

What Would Frodo Do?

Faith, War, and the Birth of Modern Fantasy Literature



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G. Willow Wilson

IN A HOLE IN THE GROUND

there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.

These sentences, scribbled on a blank page in an exam booklet one afternoon in the early 1930s, would go on to revolutionize young adult literature and usher in the genre we now call high fantasy. From its humble beginning as the byproduct of the idle mind of an Oxford professor, the hobbit, a previously unknown biped of small stature and great heart, would pass into the common lexicon, becoming a stand-in both for mankind's simplest needs—two breakfasts, a comfortable bed, and, of course, pipeweed—and our most profound aspirations (Fig. 1).

The Hobbit, first published in 1937, was the brainchild of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, who was then serving as the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University in England (Fig. 2).

Tolkien, a veteran of the First World War, fought at the Somme, one of the most brutal battlegrounds of the Western Front, and saw many of his dearest childhood friends cut down by the machines of modern battle that had made their debut in the Great War: tanks, mustard gas, grenades, automated rifles (Fig. 3). Tolkien's combat experience, cut short when he came down with trench fever, would have a profound impact on his writing. "One has indeed personally to come under the shadow of war to feel fully its oppression," he wrote. "By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead."

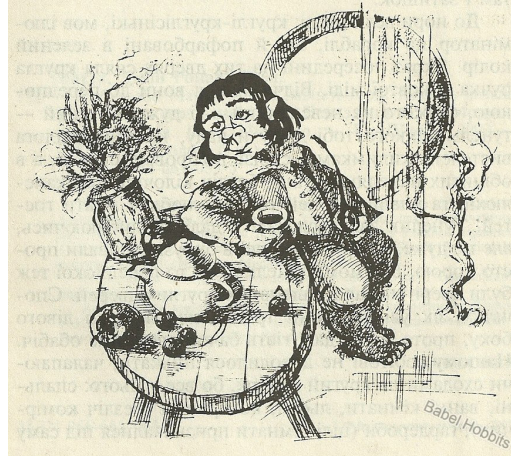


Figure 1
A hobbit.

Image: S. Fesenko.



Figure 2

J.R.R. Tolkien.

Photo: John Wyatt.



Figure 3

Troops of the British XIV Corps advancing near Ginchy, during the Battle of Morval, part of the Somme offensive. Photo: Press Association Archive.

World War I forever altered the social landscape of Europe. The conventions that required unmarried men and women to be chaperoned in each other's company made no sense when female nurses had spent the war bathing the wounds of naked men. Religion, once the cornerstone of respectability, came under question, if not under fire: though there might not be any atheists in foxholes, the brutality and horror of trench warfare caused many post-war thinkers to pose the question, "Where was God?"

Tolkien, a devout Roman Catholic, found himself turning toward ancient mythology. Of particular interest to him were the stories written in Northern Europe during another period of intense turmoil and transition: in this case, from paganism to Christianity, between the fifth and ninth centuries.

One day, during the course of his research, he came across the following couplet in the collection of Old English religious poems called the *Crist of Cynewulf* (Fig. 4):

*Eala Earendel engla beorhtast
ofer middangeard monnum sendeð.*

*Hail Earendel, brightest of angels
above Middle Earth sent unto men.*

Earendel had originally been the name of the evening star—i.e., Venus—but as the Norse and Anglo-Saxon cultures were Christianized, it came to be associated with John the Baptist. Tolkien was transfixed by this couplet. His earliest writings about Middle Earth are prose-poems about a mythical *Earendel*, the evening star, as he crosses the firmament in a great ship. *Earendel*, of course, becomes the elves' most beloved star in the *Lord of the Rings*,

the epic fantasy trilogy of hobbits, elves, dwarves, orcs, Uruk-hai, and men for which Tolkien would become world-famous, narrowly missing a Nobel Prize for literature (Fig. 5). *Earendel*, a star for a world in transition; a light in dark places when all other lights go out.

One of Tolkien's great friends at Oxford was Clive Staples Lewis (Fig. 6), who taught medieval and renaissance literature.

C.S. Lewis, known to his friends as Jack, was also a veteran of the Somme, but, unlike Tolkien, that experience, compounding the deprivations of a somewhat unhappy childhood, caused him to turn away from religion altogether. However, in the course of his extraordinary friendship with Tolkien—the two met in Lewis's rooms twice a week for nearly the entirety

Nū fculon heƿian heofon ƿiceƿ Deað
Meotodeƿ meahƿe and hiƿ moð-geƿanc,
Deoƿe ƿuldor-Feaƿe, ƿƿa he ƿundra geƿƿæƿ,
ðeðe Drihten oƿ onƿtealde
he aƿƿeƿt ƿeoƿ ielda beaƿnum
heofon to hƿoƿe, haliz Scieppeneð;
ƿa middan-geaƿd man-cƿinneƿ Deað,
ðeðe Drihten æƿteƿ teoðe
Fiuƿ ƿoldan Fea eall-mihtiz.

