J. R. R. Tolkien

***Biographical Sketch***

J. R. R. Tolkien was a professor at England's Oxford University and a respected scholar of medieval literature. But he is best known as the author of the fantasy novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born on January 3, 1892, in Bloemfontein, South Africa. At the age of three he moved with his mother to Sarehole, a village outside Birmingham, England. It was there that Tolkien developed the deep love for English country life that is reflected in his stories.

Tolkien had a skill for languages; he even made up his own private words and alphabet in a language he called Naffarin. While a student at King Edward's School in Birmingham, he excelled in Latin, Greek, German, and Middle English. His skill with words earned him a scholarship to Oxford. There he majored in philology, the study of language. He studied the great medieval literatures that would provide the background for his own writings, in which he created a world with its own languages.

Tolkien graduated in June, 1915. As World War I had begun, he enlisted in the army. Before going to France as a signal officer, he married his childhood sweetheart, Edith Bratt. During the war, Tolkien contracted trench fever. He remained ill for nearly a year. During that time he began *The Book of Lost Tales* (later renamed *The Silmarillion*). After the war, Tolkien returned to Oxford, becoming professor of Anglo-Saxon in 1925.

Tolkien was outwardly a popular lecturer and scholar. He also had an inner life filled with fanciful stories. Borrowing material from the unfinished manuscript of The Silmarillion, he began telling his children tales about a funny little creature named Bilbo Baggins. Baggins found a magic ring that made its wearer invisible. These stories became *The Hobbit* (1937). Later he invented the evil Sauron. Sauron's efforts to obtain the ring are dramatically told in three novels, together called *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55). The three are *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*.

Tolkien retired from Oxford in 1959, devoting his last years to work on The Silmarillion. He was unable to finish that task before his death on September 2, 1973. The novel was edited by his son Christopher. It was published in 1977 as the final offering of one of the most beloved and widely read authors in the world.

— biography from *The New Book of Knowledge*

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***Interesting Facts About J. R. R. Tolkien***

1. Three of the first languages that Tolkien worked on as a child were Animalic (he explored this one with friends, and did not actually invent it himself), Nevbosh (meaning “new nonsense,” Tolkien helped to construct it and enjoyed conversing with his friends in it), and Naffarin (the first language he worked on alone at age eight or nine.

2. By 1904, Tolkien and his brother were orphans. His father (Arthur) died of rheumatic fever in February of 1896. Mabel, their mother, died of complications from diabetes on 14 November 1904.

3. . Tolkien met Edith Bratt about four years after his mother died. They lived in the same lodging house. She was three years older than Tolkien, but they gradually fell in love. Actually, Tolkien adored her. Unfortunately, his guardian felt that she was distracting him from his studies, and that at eighteen he was too young to marry. Tolkien agreed to not see her for three years, and she moved away to stay with friends. At midnight on the day he turned twenty-one Tolkien wrote to Edith asking when he could see her again. When he learned that she had become engaged to marry another man he boarded a train and went to convince her to marry him instead. Needless to say, he was successful.

4. At one point during his first semester at Oxford, Tolkien stole a city bus as a prank, and took his friends on a joyride.

5. Tolkien fought in World War I and lost all but one of his childhood friends there.

6. In 1918, Tolkien was hired to work on what was to become the Oxford English Dictionary. Started in 1879, by the time Tolkien joined the team they had finally reached the “W”s.

7. Tolkien earned a professorship at Oxford in 1925. (Very few of the faculty actually had a “professorship” at that time. A high honor indeed.)

8. Tolkien’s four children were the ultimate inspiration for his fiction writing. Can you imagine the sorts of bedtime stories that they got to hear?

9. Tolkien was a big fan of clubs. Two of the clubs he was a member of at Oxford were the “Coalbiters” and “The Inklings.” C.S. Lewis was one of the members of The Inklings.

10. Rayner Unwin, age ten at the time, is the one who judged The Hobbit worthy of publishing. He was paid a shilling for his review. (For the record, his father, Sir Stanley Unwin, was the director of publisher George Allen & Unwin at that point.)

