



The *Illuminata*

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Ten Things Tolkien Got Away With (But You Won't) By Erik Goodwyn

Isn't it odd how every new fantasy author that comes out is—according to the back page blurb—the 'next Tolkien'? I can't help it, every time I read this I am irresistibly compelled to either roll my eyes or chortle to myself. And the reason is simple: if Tolkien tried to publish his masterpiece today he would get absolutely nowhere. Today's market is so competitive, so clogged with submissions, the editors so buried in manuscript mountains, that the Great One of the Twin Middle Initials would have gone sadly ignored.

Why is this, you may ask? The reasons are ten-fold...

1) The plot. How, I wonder, would Professor Tolkien possibly have attempted to sum up *The Lord of the Rings* in a one page synopsis? Think about it. After all, 'Frodo finds a magic ring and destroys it after facing numerous perils' just doesn't quite do it. There are just too many subplots and wandering paths to follow. For example, near the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo and his pals are broken up into

separate stories, all of which meander all over the place before finally coming to the end. As Frodo and Sam plod on toward Mordor, Aragorn wanders off to Rohan, which we haven't heard anything about until now (Tolkien does this repeatedly—meandering into a new plot-important realm which we have no prior knowledge of), as Merry and Pippin wander off into Fangorn (ditto) and hang out with Treebeard for several chapters, until eventually they all must defend Helm's Deep against Saruman and his goons, none of which has anything to do with Frodo going

toward Mount Doom! From here, as you know, the subplots get even more convoluted, with Faramir, and Denethor, and the Paths of the Dead, etc, etc. How Tolkien manages to make all of this work is honestly beyond me, but he does. And guess what... you and I won't! So keep it focused.

2) That whole Council of Elrond Thingy. Ok, so we have about two dozen characters sitting at a table talking for about 300 pages about the plot. Talk about an info dump! From mere mortal writers such as you and me—suicide. Of course, Tolkien makes it work because he spent twenty decades developing his world in such minute detail that it only serves to draw us in. For the rest of us...it is best to avoid such scenes.

3) No Babes. Let's face it—Tolkien didn't have much time for female characters. Ok, there's Eowyn, Galadriel and Arwen (barely), but in our modern, Politically Correct era, most publishers would have looked at this and said 'hey, John, look: over fifty percent of fantasy readers are female. Our other reader percentage tends to be males aged 15-35. That fact, divided by the coefficient of not enough romance and/or sex in your story, multiplied by the fact that 2 out of 3 teen male comic book fans want to read about sword wielding bikini babes, means your story is a big fat reject!'

4) The Evil Dark Lord Who Is Trying To Take Over The World For No Apparent Reason. This is one that Tolkien started and has spun out of control in fantasy. Nowhere in Joseph Campbell's *Hero of a Thousand Faces*, or even James Frey's *How to Write Damn Good Fiction Using the Power of Myth* does it say that in mythic fiction there has to be an evil dark lord who is a compulsive power monger. Of course, J.R.R. made it work because Sauron was so ethereally terrifying. But for everyone else...please, make it stop! Just say no! (or at least give the Dark Lord some kind of motivation other than 'He is the Lord of all Evil, so there')

5) The word 'queer'. In the fifties it meant odd or strange. Today it conjures up snickering.

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RPG Corner v4.2: Player Freedom in RPGs

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< Roper of EPIC Gaming

Most regular players of role-playing games understand that there is a kind of unspoken contract between themselves as players and the Game Master. The contract boils down to the understanding that the players are giving up a reasonable amount of freedom for their characters in exchange for the entertainment that the Game Master wants to provide (as to why certain gamers choose to subject themselves to the often thankless job of Game Mastering, your guess is as good as mine). So knowing that they are traveling through essentially limited and linear plots, why do some players still complain about being "railroaded," or forced into certain situations and choices by the Game Master?

