



# J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography

By Humphrey Carpenter

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## J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography By Humphrey Carpenter

The authorized biography of the creator of Middle-earth. In the decades since his death in September 1973, millions have read *The Hobbit*, *The Lord Of The Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* and become fascinated about the very private man behind the books. Born in South Africa in January 1892, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was orphaned in childhood and brought up in near-poverty. He served in the first World War, surviving the Battle of the Somme, where he lost many of the closest friends he'd ever had. After the war he returned to the academic life, achieving high repute as a scholar and university teacher, eventually becoming Merton Professor of English at Oxford where he was a close friend of C.S. Lewis and the other writers known as The Inklings.

Then suddenly his life changed dramatically. One day while grading essay papers he found himself writing 'In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit' -- and worldwide renown awaited him.

Humphrey Carpenter was given unrestricted access to all Tolkien's papers, and interviewed his friends and family. From these sources he follows the long and painful process of creation that produced *The Lord Of The Rings* and *The Silmarillion* and offers a wealth of information about the life and work of the twentieth century's most cherished author.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

There may be a corner of the world where the name J.R.R. Tolkien is unknown, but you would be hard-pressed to find it. Since their publication, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* have been published in every major language of the world. And though he single-handedly gave a mythology to the English and was beloved by millions, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien remained refreshingly unchanged by his fame and fortune, living out his days simply and modestly among the familiar surroundings of Oxford College. Humphrey Carpenter, who was given unrestricted access to Tolkien's papers, brilliantly puts meat to the bones of the Tolkien legend in *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, offering a well-rounded portrayal of this quiet, bookish man who always saw himself first and foremost as a philologist, uncovering rather than creating the peoples, languages, and adventures of Middle-Earth.

Carpenter chronicles Tolkien's early life with a special sensitivity; after losing both parents, Tolkien and his brother Hilary were taken from their idyllic life in the English countryside to a poverty-ridden existence in dark and sooty Birmingham. There were bright points, however. A social and cheerful lad, Tolkien enjoyed rugby and was proud of his gift for languages. It was also at this time that he met Edith Bratt, who would later become his wife. Academic life--both as a student and professor--is where this biography shines. Friendship with other men played a huge part in Tolkien's life, and Carpenter deftly reveals the importance these relationships--his complex friendship with C.S. Lewis, membership in the Inklings and the T.C.B.S.--had on the development of his writing.

The only criticism one can make about this book is that Carpenter tends to gloss over Tolkien's contributions to comparative philology. True, there is a chapter devoted to Tolkien's academic pursuits, but it tends to skim too lightly over the surface for this reviewer's tastes. Philology is a terribly methodical science, and the author clearly did not want to alienate readers who were primarily interested in Tolkien as a storyteller. Still, it would be nice to understand why Tolkien was held in such high esteem by his fellow academics. As it stands, Tolkien comes off as a slightly eccentric etymologist.

Fans who want to delve even deeper into Tolkien's life should pick up a copy of Carpenter's *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. --P.M. Atterberry

#### From Library Journal

Carpenter's 1977 biography offers a broad look at the Oxford don, who lived a relatively quiet life. This also details his close friendship with C.S. Lewis.

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#### Review

"A panorama of vignettes done with poise and exhaustive command. A man emerges whole." The Washington Post

"J.R.R. Tolkien left his impress upon a whole generation as few recent writers have done ... an excellent biography." Newsweek

"Excellent." Newsweek

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