Figure 4
Fragment of the
Christ of Cynewulf.



Figure 5
Scene from *The Fellowship of the Rings*.
Painting: John Howe.

of Lewis's tenure at Oxford—Lewis not only embraced Christianity, but also became one of Britain's most influential interwar apologetics. His radio addresses via the BBC, delivered with a candor and sensitivity somewhat lacking in the ossified Church of England, explored the moral questions raised by two world wars—the problem of pain, the persistence of evil—and were perhaps the most intelligent religious responses to conflict in the entire twentieth century.

Though Lewis had no children of his own, during World War II he and his friends fostered in their country home three children evacuated from London. He told them stories and found himself enchanted by the games they invented to pass the dreary hours, which included playing hide and seek with the household furniture, which may or may not have included a large, elaborately carved wooden wardrobe. The rest is history (Fig. 7).

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, the first book of the Chronicles of Narnia, was published in 1950, and became one of the most widely-read young adult novels of the twentieth century.

At its heart is the messianic talking lion, Aslan, who, in order to save the world of Narnia, is sacrificially slaughtered, magically returning to life three days later, appearing first to two young girls who have returned to his resting place to bathe his body. They find the stone on which he was laid cracked in two. If this story sounds suspiciously similar to that of a certain young carpenter from Galilee, it should. However, the failure of British literary critics to detect the religious allegory in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* gave

Jack an idea: “If there was only someone with a richer talent and more leisure than I,” he wrote to a friend in 1951, “I think this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelization of England; any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.”

With that, modern high fantasy was born. Two men of great religious conviction, at a time of terrible conflict when faith and God were called into question, chose to respond not by turning to scripture, not by brow-beating the faithful and castigating the infidel, but by writing “once upon a time.” They turned not to scripture, but to stories.



Figure 6
C.S. Lewis.
Photo: John Chillingworth/Getty.



Figure 7
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.
Image: Disney/Walden Media.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, a young comic book editor, the American son of Jewish immigrants, was drafted into the U.S. army and given a title bestowed on only eight other people in the history of the U.S. armed forces: playwright. Throughout World War II, as the shadow of Nazism fell over Europe, including his parents' native Romania, he worked in the Signal Corps, writing training manuals, slogans and, yes, comic books. As the extent of the Holocaust became clear—indeed, the Jewish population of Romania was destroyed—this young editor began to conceive an idea for a comic book series. Its focus would be on a group of subtly mutated human beings with hidden superpowers who struggle to survive in the world of ordinary humans. As their powers begin to manifest and it becomes more difficult for them to hide, the political powers-that-be demand that each one be identified, registered, policed, subjected to grotesque medical experimentation, and, yes, even herded into concentration camps. A few fight back. They are known, of course, as the X-Men (Fig. 8).

The young editor's name was Stanley Martin Lieber. We know him as Stan Lee (Fig. 9).

Lee, born in 1922, was following in the footsteps of two other American Jewish comic book writers born a decade earlier, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster (Fig. 10), whose best-known fictional creation was also an extraordinary individual with hidden superpowers.

But this one was the heir to an alien legacy—a world orbiting a far-flung star, whose people have all gone extinct in a terrible catastrophe. He is set adrift in an

escape pod, a kind of interstellar Moses basket, and runs aground in a cornfield on a planet called Earth. He is found by a childless couple who adopt him and give him a human name, and who choose not to reveal his origin to him until he begins to manifest incredible strength, speed



Figure 8
The X-Men.
Image: FOX
Network/Marvel.