The problems rise not from the loss of certain freedoms, but from the perceived loss of certain freedoms. Players are happy when there exists an illusion of free will for their characters. As long as the player believes that, at any time, their character could simply saunter off into the sunset and find a new opportunity for adventure somewhere else, they are happy. If that precious illusion is lost, players begin to feel forced, or robbed, of choice, and this is sure to hurt the game sooner or later.

So what is a GM to do? How does a GM encourage the notion that a player has freedom when the outcome of every scenario is already written? The real trick is for the GM to understand that he has an obligation not to grant the PCs true choice, but to keep up the illusion that there is greater choice for the PCs than there actually is.

One of the first tricks is to obfuscate the true plot of the scenario side plots and details that will make the Player Characters have to dig to find the information needed to advance the scenario and complete their goals. Having too much information to sift through (even if the information isn't necessarily pertinent to the main plot) forces the PCs to make a decision about what clues they want to pursue, creating the illusion that the Characters are dictating the course of the investigation or journey, when in fact, the GM knows exactly where they are going and what they will find.

Game Masters should also be open to player initiative, as well. If a PC has an idea and wants to investigate it, a GM interested in keeping the illusion of free will strong will provide results for that investigation. Proactive players, those players who are constantly taking initiative and seeking out new information may seem like a hassle to Game Masters, especially when the PCs are determined to investigate something that has nothing to do with the GM's scripted plot. However, experienced GMs know that

proactive players are treasured commodities. If a GM is prepared enough, he can reward proactive players' investigations with small clues that point to different areas of the plot, or if the investigation is carried far enough, larger, more important clues can be provided. The difference here is immense.

For example, a GM has designed an encounter initiated by an NPC, which sadly results in the NPC's untimely demise. A search of his body reveals a clue that will aid the Player Characters on their mission. In this case, the PCs have done nothing but follow the GM's plot and characters to a clue; they have essentially just been along for the ride. Now suppose a player, of his own initiative, begins following the NPC around for whatever reason and discovers the clue that was to be found on his dead body, tucked in an envelope on the NPC's dresser. The proactive player not only has secured the necessary clue through his own actions, but he may even get a glimpse of the NPC's killer, perhaps providing another clue. The player has no way of knowing what the GM actually intended, so he may believe that the investigation turned up a clue that the PCs would not have gotten otherwise. The illusion of Player Character impact on the events of the story is maintained and strengthened.

It can happen, and has happened to me on a couple of occasions, that a clever player has basically undone the plot or outsmarted me as a GM. The overbearing and damaging thing to do is to arbitrarily dismiss the success and declare the victory empty, as the villain miraculously escapes at the last minute by a clearly desperate act of the GM to save his plot. This may be necessary in a one shot game, where there is simply nothing to do if the PC's wrap the scenario after an hour through good playing. However, in a longer running game, I would advise the GM to let things go (I myself have planned a detailed capture and interrogation of my PCs, only to have them escape with the prize with the greatest of ease. I chose to let them go, rather than dismiss their careful planning and execution to preserve my plot. I can always get them later). Let PCs enjoy a victory without strings attached or complications. It's rare for the PCs to get the best of GM characters and they deserve to celebrate, while the GM quietly plots how to prevent such a thing from happening again.

Flexibility on the part of the GM can go a long way to involving the players in the plots of the game. Being able and willing to adjust details and encounters to provide payoffs for proactive players and characters

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Fandom Who Filk

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

Let's review: What is Fandom? Fans are people who endorse and participate in an activity based on the popularity of a common form of entertainment or idea. Fans congregate at some point with other Fans and this joining creates *Fandom*. Fans/Fandom meet online and at conventions, they form groups, clubs and associations, often around a particular theme (movies, books, roll playing games, television shows). However, some Fans never meet another Fan, and this is sad.

Some groups of Fans are loosely organized, like the weekly on-campus sci-fi club or monthly writer's group. Other Fans are hard-core, serious individuals like those guys down the street who get together every week (for the last twenty years) to play *Dungeons and Dragons* or those applying for a berth on an official *Star Trek* Starship (where you have to maintain strict requirements and pay dues.)

