

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

He wanted his work to be taken seriously – on his own terms. But John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was such an outlier in the world of academia in mid 20th century England.

MD: There was a lot of nasty snide Oxford gossip going on for a long time, oh he's a genius but he went off the rails and started writing these crazed epics.

This is Michael Drout. He teaches the works of Tolkien at Wheaton College.

MD: Tolkien had one of the plumb jobs at Oxford, he's the Rollins and Bosworth professor of Anglo Saxon, it meant that he had give a number of lectures but he had a much lower workload on the understanding that he's going to produce amazing scholarship like he did at beginning of his career. And he produced very little and what he produced was weird.

Laughs. Why?

MD: Well for example he sends off to essays and studies battle on Malden but it's a play in blank verse but turns out to be influential but what was editor thinking? A play?

And that was hardly the weirdest thing Professor Tolkien had written. In 1937, he put out a fantasy novel called The Hobbit. His colleagues were okay with that. You can't blame the man for wanting to make extra money on the side. But Tolkien become obsessed, even lost in this imaginary world he had created.

MD: For 17 years he kept telling his publisher I'm working on this sequel to Hobbit and it's really funny to read this stuff in 1939 where he says, I think I'll be done by Christmas. And he finished it 16 years later.

Tolkien was on a mission. He felt that fantasy had a role to play in modern life – that fantasy can give people a sense of comfort, and meaning when the world feels chaotic.

The writer Ethan Gilsdorf says those ideas came from Tolkien's life.

EG: Tolkien himself lived through WWI, he was a survivor of WWI, all of his high school and college buddies died and the Battle of the Somme and other places in Continental Europe. I think he was haunted by all that loss, and he lost both of his

parents, he was orphaned quite young and they have had something to do with his own tendency to fantasize about this other world, this other place.

When this magnum opus finally came out in 1954, The Lord of the Rings was so massive; it had to be split into three separate novels.

Many people were confused. The Hobbit was seen as a children's book. But this was supposed to be serious-minded literature for adults?

MD: They published 3,000 copies of The Fellowship and 3,000 copies of The Two Towers and only 2500 copies of Return of the King, because their interest will have worn off by then which is kind of crazy, first start of great word of mouth campaign about LOTR people went to libraries to get Return of the King and it wasn't there, or there was only one copy, and people camped out, there are charming stories by British writers who grew up in the '50s saying I read first two over weekend at library door Monday morning and only copy checked out.

Tolkien's friends like CS Lewis helped with the PR, hailing The Lord of the Rings as a work of genius. But many critics were far from sold. In the 1950s, great literature was supposed to be modernist – grappling with the major issues of the day. The Lord of the Rings was retro, if not reactionary.

Tolkien was annoyed. These so-called scholars who thumb their noses at him – he knew their work would be forgotten. The Lord of the Rings will be understood and appreciated on his terms -- someday.

But very soon, a movement of people would gather to hail him as a genius, and declare that the Lord of the Rings to be THE great literature of its time. And these people would push this cult classic into the mainstream. The problem is that these were not the kind of people he had in mind. They were longhaired, pot-smoking, rock n' roll-loving hippies.

That's just after the break.

>> BREAK

Gary Lachman is the author of "Turn Off Your Mind: The Mystic Sixties and the Dark Side of Aquarius." Also, he was the bassist for the group Blondie – which is so cool. But back in the 1960s, Gary was a kid growing up in

New York City. The first time he came across Lord of the Rings, he was reading Marvel Comics.

GL: At the time they were very hip, very contemporary their heroes were set in NY, they weren't set in imaginary cities like Metropolis or Gotham, and so things that were happening at the time would turn up in the comics and there would be these signs saying Frodo Lives and I had no idea what that was.

He soon found out that hippies were going to protests with "Frodo Lives!" buttons. They were driving around in vans plastered with "Gandalf for President" bumper stickers.

How on Middle Earth did this happen?

It started with a guy named Don Wollheim.

