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Approaches to Teaching Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Other Works (2015) edited by Leslie A. Donovan

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Approaches to Teaching Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" and Other Works, edited by Leslie A. Donovan. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2015. xiv, 279 pp. \$40.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781603292054; \$24.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781603292061. [Also available in ebook formats.]

This collection is part of the Modern Language Association's (MLA) *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series whose principal objective is to create "a sourcebook of material, information, and ideas" in order to present "different points of view on teaching a literary subject . . . or a writer widely taught to undergraduates" (MLA.org). The inclusion of J.R.R. Tolkien in the series, the first (and so far only) modern fantasy author to be covered, signals his increasing acceptance in the Western literary canon. As with each book in the series, *Approaches to Teaching Tolkien* is divided into two parts, "Materials" and "Approaches."

"Part One: Materials" is an extended bibliographic essay by volume editor Leslie A. Donovan, professor in the Honors College at the University of New Mexico. The essay compiles and describes key primary sources for the study of Tolkien's works as selected through a survey of Tolkien instructors. According to the MLA, this section "presents a guide to the most helpful available materials related to the subject of the volume (e.g., preferred editions and translations; essential reference works, critical studies, and background materials; and useful teaching resources)." As with any survey of this kind, there will be broad agreement on many of the selected sources, like Humphrey Carpenter's biography (1977), Tom Shippey's *Author of the Century* (2002) and *The Road to Middle-earth* (rev. ed. 2003), and Verlyn Flieger's *Splintered Light* (rev. ed. 2002), though individual readers may find a few of their personal favorites missing. (For me, that includes Flieger's *Interrupted Music*, 2005, and Dimitra Fimi's *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History*, 2008). Most important critical texts, however, are mentioned at some point in the essays of Part Two. Furthermore, the MLA's long publication process also means that the most recent of Tolkien's writings are not covered. The latest mentioned here are *The Fall of Arthur* (2013) and *Beowulf* (2014). *Journal of Tolkien Research*, which began publication in 2014, also came too late to be included. Nevertheless, it's a solid, concise essay which will serve as a helpful introduction on standard sources for beginning Tolkien researchers.

"Part Two: Approaches" includes a brief introduction by Donovan and twenty-nine short essays (the average length is seven pages), grouped into six sections, describing a variety of critical approaches to teaching Tolkien in English and other tertiary-level subjects. The MLA stipulates that series volumes should strive to represent both innovative and traditional approaches, a broad range of philosophies, methodologies, and critical orientations, various types of schools (two-year colleges, four-year colleges, universities), students (e.g., non-majors,

majors, traditional, nontraditional), and courses (survey courses, specialized upper-division courses, etc.). Donovan has done a good job addressing most of these several criteria, including contributions from educators in Canada and Wales, however two-year colleges are not represented. The essays themselves describe various curricula, assignments, classroom and student engagement techniques that readers can adapt to their own classrooms. The contributors represent a veritable who's-who of Tolkien scholarship.

The first two sections of Part Two focus on Tolkien's writings primarily in literature courses. The first section, "Teaching the Controversies," includes two essays, by Craig Franson and James McNelis, introducing Tolkien through critical reviews (both positive and negative) and Tolkien's own non-fiction writings. The second section, "Tolkien's Other Works as Background," is composed of four essays. Verlyn Flieger's "Eucatastrophe and the Battle with the Dark" effectively demonstrates the use of Tolkien's most famous critical essays, "On Fairy-stories" and "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" as "the gateways into *The Lord of the Rings* and the keys to its power" (50). With specific classroom activities and even model exam essay questions, Flieger has created an easy-to-follow and engaging guide for a stand-alone course on *The Lord of the Rings*. Jane Chance employs *The Silmarillion* to underpin the better-known *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. Brian Walter thoughtfully incorporates *The Hobbit* into a children's literature course, while Yvette Kisor offers some extremely valuable charts relating sections of *The History of Middle-earth* with parts of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* in order to elucidate Tolkien's creative process.

The middle two sections focus on Tolkien's place in relation to past and present literary contexts. In the third section, "Connections to the Past," five essays explore Tolkien's ancient and medieval influences. Historian Robin Chapman Stacey describes activities for student inquiry into Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and Latin sources. Leslie Stratyner investigates the oral tradition, while Liam Felsen, Melissa Ridley Elmes, and Philip Irving Mitchell consider Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon, epic, and pastoral influences, respectively. Conversely, the six essays in section four, "Modern and Contemporary Perspectives," consider Tolkien in relation to a variety of more recent literary contexts. Christopher Cobb explores Tolkien in the fantasy tradition of William Morris and Lord Dunsany. Both Cobb and Sharin Schroeder also engage with modernist texts such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Thomas L. Martin employs Tolkien's word creation, literary analogs, and artifacts to engage students more familiar with contemporary pop-culture than with twentieth century history. Dimitra Fimi, Shelley Rees and Deidre Dawson offer classroom strategies for analyzing the popular (and sometimes thorny) issues of Tolkien's views on, and representations of, ethnicity, gender, language, and culture.

