

Now Playing

Kids Get Hollywood's Best Stuff

Courtesy of Pixar

Who gets the most respect from Hollywood today?

After taking a look back at 2001, you could easily argue that it's young children. The ratio of quality films to clutter hasn't been good for adults—we faced the usual high chances of being ripped off or insulted rather than entertained when we ventured into movie theaters this past year.

The options for small children were much brighter. *Spy Kids* got things off to a boisterous start last spring, followed by summer's *Shrek*, and the positive trend has continued with the recent releases of *Monsters, Inc.* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. In short, there's been more reason than usual of late to envy youth.

It's no wonder that children's films have been so accomplished this year, considering the talent level involved. The eminently enjoyable, G-rated *Monsters* is the latest creation of Pixar Animation Studios, arguably the best movie production company working right now. Pixar concentrates exclusively on computer-animated kids' movies, a field the studio perfected with *A Bug's Life*, *Toy Story*, and *Toy Story 2*. Each of those movies looks at the world through the innocent, imaginative eyes of a child, a feat pulled off once again in *Monsters, Inc.*, which follows an inquisitive little girl who manages to tame the scary creatures in her bedroom closet. Melding ingenious storytelling with stunning technological prowess, Pixar's pictures are fast becoming fairy tales for a new generation.

Even so, Pixar doesn't have a stranglehold on the kids' flick business, a fact that became clear with the arrival of DreamWorks Pictures' computer-animated *Shrek*. Matching Pixar in

visual and narrative wit, DreamWorks demonstrated itself to be a formidable competitor with this spoof of and homage to classic make-believe stories. And that's good news for fans of computer-animated storytelling, since we'll be the main beneficiaries as these two studios try to outdo each other.

It's not only top production talent—kids have also been getting top material. In addition to the William Steig children's book that inspired *Shrek*, film studios have, of course, adapted J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, the biggest phenomenon in children's literature in years. The story of an 11-year-old boy who discovers he's a wizard and goes off to learn his trade at a magical boarding school, the Harry Potter books—what with their floating candles and flying brooms—are tailor-made for the movies.

Who would have guessed, however, that the filmmakers behind *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* would have brought Rowling's first book to the screen so intact? Nearly everything is here, from the Sorting Hat to the Quidditch match, even if the result is a commercially risky running time of two and a half hours.

What this points to, more than anything else, is a respect the filmmakers have for the young readers in their target audience (something that clearly wasn't shown last year when *Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas* butchered the work of Theodor S. Geisel). Rowling's book is treated as a defining classic here, because that's exactly what kids think of it. Meanwhile, we adults have our classics—Shakespeare, for example—routinely massacred by the movies.

An even more heartening facet of the best children's movies this year was



that they refused to insult the intelligence of their viewers, often bypassing the easy laughs that can be had by wallowing in bathroom gags in favor of a sharper, smarter humor. Nowhere was this more clear than in *Shrek*. (Yes, there were a few flatulence jokes in the film, but if an ogre can't be a bit gross, who can?) The very premise of the movie—that all fairy tale creatures have been banished to the title ogre's swamp until he rescues a princess from a dragon—assumes that children are well-read enough to catch the connections to traditional bedtime stories. Thus the giggles that erupt when *Shrek* finds the big bad wolf in his bed.

The best of these films, of course, have more than giggles. *Monsters, Inc.* is a potent, timely parable about confronting one's fears, real and imagined, while *Shrek*, in which an ogre and a princess strike up an unlikely romance, turns the conventional Hollywood notion of beauty on its head. Yes, these are familiar, old-fashioned ideals, but they're imaginatively presented.

And goodness knows Hollywood usually doesn't bother including morals of any sort in the dregs they serve up to us grownups.

—Josh Larsen

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BookTalk

THE MASTER OF MIDDLE-EARTH

By Martin Morse Wooster

J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century
By Tom Shippey
Houghton Mifflin, 347 pages, \$26

Ask a typical literary critic to name the most important novel of the twentieth century, and he might cite a gloomy German tome such as Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* or Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. But as Tom Shippey demonstrates, the honor belongs to J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*.

