

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.

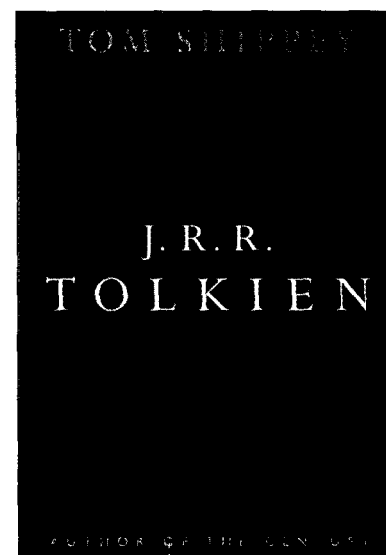
Tolkien's writings are, of course, best sellers; his most important work, *The Lord of the Rings*, has sold 50 million copies, *The Hobbit* 40 million. It's these substantial sales that ensured Hollywood's willingness to finance three new movies based on the trilogy. Moreover, Tolkien is one of the few 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.

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

By Bruce Ramsey

The Business of America
By John Steele Gordon
Walker & Co., 285 pages, \$27

Business writing has long been clotted with morality plays of arrogant tycoons and monopolistic corporations. Businessmen have created our tools, anti-businessmen our tales. John Steele Gordon attempts to correct this imbalance in *The Business of America*, a sympathetic collection of American capitalism's emblematic stories.

The book has 47 of these, each five pages long. Some are of triumph, some of defeat. Henry Ford, having succeeded with the Model T, failed with the Fordson tractor because he didn't understand farmers. Sewell Avery saved Montgomery Ward by being rightly pessimistic in 1930; he lost out to Sears Roebuck by being wrongly pessimistic in 1945. Here, too, is the story of Sears Roebuck, which, by Gordon's account ought to have been called Sears Rosenwald.

Despite their brevity, Gordon's tales are leisurely. He introduces health nut Sylvester Graham, the inventor of the Graham Cracker, by quoting the Bible on the virtues of wine. He begins his story of nineteenth-century California banker D. O. Mills by talking about Steve Jobs.

Many of Gordon's stories flesh out an idea. He presents J. Paul Getty's pithy explanation of his success—"I seen my opportunities and I took 'em"—and illustrates it with a story on onion farmers. Declaring that victory in war goes to the side that mobilizes wealth, Gordon tells the story of Jay Cooke, the financier who created the world's first war-bond drive to fund the Union army.

Another chapter proclaims, "Politicians don't really make economic decisions; they make political ones," and tells of two New York boondoggles: the Erie Railroad and the World Trade Center. Written before the September 11 terrorist attack, Gordon sees the Twin Towers not as shining symbols of American capitalism, but as a show-off project of Governor Nelson Rockefeller, built by the public Port Authority and run at

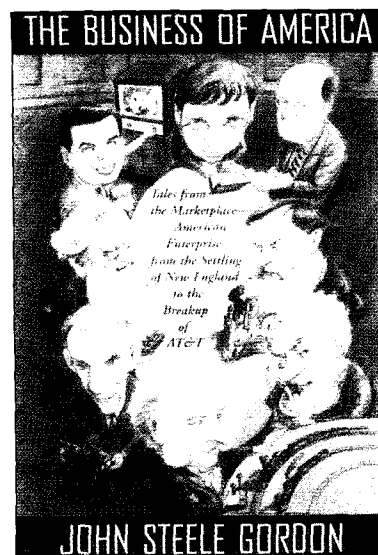
a loss for more than 20 years.

Some government projects do pay off. Gordon explains the rise of New York City through the success of the Erie Canal. It is an exception, though; on the whole, he sees governments as "nothing more than very large committees."

Several stories turn anti-business icons on their heads. During the armor-plate scandal of 1893, the Cleveland administration thought Andrew Carnegie was cheating on shipments of battleship armor. By Gordon's account, there was no cheating; the plates were difficult to fabricate, and most of them exceeded the government's standard. The government believed otherwise, and decided to build its own armor-plate plant in World War I. It wasn't ready until three years after the war had ended, and its costs were almost double that of private industry.

Two of Gordon's chapters take on quotations beloved by socialists: "The public be damned," and "What is good for General Motors is good for the country." The second quotation is false, Gordon explains. Charlie Wilson was asked at his confirmation hearing what he would do if faced with a case in which the interests of the country were adverse to the interests of General Motors. He quite sensibly replied: "I cannot conceive of one because for years, I thought what was good for our country was good for General Motors, and vice versa." Gordon relates three separate accounts of Cornelius Vanderbilt's statement, "The public be damned" to explain what he was getting at: He was running a business, so serving the public good was not an adequate excuse for running a loss.

Gordon is impressed by results, not intentions. He has few kind words for the Freedmen's Bank, a federally chartered effort to lift up former slaves. Run as a venture to do good, it collapsed, taking the deposits of thousands of blacks with it. It was for business reasons that the Cadillac division of General Motors began marketing to blacks. In the 1920s, Cadillac sold to whites only, to maintain an exclusive image. When the Depression hit, the division was on the ropes, and executive Nicholas Dreystadt realized the



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black elite—singers, boxers, doctors, and lawyers—had been paying white front men to buy their Cadillacs. Dreystadt decided that selling to black Americans was good business.

Gordon rarely strays into the world of the should-have-been. An exception is his piece on the Interstate Commerce Commission, where he argues that the nation's first regulatory agency—set up to control railroad rates—was a mistake. Most of the time, Gordon is a storyteller.

Most of his stories are a century or more old, and at least one reviewer has grumbled there are more steamboats and sewing machines in this book than memory chips. Don't let that put you off. Early America was a rough-and-tumble place, not so different in spirit from today's entrepreneurial economy. These stories will have a familiar ring to those who conduct the business of America.

Bruce Ramsey is an editorial writer at the Seattle Times.