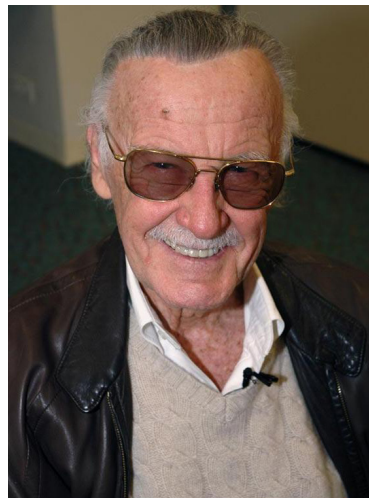


Figure 9
Stan Lee.
Photo: Edward Liu.

and endurance. As it turns out, he can also fly. When his birth father's final message to him, detailing the death of his home planet and his peculiar destiny, is revealed, the young man realizes he must use his powers to help and protect the human beings who sheltered and raised him, even though they may despise him or, worse, worship him as a god, when they discover who he truly is. His real name, his father's message tells him, is Kal El, which, taken together, resembles a Hebrew phrase that can be interpreted as "the voice of God." And so the unassuming young lad—who, as most of you have probably guessed, is named Clark Kent—leaves Smallville for the bustling Metropolis, becomes adept at doing quick-changes in telephone booths, and takes on a new crimefighting name: Superman (Fig. 11).

Three Jewish cartoonists, watching from the other side of the world as half the Jewish population of planet Earth was systematically eliminated, turned to stories. They too said, "once upon a time."

Fast forward to the turn of the 21st century. Several generations around the globe have grown up with the fantastic tales of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, and Stan Lee, along with the legions of fantasy and sci-fi authors they inspired. The age of digital media and dominance of the American film industry mean that people in China and India and Egypt and Brazil can follow the adventures of the X-Men or pick up (and increasingly download) a copy of *The Lord of the Rings*. The term "nerd" is now recognized across a plethora of languages.

Then comes 9/11. Islam is now in the spotlight. In Afghanistan and Iraq, it ushers



Figure 10
Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster.
Photo: Ulvis Alberts.



Figure 11
Superman.
Image: DC Comics.

in a decade of war. Drones circle the skies in Pakistan. Across the Middle East, the decades-long reign of dictators comes crashing down in some of the largest mass mobilizations in modern history, a series of revolutions that come to be known as the Arab Spring. Political Islam is quickly taken up to fill the gap and then violently rejected.

In the midst of this upheaval came a veritable renaissance in literature and pop culture, including a new interest in superheroes. And in the Muslim world, where covering the face has a very particular religious and cultural significance, what could be more appropriate than two burqa-wearing superheroines.

Qahera, which means “the conqueress,” is Cairo’s own Dark Knight, who takes on the epidemic of sexual harassment with ass-kicking vengeance (Fig. 12). Cairo, despite the fact that its public spaces are dominated by men, has always been considered a female city, so it’s only appropriate that her guardian angel, her *genius loci*, be a woman. Prior to the January 25 revolution, it was generally taboo to discuss sexual harassment in a public forum; it was just something you dealt with. But after the revolution, the genie of public expression was out of the bottle, and all of a sudden, the paradoxes and problems of Egyptian daily life were fair game in all forums. And how interesting that the fantasy world of comic books—let’s not forget that the film adaptation of Alan Moore’s dystopian fantasy, *V for Vendetta*, provided the Guy Fawkes mask template that has become ubiquitous in Arab revolutions—has become one of the principal modes of critique.

And in Pakistan, a new cartoon featuring the Burka Avenger, a mild-mannered teacher by day who dons a face-veil to defend her people from extremist fanatics and corrupt strongmen (Fig. 13).

In both *Qahera* and *Burka Avenger*, it’s interesting to note that the veil is used by women as a tool against patriarchy, as well as a way to remain anonymous and yet broadcast one’s power—much like Batman and Spiderman.

And it doesn’t stop at comics. In 2013, for the first time, two of the five nominees for best novel in the Locus Awards, one of the premiere fantasy awards given in the



Figure 12
Qahera. Image:
Deena Mohamed.



Figure 13
Burka Avenger.
Image: Unicorn Black.

United States, were written by Muslim authors. One was my novel, *Alif the Unseen*, about a young hacker in an unnamed Middle Eastern emirate who goes on the run from a shadowy state security apparatus known as the Hand of God, bringing with him the Islamist girl next door, an acerbic genie, and a book of apocryphal folk tales that are either the world's best hoax or a repository of arcane knowledge. The other was a novel called *Throne of the Crescent Moon* by Saladin Ahmed, an Egyptian-American author and native of Detroit (Fig. 14). *Throne* is about a curmudgeonly retired demon-hunter in a fantasy city called Dhamsawaat that bears much more in common with medieval Arabia than it does with the more classical medieval Europe of standard fantasy fare. And it won. And because Saladin is a buddy of mine and has some very interesting thoughts on the intersection of fantasy and religion, I asked him to weigh in on the subject just for you:

I'm Saladin Ahmed, author of the Locus Award-winning and Hugo Award nominated novel, *Throne of the Crescent Moon*. That book is a fantasy novel with a quasi Islamic influence. That means that in today's culture, and especially in the United States, it's instantly going to be a novel embroiled in conflict.