Shippey is a crisp, forceful, and intelligent writer who has produced a highly readable appreciation of Tolkien's life and art. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* is the ideal companion for readers enchanted by Tolkien's novels who want to learn more about his ideas.

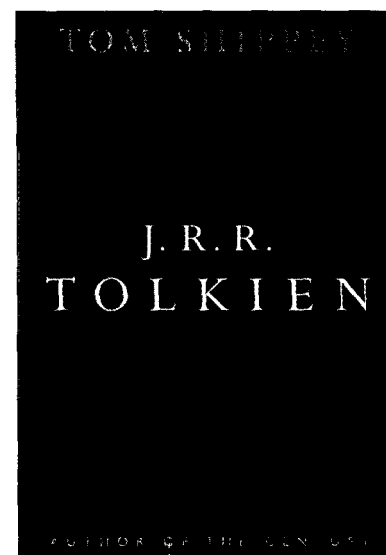
Tolkien's writings are, of course, best sellers; his most important work, *The Lord of the Rings*, has sold 50 million copies, *The Hobbit* 40 million. It's these substantial sales that ensured Hollywood's willingness to finance three new movies based on the trilogy. Moreover, Tolkien is one of the few writers who created his own category of fiction. Walk into any bookstore, and you'll find a fantasy section where most of the bad books (and a few good ones) show his influence.

High-minded *littérateurs* sneer at Tolkien's readers for wasting time reading trash. But as Shippey, an expatriate Brit who teaches English at Saint Louis University, shows, Tolkien was neither a hack nor a fool; he was a master of English prose who largely succeeded in his goal of creating a great epic.

The key to understanding Tolkien, Shippey believes, lies in his background as a philologist—a scholar who studies language. Tolkien spent his professional career analyzing Old English epics. As he wrote in a 1955 letter to his American publishers, “a primary fact about my work, is that it is all of a piece, and *fundamentally linguistic* in inspiration.” Tolkien thought that by delving deeply enough into a piece of medieval writing, you could peel back the centuries and return to the springtime of a culture, recreating long-suppressed myths that only survive in garbled fragments. He believed his mission was similar to that of the Brothers Grimm, who reconstructed German fairy tales, or the Finnish scholar Elias Lönnrot, who produced a “restored” edition of the national epic *The Kalevala* by collecting fragments of earlier myths and using them as a basis for his own poetry.

A lesser writer with Tolkien's ambitions might have produced an unreadable tome. But because of his mastery of English prose, *The Lord of the Rings* was a new kind of novel. Some of the characters perform heroic deeds that transcend ordinary life. Yet others (including most of the hobbits) are lower-class characters who would be happier in their comfortable burrows than engaging in valiant adventures. Because Tolkien easily combined characters who act in strikingly modern ways with more mythic characters, Shippey explains, he got “under the guard of the modern reader, trained to reject, or to ironize, the assumptions of tragedy or epic.”

Tolkien also used his formidable ability with language to incorporate many of the grim parts of twentieth-century life



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into his work. As a veteran of World War I, severely wounded in the Battle of the Somme, Tolkien saw most of his friends die in the slaughter of trench warfare. He knew that war produced more tragedy than triumph, and Shippey believes that Tolkien's combat experience helped forge the grim majesty of *The Lord of the Rings*. While Tolkien insisted his novel was not allegorical, Shippey finds some similarity between contemporary events and Tolkien's tale. The ring, for example, is somewhat similar to the atomic bomb; both are weapons too terrible to use.

Tolkien spent nearly 15 years writing *The Lord of the Rings*. Tom Shippey decisively demonstrates that Tolkien's exhaustive effort produced one of the few twentieth-century novels likely to endure. Those who read Tolkien are not wasting their time; they choose heroism and virtue over the nihilism and skepticism clouding the minds and works of most leading authors of the last century.

TAE associate editor Martin Morse Wooster reviews science fiction and fantasy for the Washington Post and other publications.