

J.R.R. Tolkien

(1892–1973)

J.R.R. Tolkien is an internationally renowned fantasy writer. He is best known for authoring 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of the Rings' trilogy.

Who Was J.R.R. Tolkien?

J.R.R. Tolkien was an English fantasy author and academic. Tolkien settled in England as a child, going on to study at Exeter College. While teaching at Oxford University, he published the popular fantasy novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The works have had a devoted international fan base and been adapted into award-winning blockbuster films.

Early Life and Family

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, on January 3, 1892, to Arthur Tolkien and Mabel Suffield Tolkien. After Arthur died from complications of rheumatic fever, Mabel settled with four-year-old Tolkien and his younger brother, Hilary, in the country hamlet of Sarehole, in Birmingham, England.

Mabel died in 1904, and the Tolkien brothers were sent to live with a relative and in boarding homes, with a Catholic priest assuming guardianship in Birmingham. Tolkien went on to get his first-class degree at Exeter College, specializing in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic languages and classic literature.

World War I

Tolkien enlisted as a lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers and served in World War I, making sure to continue writing as well. He fought in the Battle of the Somme, in which there were severe casualties, and was eventually released from duty due to illness. In the midst of his military service, he married Edith Bratt in 1916. Continuing his linguistic studies, Tolkien joined the faculty of the University of Leeds in 1920 and a few years later became a professor at Oxford University. While there he started a writing group called The Inklings, which counted among its members C.S. Lewis and Owen Barfield. It was also at Oxford, while grading a paper, that he spontaneously wrote a short line about "a hobbit."

Books: 'The Hobbit' and 'The Lord of the Rings'

The award-winning fantasy novel *The Hobbit* — about the small, furry-footed Bilbo Baggins and his adventures — was published in 1937, and was regarded as a children's book, though Tolkien would state the book wasn't originally intended for children. He also created more than 100 drawings to support the narrative.

Over the years, while working on scholarly publications, Tolkien developed the work that would come to be regarded as his masterpiece — *The Lord of the Rings* series, partially inspired by ancient European myths, with its own sets of maps, lore and languages.

Tolkien released part one of the series, *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 1954; *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* followed in 1955, finishing up the trilogy. The books gave readers a rich literary trove populated by elves, goblins, talking trees and all manner of fantastic creatures, including characters like the wizard Gandalf and the dwarf Gimli.

While *Rings* had its share of critics, many reviewers and waves upon waves of general readers took to Tolkien's world, causing the books to become global bestsellers, with fans forming Tolkien clubs and learning his fictional languages.

Death

Tolkien retired from professorial duties in 1959, going on to publish an essay and poetry collection, *Tree and Leaf*, and the fantasy tale *Smith of Wootton Major*. His wife Edith died in 1971, and Tolkien died on September 2, 1973, at the age of 81. He was survived by four children.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS

The Lord of the Rings, originally written as one immense tome, for publishing purposes it was divided into three texts: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*.

The Fellowship of the Ring is the book that began a legend. It has been the reference of every fantasy or [epic](#) book to come after.

Thematically it would be impossible to list everything, but significant themes include: race, social class, religion, good versus evil, morality, catholic ideals, conservatism, the monomyth, friendship and loyalty, and home. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and the entire masterpiece of *The Lord of the Rings*, is easily one of the most famous modern novels of all time.

Bilbo Baggins throws a party on his “eleventy-first” (111th) birthday, where he announces he is leaving the Shire for what he calls a permanent holiday. He is leaving all of his belongings to his young cousin, heir, and fellow birthday boy, Frodo. After disappearing mysteriously in a puff of smoke, Bilbo meets Gandalf the Grey, a powerful wizard and close friend, who insists Bilbo leave the Ring to Frodo. Bilbo does not want to give up his most cherished possession, which he found during his adventures, chronicled in *The Hobbit*. The most obvious power the Ring has is invisibility to the wearer, but Gandalf suspects it to be the very dangerous Ring of Sauron, the Dark Lord. Bilbo reluctantly agrees, and leaves. Gandalf then warns Frodo to keep the Ring a secret, and leaves to find out more information.

Frodo lives at Bag End for many years, seemingly without aging, as Bilbo had lived. One day, Gandalf appears to warn Frodo about his confirmed suspicions, including the corrupting power of the One Ring. Sauron is after the Ring to conquer the world, and has sent Gollum and many other frightening creatures to search for it. The Ring will always destroy and corrupt the wearer and anyone close by, Gandalf says, but Frodo can and must destroy it by throwing it into the volcano at Mount Orodruin. It cannot be done by anyone else because it is Frodo’s fate.

Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin (fellow hobbit friends) set out, and are pursued by Sauron’s Black Riders, or Nazgûl, bodiless evil horsemen. In the village of Bree, the hobbits meet and team up with a man who calls himself Strider. They do not trust him until they receive a letter from Gandalf. Strider reveals his real name is Aragorn, a friend of Gandalf and heir to Isildur. They travel to Rivendell, eluding the Ringwraiths, where Elrond saves them. Frodo is reunited with Bilbo, who finally understands the danger of the Ring. There is a council to discuss what to do with the Ring, during which Gandalf explains his visit to Isengard. He asked for Saruman’s help, but the great wizard has been corrupted by Sauron’s evil.

The council decides the Ring must be destroyed because of its intrinsic evil, and the Company of the Ring is formed. The group consists of two men, Aragorn and Boromir; an Elf, Legolas; the great wizard, Gandalf; the Dwarf, Gimli; and the four hobbits. Bill the Pony comes too.

When the group's plan to cross over the Misty Mountains fails because of heavy storms, they have no choice but to take a dangerous path under the mountains, through the ancient Dwarf mines of Moria. They are attacked by Orcs and must flee, but just before they escape, they encounter a Balrog, an evil demon of fire and shadow. Gandalf turns to defend them, but both the wizard and the demon fall into an abyss.

The group continues on. In the Elf-haven of Lothlorien, Lady Galadriel of the Elves gives them magical items to help them. After leaving Lothlorien, the group plans its next move. Boromir, clearly corrupted by the Ring's dark power, says Frodo should give the Ring to his father, and thus fight the evil Sauron. Boromir tries to take the ring for himself, and Frodo puts on the Ring to escape and disappear. Boromir is suddenly ashamed of his actions; he had been under the power of the Ring, but understands his error. He admits to the rest of the Fellowship what he did, and they search for Frodo frantically. Frodo, however, has fled, believing the burden of the Ring must be his and his alone. Demonstrating an understanding of his friend that the others clearly did not possess, Sam finds Frodo and refuses to leave his side. The two hobbits continue down the river in a little boat. They are more determined than ever to destroy the Ring. The action continues in the second book, *The Two Towers*.