11. When Tolkien’s son Michael entered the army he listed his father’s profession on his paperwork as “Wizard.” It would seem that Michael really understood his father.

12. Before the German publishing house Rutten & Loeing Verlag released The Hobbit in Nazi Germany, they asked Tolkien if he was of Aryan origin. In a letter to his British publisher, Stanley Unwin, he asserted that Nazism was “wholly pernicious and unscientific.” He also said that he had many Jewish friends and was considering “letting a German translation go hang.” He provided two letters for Rutten & Loeing Verlag, and told his publisher to send whichever one he preferred. The first was a more “tactful” letter, and simply stated that he was. In the other more honest letter however, Tolkien writes; “If I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people.” Naturally and unfortunately, the first one was sent.

13. As a linguist and expert on Old English and Old Norse literature, Tolkien was a tenured professor at Oxford University from 1925 until 1959. He was also a tireless instructor, teaching between 70 and 136 lectures a year (his contract only called for 36). But the best part is the way he taught those classes. Although quiet and unassuming in public, Tolkien wasn't the typical stodgy, reserved stereotype of an Oxford don in the classroom. He was known to begin classes by barging into the lecture hall, sometimes in era-appropriate chain mail armor, and bellowing the opening lines of Beowulf at the top of his lungs. As one of his students put it, "He could turn a lecture room into a mead hall."

14. Tolkien saw himself as a scholar first and a writer second. It always irked him that his scholarly works went largely unknown by the general public, who flocked to his fantasy writings. *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were largely Tolkien's attempt to construct a body of myth, and their success caught him largely unaware. In fact, he spent years rejecting, criticizing and shredding adaptations of his work that he didn't believe captured its epic scope and noble purpose! He was also utterly skeptical of most *LOTR* fans, who he thought incapable of really appreciating the work, and he probably would have been horrified by movie fandom dressing up like Legolas.

15. A philologist by trade, Tolkien kept his mind exercised by inventing new languages, many of which (like the Elvish languages Quenya and Sindarin) he used extensively in his writing. He even wrote songs and poems in his fictional languages. In addition, Tolkien worked to reconstruct and write in extinct languages like Medieval Welsh and Lombardic. His poem "BagmÄ“ BlomÄ" ("Flower of the Trees") might be the first original work written in the Gothic language in over a millennium.

16. After he wrote *The Hobbit* in 1937, it wasn't until the mid 1950s when the first volume "The Fellowship of the Ring" was actually published. When all was said and done, the book was over 1200 pages that he typed himself! It is said that when he needed a copy of the manuscript, he didn't have the resources to make one, so he retyped the whole thing himself. The craziest thing is that he wasn't a particularly adept typer, so he pecked his way through the 1200 using only two fingers!

17. J.R.R Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings” is often erroneously called a trilogy when it is actually one book often published in three volumes! The Lord of the Rings is a single novel with six books and appendices. It is sometimes published in 3 volumes and people erroneously call it a trilogy. The reason for this was that paper was scarce and expensive at the time, so the publisher decided that it would be better to publish it in 3 volumes, so that they could recoup the cost of paper. The first volume, “The Fellowship of the Ring” was first published in Great Britain in July 1954 and in the U.S. in October 1954. The publication of the first volume began a problem that Tolkien continued facing with each volume published. The editors made many well-intentioned corrections that actually ruined what Tolkien had tried to write. Instead of Tolkien’s “elven” they would correct it to “elfin” or “dwarves” to “dwarfs.” Tolkien’s invented language was continuously “corrected,” something he constantly fought to get reverted back to his original writing. The second volume, “The Two Towers,” was published in Great Britain in November 1954 and in the U.S. in April 1955. The third volume was delayed, because Tolkien had promised in his first volume that he would add an index and full etymological information on the languages, especially on the elven tongues. In the end, there wasn’t an index in the third volume, only an apology from the publisher for the lack of index. Volume three was finally published in October 1955 in England and January 1956 in the U.S.

Sources:

[Biography Resource Center Database](http://www.aclibrary.org/research/articlesDataBases/default.asp?topic=ArticlesDataBases&cat=HistoryBiography)

*J. R. R. Tolkien: Creator of Languages and Legends* by Doris Lynch