Even being a fairly innocuous sword-and-sorcery book, taking Islam as your primary influence, and taking the Arab world as your primary cultural influence, is a kind of act of confrontation or conflict. It's absolutely in the forefront as I write.

My characters, because they are quasi-Muslims as opposed to quasi-

Christians—or, as is popular in fantasy today, quasi-secularists—will have a different approach to conflict. They have different priorities. They solve problems in different ways, and they conceive of their problems in different ways.

I think that a more diverse kind of fantasy in the real world, in the way it interacts with the rest of the genre, will offer some alternatives for questions of conflict in religion. I think that also within our fantasy, if we're being true to the cultural influences, we'll see some alternatives posed even as our characters solve conflicts. I hope very much that I'm helping to make that happen.

From the turmoil in the Muslim world, questions are being asked that would have been very familiar to Tolkien and Lewis and also to the creators of the Golden Age of comics: in the face of great adversity, both from without and from within, what does it mean to have faith? When the institutions of society fail us, where do we turn for moral guidance?

And how interesting that, faced with these questions, there seems to be a universal instinct to begin with “once upon a time.” To create a world in which, against



Figure 14
Saladin Ahmed.

tremendous odds, the good guys always win. Tolkien called it “eucatastrophe.” Catastrophe is the sudden overturning from good to bad. Eucatastrophe, therefore, is the sudden overturning from bad to good. It’s the moment when the ring of power finally slips from Golem’s finger, plunging into the fires of Mount Doom, or the moment when Aslan miraculously returns from the dead. All fantasy novels, and you can take this to the bank, have, if not happy endings, then hopeful endings. Even *Game of Thrones*, the most notoriously cynical, ruthless high fantasy series of the past 25 years, is primarily about hope: winter is coming, but it’s okay because Tyrion and Danaerys will fix it. I guarantee, and may George R.R. Martin strike me dead if I lie, that even if the series ends in a hail of dragon fire, one character will crawl out of the mess and survive. And it ain’t gonna be Littlefinger. Fantasy is about macrocosmic hope. The world can change, even cataclysmically, but it will not die out.

Tolkien knew this. One of his great academic loves was the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, about a great Scandinavian warrior who is called to the aid of old king Hroðgar, whose mead hall is under attack by a fearsome monster named Grendel. Before Tolkien’s extensive scholarship on the *Beowulf* legend became part of the academic canon, *Beowulf* was largely seen as unimportant by historians because it fails to address the tribal politics and concerns of eighth-century Scandinavia. So, in the eyes of early twentieth-century historians and literary scholars, it was uninteresting, because it tells us so little about the society in which it takes place. It was a fairy-tale. Tolkien was the first scholar to mount

a serious argument that *Beowulf* was actually far more sophisticated than that. He argued that *Beowulf* deals with human destiny. That it was, in fact, an attempt at universalism. And, because it deals with human destiny, the monsters are essential. We may not be able to imagine the intricacies of dynastic squabbling in dark-age Scandinavia, but we all know Grendel (Fig. 15).

We’ve seen him in our dreams.

Beowulf was also written at a time of war and religious upheaval. The worship of the old gods was fading, slowly replaced by Christianity. A new Islamic empire was emerging in the east. The legends of King Arthur are set in the British Isles at a time when the invading Saxons were at war with the last fragments of the Roman Empire.

Why?

Fantasy writers both ancient and modern tend to step in when institutional religion



Figure 15
Grendel. Illustration:
Albert Nguyen.

begins to break down. Sometimes that breakdown is catastrophic—when a set of beliefs and a way of life are being wiped out through war or natural disaster—but often it’s more subtle. Institutionalized belief, once it reaches a certain critical mass of wealth, power and influence, tends to develop deep hypocrisies. The men—and it is inevitably men—who control that belief set become more concerned with the preservation of their own power than with the greater good. You see this during the Inquisition. You see this in the modern state of Saudi Arabia, in which the ruling family is propped up by a coven of corrupt clerics. And there was the Catholic Church’s tacit support of the Third Reich, something that had a deep impact on Tolkien.

There is a point, it seems, in the moral arc of every great religion when its ethical trajectory begins to reverse course. And it is those times when we tend to turn to storytellers to remind us of our core beliefs, to reteach us how to be good, because institutional religion has failed to do so. The great Muslim poet Hafez once said that religion is like a great ship permanently at sea. At least once in his or her lifetime, every person jumps off. And the poets are the ones waiting in the water below, with lifeboats.