The final two sections deal with non-traditional settings and approaches. The fifth section is composed of four essays which take Tolkien out of the traditional literature classroom and place him in a variety of “Interdisciplinary Contexts.” Christopher Crane uses the Peter Jackson films, which today are often a student’s only previous exposure to Tolkien, as a portal back into *The Lord of the Rings* books. Nancy Enright, associate professor of English and Catholic studies, explores the writings of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis through the context of faith and religion. Astronomer Kristine Larsen infuses her science courses for non-science majors with “bits and pieces of Tolkien’s legendarium to spice up units” in astronomy, natural resource conservation, earthquakes and volcanoes, the origins of life, genetic engineering, and the Atlantis myth (179). Justin Edward Everett pairs the writings of Darwin with the writings of Tolkien to stimulate critical thinking on scientific ethics, environmental sustainability, and stewardship for a freshmen science-themed course in argumentative writing. And just as every Tolkien course is not a literature course, every classroom is not a traditional lecture hall. In the sixth and final section, “Classroom Contexts and Strategies for Teaching,” eight essays discuss teaching Tolkien in special situations. Anna Smol approaches the first-year survey of literature course, while Julia Simms Holderness team-teaches Tolkien in the large lecture class. Three essays incorporate Tolkien studies into learning communities, “two or more courses in different disciplines . . . organized around a common theme” (207). James R. Vitullo and Keith W. Jensen focus on Tolkien’s mythmaking efforts in undergraduate survey courses on fiction and classical mythology; Judy Ann Ford and Robin Anne Reid use Tolkien to examine history, popular culture, and gender studies in their online graduate-level course; James Gould and Ted Hazelgrove employ *The Lord of the Rings* in teaching English composition and philosophical ethics. The final three essays tackle a variety of teaching challenges. Cami D. Agan shows teachers, incredibly, how to cover *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and a large portion of *The Silmarillion* in a three-week intensive summer literature course. Michael D. C. Drout gives easy-to-replicate strategies for teaching “the hard parts of Tolkien” (i.e. “The Council of Elrond” and the poems from *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as *The Silmarillion*). And finally, Michael Tomko has the very clever idea of teaching the Inklings by grouping his students into Inklingsesque small discussion groups he calls “pub groups.”

Teachers of anything Tolkien will definitely want to pick up this volume for its stimulating discussions on exploring Tolkien’s works through a wide variety of critical lenses in a variety of college and university settings. Each essay includes helpful pedagogical discussions, while the better ones don’t just talk about pedagogy, they *show* readers specific classroom activities and assignments. Still, the essays, centered as they are on pedagogical issues, and using specialist pedagogical terminology, may not be accessible to, or garner the interest of, every

Tolkien scholar or student. Even instructors would likely not read this book cover to cover, but rather dip in and out like hummingbirds, taking just the needed sustenance then flitting on. And yet, there is something intriguing here even for non-instructors. There is an old saying that if you want to learn a subject really well, you should teach it to someone else, and in reading about teaching Tolkien to others, new perspectives on his writings are revealed. Those who enjoy viewing Tolkien anew may indeed consider adding this volume to their libraries, even if they never plan on standing behind an instructor's podium.

The collection and sharing of strategies for teaching Tolkien has become something of a mission for Donovan. Following her work on this book, she launched a digital, non-profit, open-access resource repository, *Waymeet for Tolkien Teachers* (waymeet.mla.hcommons.org). This site, part of the MLA network on the *Humanities Commons*, contains published course syllabi, class materials (e.g. formal and informal assignments, class exercises, and handouts), online resources, pedagogical articles, publications, and a discussion forum. I myself have contributed bibliographies of online Tolkien resources, and downloaded syllabi to aid in the development of a Tolkien course for a community college Honors program. *Waymeet* is a very promising site for the sharing of information on teaching Tolkien, particularly as it grows even more robust. The site also serves as a living extension of Donovan's book. MLA's mandate for their *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series—to serve specialists and non-specialists, undergraduates, graduate students and professors—sets a high bar, but Donovan easily sails over it with this fine and soon-to-be classic text on approaches to teaching Tolkien in tertiary settings.

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Correction: The reviewer mistakenly commented that two-year colleges were not represented in the collection, however, both McHenry County College in Crystal Lake, Illinois, and William Rainey Harper College are two-year colleges.