Bottom line: Fans *do* things. They are dynamic, often boisterous, creative, and they may collect cool Fan stuff (See *Illuminata* July-Nov 2004). They are seldom static. A little known Fan activity is Filking. Like Fandom, Filking can be loosely organized or highly structured. Depending on the type of Filk, anyone can join in or only certain Filkers Filk and the rest of us enjoy it.

So...what is Filking? "Filk" has it's own unusual, but semi-traceable past. Tradition has it the word was misspelled on a science fiction convention program and the name just stuck. Among sci-fi Fandom, it is an urban legend. "Filk" is a bastardization of the word *folk*—as in folk singing. Folk singing was a lesser-known activity found at religious gatherings and summer camps. Songs like "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore" and "Ragtime Cowboy Joe" are old friends of the campfire tradition.

From Folk to Filk—A little history: Folk singing actually took two separate routes to become Filk singing. Singing and telling stories around the campfire is a tradition brought from Europe with the settlers who used traditional and cultural songs and stories to teach and remember their heritage. (Native Americans had been doing their own version for centuries.) As expansion of the United States brought settlers west, singing and storytelling was a natural part of wagon train and cattle-drive evenings.

Fast-forward one hundred years and the campfire tradition remains, though the songs have changed and would hardly be recognizable from the ones sung in the 1700's. Today's campfire songs are catchy and tuneful; harmonies are rich and spontaneous—and *everybody* can join in.

However, through the years, a small smattering of singers found themselves on display as a *solo* act. Saloons and bars took the songs inside and off the trail. Later, the bars of Scott Joplin's day and Speakeasy clubs of the prohibition highlighted drinking and torch songs of the 1900's.

After WWII, American life settled down and a more civilized nightlife was enjoyed. The nightclub era of the 1940's through the 1960's spotlighted the famous crooners—Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Bing Crosby. But in the 60's, beyond the glitter in an establishment called a Coffee House, a quiet revolution was emerging with longhaired, goateed, pre-Blues Brothers-looking guys called Beatniks. We can thank the Beatnik for unusual instrumentations (bongos, flutes) and original prose that was not generated by *Tin Pan Alley*.

Over the years, this underground movement evolved into the Love Generation and went wild and flowery. The 60's and 70's were born with sing-a-long lyrics, "American Pie" and not-so-sing-able Heavy Metal. Folk songs became widely accepted with the advent of groups like *The Kingston Trio*, *Peter, Paul and Mary* and *Simon and Garfunkle*. Other individuals with folk-singing repertoires helped this along—Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Gordon Lightfoot, Leonard Cohen and John Denver are only a few. Thirty years later, we have Weird Al Yankovic and we Filk.

And what exactly IS Filking? Filking tends to be a home-based phenomenon, but whole conventions are popping up around this Fandom activity. Filk Fans gather, usually once a month, in a home or mutually accessible location. Filking takes several forms so the host/hostess tends to set the tone by starting the Filk and telling about the format. Filking groups range from frivolous, open to almost anything or any kind of song or performance (or ego), to groups that limit the material to music only or Science Fiction themes. It depends on the group's personality.

Filkers are eclectic. No two groups Filk the same. As individual as a camp-out or convention, Filk Singers/Singers are unique. The "serious" Filking groups lean toward Celtic and historical songs that are often authentic folk songs from a particular period or culture. SCA aka Society for Creative Anachronisms, tend to be in the serious Filk group category and sing original songs inspired by a character or event from a book or movie set in older prose styles. These can be astoundingly beautiful (and some are downright boring if the singer doesn't enunciate. Then again, some *are* just

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The Writer's Block: Harvesting Memories

by Charles Gramlich

I grew up on a farm in Arkansas, and although I've lived in urban environments for the past twenty-eight years, many of the memories of that childhood are still bright. I remember that we lived just under a hill, and how one night we heard a tornado go over the house in the air, and how it really *did* sound like a freight train. The next morning we found fish scattered in the field behind the house and picked them up in a big silver tub and brought them home.