In the early '60s, he was running a publishing company called Ace Books, which put out cheap paperbacks. He mostly focused on sci-fi, but he was excited about the Lord of the Rings, and wanted to publish it in the U.S.

There was only one problem. He didn't own the rights. Michael Drout:

MD: At the time the copyright law was such you could print in US paperback edition of books published in England overseas and pay no royalties at all and Ace paperbacks were like hey we'll just print it!

They spread like wildfire across college campuses. It helped that the covers they chose looked like comic books.

Tolkien hears about these bootleg paperbacks, which were full of misprints. And he was losing money. His publisher told him the only way to stop them was to put out a new edition of The Lord of the Rings in the U.S. with minor changes to the story.

GL: But he hemmed and hawed, and took his time and took forever and did all this stuff besides what he needed to and a really long time went by before he finally did what was necessary by that time, but by that time, the Ace edition had sold over 100,000 copies.

So that's how Lord of the Rings became a hot commodity on college campuses. The trickier question is why.

Gary Lachman thinks Tolkien's ideas were falling on fertile ground because the newly emerging counter-culture was interested in all things mystical. And that started with the publication of a book called *The Morning of the Magicians*.

GL: Out of the blue it had become best seller in France and English edition, and it's a real hodge podge of book, and a great deal of it is inaccurate but it was the first book to throw together assortment of strange things, this interest in occult, UFO, alchemy and a variety of X-Files sort of things, and this caught a whole new spirit as if everything was in black and white and now it was in Technicolor.

The Lord of the Rings fit into that mystical groove.

GL Tolkien's world sort opened up this early New Age kind of universe, in a sense of the sacredness of the Earth, the sacredness of the Shire.

There was another popular theory, which Tolkien was asked about on TV.

INTERVIEWER: There is a temptation to read the an allegory to the H-bomb, that what is said is that the one ring is a power so enormous that even if a good man were to use it against a bad it would corrupt the good man.

TOLKIEN: But that is a thing other people have arrived at long before the H-Bomb was invented. Also may I say, I began beguiling these stories when I was an undergraduate, they were already under advanced stage during the first war, the H-Bomb hadn't been heard of.

I found an article from 1968 called "The Hobbit and the Hippie," in Modern Age magazine. The authors were at their wits end trying to explain Tolkienmania. As they saw it, The Lord of the Rings should have been seen as a conservative tale about good fighting evil. Frodo doesn't tell Gandalf to buzz off because he doesn't trust anyone over the age 30. Aragorn doesn't declare that he's conscientious objector and refuses to fight the Orcs. In the end, the authors conclude, "The hippies, in their bizarre search for values in the modern world, have enthusiastically taken up a book with a view of the universe and a creature's place in it which is distinctly opposed to prevailing philosophies."

But Michael Drout disagrees.

MD: I mean on the one hand you can say what people do now celebrates war, great heroes were heroes but on the other you could say what the counter culture people who opposed the Vietnam War say celebrate bucolic life of Hobbits good guys not warriors and killers but just want peace, safety, kindness, there's environmental ethic that's way ahead of its time, and the one thing that really appealed to counter culture, the bad guys were those who eliminated individuality. They were those who crushed the individual, they wore uniforms, they all looked the same they followed orders whereas some of the good guys are like that in Gondor, most of the good guys in LOTR are not big on following orders at all.

Well also the idea of the fellowship that we're stronger together, not just the Western style of rugged individualism.

MD: Yes I would agree except the difference is that is all voluntary. Even when Elron does official charge to fellowship only the ring bearer has a charge on him, take ring to Modor everyone else voluntary companion you can leave, stay. And in the fellowship everyone has different skill and contribute each to his ability, I mean if that doesn't describe a hippie commune, I don't know what is.

And the Hobbits like to sit around smoke a lot of pipe-weed.

Michael says another reason why the hippies felt kinship with Tolkien – they were both equally disenchanted with modern life – especially commercialism and materialism.