Fantasy is a lifeboat. It serves to remind us of human goodness in the midst of terrible hardship and terrible hypocrisy. Even when half the Jewish population of Europe was starved and slaughtered and the great men of religion had turned their backs, by God, there were people left who would walk out of those camps and survive. Even when the elves wuss out, and Boromir is seduced by the power of the ring, and Gandalf falls into shadow battling the bal-

rog and Merry and Pippin are captured by Uruk-hai—by God, Frodo and Sam are walking to Mount Doom. It is at the moment when all hope fades that Isildur, son of the king, picks up his father’s sword. Or, as Bulvi, the main character in Michael Crichton’s fantasy adaptation of *Beowulf* says, “Luck, often enough, will save a man, if his courage holds.”

Despite the fact that fantasy is so often a moral stand-in for religion, the best fantasy is not made to broadcast the religious beliefs of its author or as an evangelical tool (C.S. Lewis was an exception). Its purpose is to communicate an ethical message within a good story. Therefore, there is typically no religion in the stories themselves. The inhabitants of Middle Earth do not worship a god or many gods or no gods; neither do the inhabitants of Narnia, though there are false prophets of sorts who pop up in the later Narnia books. There are multiple religions in George R.R. Martin’s *Song of Ice and Fire* (better known as *Game of Thrones*), but they serve as tools to build the world and move the plot along; Martin does not take sides. When *The Lord of the Rings* was first published, and Tolkien was asked whether it was meant to be allegorical—whether Frodo was Jesus or the armies of Sauron and Saruman represented the Third Reich—he said he preferred the term “applicable” to “allegorical.” An allegory is one story dressed up as another. But a story that is applicable extracts the particular truth of the original story in a way that—if done well—will be relevant to whoever reads it. Tolkien was not interested in gaining new followers for the Catholic Church, just as Stan Lee and Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were undoubtedly

not interested in attracting Jewish converts. Rather, they were operating under the premise that, if a belief system is worth anything, it should have an ethical message that is of some value to all people.

In the case of Superman, that message was summarized as “Truth, justice, and tolerance,” though, in the McCarthy era, tolerance was dropped and replaced by “the American way.” In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien’s moral point was perhaps best expressed by the hobbit Samwise Gamgee, who said, “There’s some good left in the world, Mr. Frodo, and it’s worth fighting for.”

Now, in recent years there has been some pushback against the idea that fantasy literature and religion are intimately connected. Most famously, Phillip Pullman’s young adult trilogy *His Dark Materials*, about a young girl named Lyra who battles an ominous, church-like order called the Magisterium. Pullman’s books function in part as a condemnation of religious institutions, but his primary critique is that those organizations that claim to edify the soul end up crushing the spirit. This observation is not at all out of step with prior works of epic fantasy or the opinions of their authors; indeed, it’s a restatement of the lifeboat argument. I don’t think any thoughtful practitioner of religion could disagree with Pullman’s premise, especially since a fantasy author—for that precise reason—steps in where religion fails. Tolkien and Lewis argue that we still need religion; Pullman argues, rather, that we can do without it.

We think of the great monotheistic religions as different. And they are. They are united not only by belief in a single god, but also by a set of ethical impulses that

can best be summarized by the Golden Rule: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This is expressed by the prophet Muhammad as, “Your faith is not complete until you want for your brother what you want for yourself.” Fantasy writers step in when religious institutions fall short of that ideal.

We are entering a time which now feels slightly apocalyptic. We have climate change. We have wars around the globe. And while many things are improving for people around the world, whenever you turn on the news, you are confronted with some new tragedy in which we have reversed that ethical imperative. Instead of wanting for our brothers what we want for ourselves, we treat them as our enemies. I think it’s particularly appropriate to address this subject now, at a time when we need those stories to remind us that the goodness remains: there is a light in the darkness when all other lights go out. ✧

G. Willow Wilson began her writing career at the age of 17, when she freelanced as a music and DJ critic for Boston’s *Weekly Dig* magazine. Since then, she’s written the Eisner Award-nominated comic book series *Air* and *Mystic: The Tenth Apprentice*, and the graphic novel *Cairo*. Her first novel, *Alif the Unseen*, was a New York Times Notable book and winner of the 2013 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel. She currently writes the bestselling monthly comic book series *Ms. Marvel* for Marvel Comics.

Willow spent her early and mid-twenties living in Egypt and working as a journalist. Her articles about the Middle East and modern Islam have appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Canada National Post*. Her memoir about life in Egypt during the waning years of the Mubarak regime, *The Butterfly Mosque*, was named a Seattle Times Best Book of 2010.

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