I remember how I used to keep little green grass snakes for pets, and how I had one in my pocket at supper one night when it got out and went scooting across the table directly into my mother's lap. I remember that was the end of my snake keeping. But it wasn't the end of my experiences with snakes. We raised chickens and a lot of times snakes would find their way into our chicken nests to eat the eggs. One day I found a snake that had swallowed two of the wooden eggs that we sometimes used to get our hens to lay more. I remember thinking how rough it would be for him when he needed to... "go."

So what do these strange little tidbits from my life have to do with writing? Well, all of them have been used to provide verisimilitude in stories that I've written. The past is what we all mine for the detail that makes our fictional tales seem real. Even when I'm writing a story set on an alien world, it is *this* world that provides the sensory details I need to make my readers "feel" the alien sunlight and the alien wind. And it's my memory that provides the relevant experiences.

But a writer's past life can provide more than just detail for stories. It can supply whole plots and complete scenes. Even though I haven't lived a terribly exciting life by Hollywood standards, enough has happened to me—and almost certainly to you, as well—to feed a writing habit for years. From thinking about how a tornado could carry fish came an idea that I used in writing a story called "The Teeth of the Wind." From an old, half fallen house about which ghost stories were told came the plot for a piece I called "Your Nightmare or Mine." There are plenty of other examples I could give from my own work.

Although most of you reading this article already know the truth of what I'm saying, I'm afraid that many of you are *making* a mistake that I've *already* made. That mistake is to trust that your childhood memories will always be there for you to explore whenever you need. It ain't necessarily so.

I turned forty-six at the end of last year, and I'm lucky that my memory is still pretty good. But... it's not as

good as it used to be. Every time I go home to visit my family, someone brings up something that happened twenty years ago that I've forgotten. Finally, about six years ago I got smart and started a journal to record as many of my childhood memories as I could. And I update it whenever I talk to old friends or to family who remind me about past events.

I was to discover, however, that even important events that were once vivid memories can fade. For example, in looking over my memory journal for this article I found the entry: "The little yellow Tomcat that I loved." I now have absolutely no memory of that cat, although apparently I "loved" it.

My mistake—at least my first mistake—was not starting my memory journal until I was already forty years old. I wish now I'd begun it at twenty. Or at fifteen. I wish I'd kept a diary from the moment I could write.

Even after I began keeping a journal I made yet another mistake. I just jotted down a line or two about items, such as that yellow Tom, smugly convinced that this was all I'd ever need to trigger my recall. Nope! Had I added more detail about that cat to my journal I might still be able to dredge up that memory.

So what is the point of this piece? The point is to suggest that you start your own "Memory Journal." Start it now and put into it all the rich details that you possibly can. I know why I just jotted down a line or two for many of my early entries. It was because I was lazy, yet another mistake. I always had other writing projects that I wanted to work on, and I knew my journal in and of itself was not going to be published. I shortchanged my journal to write other things; what I didn't realize is that time spent on my journal would pay bigger dividends in the years to come than any other piece of writing I might be doing.

* * *

Hey, why are you still reading this? Get to work on that journal. Don't be lazy. And don't forget.

Some may have noticed that my name did not grace the cover story of this edition (I hope *someone* noticed!). In order to devote myself to editing the short story anthology and preparing my third book, *Jewel of Truth*, for publication, I am temporarily stepping down as a contributor. With a little luck, I'll be writing articles again before you know it!

— Bret Funk, Editor-in-Chief of the *Illuminata*

Reviews

Dies The Fire S.M. Stirling



Roc, July 2004
483 pages
ISBN: 0451459792
Review by Terry Crotinger

Set in present day Idaho and Oregon, this twist on the apocalypse theme isn't a typical after-catastrophe survival story. Well, okay, it is. But it is also survival manual and riveting "what if" read. It also is the first book of a trilogy by Stirling that

makes the *Alien Space-Bat Theory* of what happened to the world almost plausible—as likely as a mysterious flash from the Nantucket, Rhode Island area that knocks out power (typical doomsday technique). But Stirling expands this lack-of-power dilemma to include *anything* that runs on power.