MD: Tolkien he liked a few pieces of modernity, you know like electric lights, running water, but on the other hand he had been young enough and poor enough to know you didn't actually need a lot those things. And Tolkien at beginning had bought car and family story is he just crashed into stuff all the time, multiple stories Tolkien ran over a fruit stand or something because he wasn't paying attend and the rest of his life used his bicycle from his house to Oxford and stuff so he lived that semi pre modern life, that 1880s to 1910 or so life and I think that appealed, I mean again the hippies didn't – well some of them lived in tents they didn't reject electric light and running water but all the other stuff.

Tolkien didn't have an issue with the politics the counter-culture in terms of Vietnam or Civil Rights. The problem is that Tolkien was a strict Roman Catholic. One of the reasons why he and CS Lewis had a falling out was because Lewis married a divorcee -- an American divorcee at that.

GL: You know he's, he's very persnickety.

Gary Lachman.

GL: He was very fussy and fastidious, and the idea that these this long haired marijuana smoking hippies were basically funding a very comfortable retirement for him was in a way ironic.

Ethan Gilsdorf.

EG: He called his fans – in probably not a charitable moment -- he said my deplorable cultists, he says many young American are involved in the stories in a way that I'm not.

MD: I mean stories about people calling his house in 3 in the morning didn't understand the time change, wanted advice, I think he was flattered and frustrated by the volume like fan art people would send to his house, or fan fiction, it was I wish these people would stop annoying me.

His characters were ending up in rock songs. The first time I heard about Lord of the Rings, I was a kid listening to Led Zeppelin, wondering who this Gollum was.

MD: Who stole a girl from me in the darkest depths of Mordor – I mean like worst use of LOTR imagery ever! I love that song too.

The Beatles even tried to make a Lord of the Rings movie with John as Gollum, Paul as Frodo, Ringo as Sam and George as Gandalf. Tolkien himself stopped the project.

MD: He didn't put a stop to it because Beatles, he put stop to script, somebody had written a script and it drove Tolkien up a tree, he's reading it, hop on Eagle get somewhere, ruins whole plot, why not fly to Mount Doom the first day and we're done?

That would've been amazing.

JOHN: That's my precious.

RINGO: He wants the ring, Mr. Frodo.

PAUL: Well, he can't have it.

GEORGE: Hey, lads! Why don't we jump on a giant eagle and fly to Mount Doom?

Normally, we think of Star Trek as the beginning of modern fandom, but it really started here. Today we can put this behavior into context. But from Tolkien's perspective, the counter-culture was creating a cult around his work.

But I think what bothered Tolkien the most was that the hippies were derailing his larger goal – for the Lord of the Rings to be seen as serious literature.

MD: There's no question that even all of my struggles to be able to teach LOTR, teach Tolkien, to do scholarship on Tolkien the people in the way the academics who come of age in the '60s, they had no respect for it, its childish, poorly written, retrograde, why are you wasting your time? Students can't learn anything from that and so forth. Those people are retired or dead, so it doesn't matter. And in fact, the funny thing, I was on a dissertation committee he was a real hard core medievalist but he was presenting himself as Tolkienist so he could get a job. And I had to do the opposite.

Today's college students grew up on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings films --- which probably wouldn't have happened without the grass roots Tolkienmania of the '60s and '70s. And there's another parallel. The movies also came out during a time of profound uncertainty. I remember in the months September 11th, seeing newspaper ads for The Fellowship of the Rings with a picture of Frodo and Gandalf under a quote that I thought long and hard about.

Frodo: I wish it need not have happened in my time

Gandalf: So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

Gary Lachman says Tolkien was proven right again, long after his death. When our world feels chaotic or scary, we need fantasy to give us a sense of meaning and purpose.

GL: It not only serves a therapeutic function, in the way that it heals wounds, or it helps deal with uncertainty in a Jungian sense embodies archetypes that are there and we need recognizable containers for the psychological even perhaps the spiritual.

And that's why I'm kicking off season 3 of Imaginary Worlds with a six-part series on magic and fantasy.

This week's episode featured original music by Phantom Fauna. Special thanks to Ethan Gilsdorf, Gary Lachman, Michael Drout and Lloyd Floyd as The Beatles.

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