

*The Elvish Mode*

WE walked over to Brooklyn the other day to attend a meeting of the Tolkien Society of America, a group dedicated to the discussion and promulgation of the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, the Oxford don whose adult fairy tale "The Lord of the Rings" shows signs of becoming a modern classic. The meeting was held at the home of Richard Plotz, a senior at Erasmus Hall High School, who founded the Society last May, and it was attended by some fifty members, including several college professors, a large number of high-school students, W. H. Auden, who is a longtime friend and admirer of Tolkien, and Richard Plotz's two younger brothers — Tommy, twelve and a half, and Bobby, ten. The members gathered in the large and comfortable living room of the Plotz home, at 159 Marlborough Road, and after a few drinks (of non-alcoholic eggnog and soft apple cider) and a light snack (featuring fresh mushrooms, which are a favorite food of Tolkien's favorite creatures, the Hobbits) the meeting was called to order. The main topic of conversation was, of course, "The Lord of the Rings," a trilogy that tells of the perilous quest of Frodo the Hobbit, Gandalf the Wizard, and a company of Elves, Dwarves, and Men, who attempt to destroy the power of the Dark Lord before he can plunge the world into a fate worse than destruction. But before the assembled Tolkienians could launch a discussion of this epic conflict, they felt obliged to touch on a related conflict that was not so epic — a legal skirmish between the authorized American publishers of the tale (Houghton Mifflin and Ballantine Books) and a paperback firm called Ace Books over the fact that Ace, having discovered a flaw in the American copyright, last year brought out an unauthorized but highly profitable edition, from which

the author has yet to receive a penny. Contenting themselves with a general expression of outrage at this state of affairs, the members turned to more congenial matters, such as the correct method of writing in "the Elvish mode," and the construction of an accurate cosmological model of Middle-earth, the vast setting for Tolkien's personal mythology. Stephen Shechtman, a senior at Jericho High School, argued persuasively that Middle-earth could be considered "essentially spherical, if one ignores all the minor technical difficulties arising in the text," while Dr. Peter H. Salus, assistant professor of Germanic languages and linguistics at Queens College, maintained that, by analogy with the Icelandic Eddas, Middle-earth was undoubtedly saucer-shaped. Chairman Plotz then announced that W. H. Auden had consented to give a brief talk on "Tolkien as a Man."

Auden, who had been following the debate with intense concentration, got to his feet and glanced around the room at his fellow-members; most of them were sprawled out on the custard yellow carpet. "Well, Tolkien is a man of average height, rather thin," he began. "He lives in a hideous house—I can't tell you how awful it is—with hideous pictures on the walls. I first encountered him in 1926, at a lecture at Oxford. He read a passage from 'Beowulf' so beautifully that I decided Anglo-Saxon must be interesting, and that has had a great influence on my life." Auden went on to say that Tolkien himself, when he was an Oxford undergraduate, had fallen in love with the Finnish language, "because it has fifteen or sixteen cases."

From the floor a high-pitched voice exclaimed, "Fifteen!"

Auden said, "Yes, fifteen cases. I suppose most of you know that the Elvish language in the trilogy has affinities with Finnish."

Several voices from the floor made it clear that they did indeed know.

Auden then said that Tolkien, by his own admission, had had no idea where the book was going when he started it; in fact, when one of the major characters, the mysterious figure of Strider, appeared for the first time he hadn't the faintest notion who Strider was. "Tolkien is fascinated with the whole Northern thing," Auden said. "People seem to divide—they're attracted by either the Northern thing or the Southern thing, by Scandinavia or the Mediterranean—and for Tolkien north is a sacred direction."

In answer to a question from the floor, Auden said that "Tolkien was born in South Africa but had spent almost his entire life in England, to which his family had moved shortly after his birth. "He has been to Wales, of course," Auden said in conclusion.

Although Auden had asked to be excused after his talk, he stood at the door for twenty minutes debating various fine points of Tolkien scholarship with a handful of fellow-fans. His monumentally wrinkled face creased even further by a broad smile, he looked remarkably like some Tolkienish wizard surrounded by a crowd of young and eager Hobbits.

The remainder of the evening was given over to small discussion groups that formed of their own accord in the corners of the room. Sheetman, who said that he hopes to go to Yale next fall and has thoughts of majoring in astronomy, recalled that he had first heard about Tolkien a few years ago from a younger brother, whose teacher had read one of the books aloud to a third-grade class. "But I wasn't ready to read Tolkien then," Sheetman said. "I was in the ninth grade, and so, naturally, I was too sophisticated for fairy tales."

Audrey Weinstein, who is a senior at the Bronx High School of Science, agreed. "It takes a great deal of maturity to be able to read things like Tolkien," she said. "You have to be the

kind of person who doesn't care what other people might think."

"Quite the contrary," said Irwin Rubin, a classmate of Richard Plotz's. "At Erasmus, anyone who wants to be sophisticated or snobbish feels he has to read 'The Lord of the Rings.'"

"Once you've read it, you have something in common with other people who've read it," Sheetman said.

Audrey Weinstein again agreed. "An English teacher in my school wants to read it because she wants to be able to communicate with her class," she said.

Rubin said, "I started reading it when a group of people at school started writing phrases like 'Frodo lives' all over the walls. I just wanted to find out what they were talking about, and then, Once I got started, I was filled with awe."

"I know, I know," Audrey Weinstein said. "I was *living* in 'The Lord of the Rings' all last year. It was my world. I wrote my notes in Elvish. Even now, I doodle in Elvish. It's my means of expression."

All around the room there were young people in deep conversation.

On a couch, a boy in a dark-blue sweat-shirt and black chino pants was sitting next to a barefooted girl in blue jeans and a white sweater. There was a piece of paper on the coffee table in front of them. The girl held a pen in her right hand, the boy's right hand was clasped over the girl's right hand, and, to judge from the expressions on their faces, they were practicing some strange and beautiful Elvish calligraphy together.

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