Digital watches, car engines, battery powered radios, and even gunpowder is affected and fairly meaningless in everyday life after *The Change*. That means there is no way to prevent collisions or use emergency equipment. Jets fall from the sky and water pressure quits—so fighting fires from airplane crashes is impossible. The implications are grisly.

Antiques become priceless; modern appliances, trash. Car parts are more suited to make swords and daggers than provide any form of transportation. A hand-drill, horse or can-opener is valued above power tools, motorcycles or gourmet food. Suddenly, those old, outdated pills in the medicine cabinet are worth more than precious jewels.

S.M. Stirling keeps the reader on edge with accurate description and historical references, riveting plot and believable characters that include a Wiccan witch in Oregon and an ex-military pilot in Idaho, both of whom use their unique talents to band the people around them together, increasing survivability. The most surprising leader is an unlikely professor who, before *The Change*, taught ancient history but self-appoints himself as a dictator over what is left of Portland, Oregon—and he's not very nice.

But, wait a minute! Didn't *The Postman* by David Brin deal with a similar issue, in a similar location with similar bodies and innocent bystanders? Yes, there is a very familiar theme going on, but Stirling takes *Dies The Fire* and keeps going where *The Postman* ends. And with the companion books, *The Protector's War* and *A Meeting at Corvallis*, being written and edited as *The Illuminata* goes to print, *Dies*

The Fire promises to expand on this as well. In fact, S.M. Stirling seems to make a habit associating one set of novels with another. *Dies The Fire* takes up where the *Island of Nantucket* dropped off, literally—dropped off or out—of our time to 1250 B.C. The reader realizes the scope of cause and effect from a worldwide scale to a very personal one in the "Island in the Sea of Time" series—a precursor and segue to *Dies The Fire*.

The unsuspecting reader may have trouble sleeping after reading the first few chapters (survival note-taking is encouraged). *Dies The Fire* will be one of those books remembered as cautionary tale, historical lecture and action-packed adventure.

The Rose of the World

Jude Fisher

Daw, Feb 2005
\$23.95, 512 pp.
ISBN 0756401879

Review by Harriet Klausner

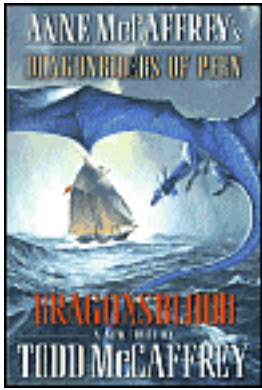
Three benevolent beings, the Woman, the Man and the Beast watched over the world of Elda making it a land of harmony, peace, and love. This idyllic world dissolved into chaos when Rahe, the most powerful sorcerer that ever lived kidnapped the Beast and the Woman, and buried the Man in a place to die. The Woman, the Rosa Eldi was stripped of her memories and her magic and taken to Rahe's hidden ice fortress where he siphoned off her powers and that of the Beast, making Rahe more powerful and dangerous.

When Rahe's apprentice stole the Rose of the World and the Beast, magic returned to the world. At a trade fair, the King of the North, Ravn and the Lord of them South Tycho Issianm saw the Rose of the World and wanted her. Ravn won but Tycho Issian swore he would get her for himself. He coaxed the population into making war on the north. While this political intrigue takes place, the Rose of the World remembers who she is and is horrified that the world is a hateful place of petty wars and enmity between the north and the south. It is something she won't stand for as the Woman plans to find the Man and the Beast so they can return Elda to what it once was.

The third book in the Fool's Gold fantasy series ties up all the loose ends, answering all questions satisfactorily while rewarding readers with a fantastic climax. *The Rose of the World* is more epic in scope, so the various subplots tie seamless back to the main storyline as readers understand why each sub-plot was necessary to make this romantic fantasy a complex and fulfilling work.

