction to fantasy worldbuilding.

Sub-creating Arda successfully manages to contribute to Tolkien and worldbuilding scholarship, and the book will be useful to both readers interested in Tolkien’s world and to readers more interested in worldbuilding generally. However, it is noteworthy that *Sub-creating Arda* relies quite heavily on both Mark J.P Wolf’s *Building Imaginary Worlds* as well as Tolkien’s “On Fairy-stories”. While I think that most articles in the book generally do a good job of introducing concepts from these two sources before delving further into problematizing ideas, it does seem to me that familiarity with *Building Imaginary Worlds* and “On Fairy-stories” is almost a prerequisite in order to comprehensively engage with the *Sub-creating Arda*. At the end of the day, however, that is a minor point of criticism that does not detract from a book that is well worth the time. I remain confident that several of the articles will inspire and assist more promising work in the exciting fields of worldbuilding and Tolkien scholarship.

Worldbuilding in Tolkiens Mittelerde und darüber hinaus

German Abstract:

In den Literaturwissenschaften erfährt das Feld des *worldbuilding* ein wiederbelebtes Interesse, weshalb es wenig überraschend ist, dass auch Tolkiens Mittelerde neu entdeckt wird. Obwohl viele Bereiche von Tolkiens Welt bereits analysiert und diskutiert wurden, bleibt ihre Relevanz für spezifische wie allgemeine Fragen zu der Schöpfung und Konstruktion von literarischen Welten unumstritten. Daher stellt der Sammelband *Sub-creating Arda*, von Dimitra Fimi und Thomas Honegger herausgegeben, eine wertvolle Bereicherung im Feld des *worldbuilding* dar. Neben theoretischen Überlegungen und dem konkreten Anwenden von theoretischen Ansätzen auf Tolkiens Mittelerde werden auch vielversprechende Parallelen zu anderen fiktionalen Werken gezogen. Obgleich *Sub-creating Arda* keinen umfassenden Einblick in das breite Feld des *worldbuilding* bieten kann, stellt der Band dennoch einen bedeutenden Beitrag zu der Problematisierung des Begriffs sowie des Feldes dar, der aussichtsreiche Argumente und Ansätze hervorbringen wird.