Reviews

Dragonsblood Todd McCaffrey



Del Rey, Jan 2005
\$24.95, 436 pp.
ISBN: 0345441249
Review by Harriet Klausner

When the colonists landed on Pern, they didn't know that the red star would align with the planet every two hundred and fifty years.

When that event happens, spores from the red star fall onto Pern destroying anything organic in its path. To combat this problem, geneticists changed fire lizards into telepathic dragons that bond with a human; together they unite to fight spores or thread as it is now called in 507 years after the initial landing of the spaceship.

In AL 507, Lorana sends her fire lizards away when she thinks she is dying, but she is saved and brought to Bendon Weyr where she bonds with a hatchling dragonet Arith. A plague infects the dragons killing many including Arith just when thread is coming. Arith and Lorana's two fire lizards go back to 42 AL where geneticist Wind Blossom concludes that the three visitors come from Bendon Weyr in the future. She devises a plan to help her descendents battle the deadly dragon killer plague if the future people can interpret the clues she left behind to save them.

This is the first solo Pern story not written by the immortal Anne McCaffrey, but her son who obviously inherited the writing gene as readers will not be able to tell who wrote the novel without reading the cover. Two women living centuries apart work to find a cure to save the dragons and ultimately their world. There is plenty of action scenes especially when dragons and their human rider battle thread, but it is the strong characterizations especially the grieving Lorana who can communicate with any dragon while reminded of the loss of her Arith to the plague that make this a worthy entry in the long running series.

Destroyer C.J. Cherryh



Daw, Feb 2005
\$24.95, 480 pp.
ISBN 0756402530
Review by Harriet Klausner

The Atevi send the spaceship Phoenix to Reunion Station where the inhabitants encountered the sentient space faring Kyo who planned to blow up the facility because it was in territory they considered theirs. Deploying diplomacy, interpreter and Human-Atevi advisor Bren Cameron convinces the Kyo to allow the four thousand inhabitants to peacefully leave and then the space station would belong to the Kyo. Now they are days away from home and both human and Atevi are looking forward to enjoying the little luxuries found on their planet.

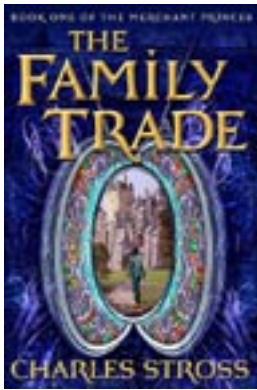
They come back to a world that is in the middle of a civil war and onboard the Phoenix is the dowager and the heir. No one knows where the ruler and his wife are and many think they are dead. Bren and his staff, the dowager and her staff, and the heir shuttle down to the planet where they travel through enemy territory to find the heir's great uncle. They hope to enlist his aid in returning the former ruler on his heir to power, but a traitor alerts the rebels who plan to kidnap or kill them.

Nobody is better than C.J. Cherryh when it comes to writing an in depth exploration of an alien society. Relations between humans and Atevi are in jeopardy many of the native race believes humanity has too much influence and technology that disturbs the conservative elements of their society. Bren blames himself for pushing the space program and other technological advances on the leader who trusts him and he is desperate to undo the damage he has done. Destroyer is a wondrous work starring two sentient races struggling to co-exist peacefully.

Reviews

The Family Trade

Charles Stross



Tor, December 2004
Hardcover, 303 pgs
ISBN: 0-765-30929-7
Review by D. L. Parker

I usually allow myself to read the back and inside cover of a new book only *after* I've finished the story. Then I can smile, sneer, nod my head, or roll my eyes at

the buy-this-book come-hithers recorded thereon as they deserve. *The Family Trade* has the usual on its glossy covers: names of various publications and other authors taken in vain; a few openly sycophantic quotes (we're told, twice in case we miss the point, that Mr. Stross is "The Next Big Thing" in science fiction), and professions of purported resemblances to other more famous works and authors. In this case, Roger Zelazny, H. Beam Piper, and Philip Jose Farmer are singled out for attention. Not being familiar with H. Beam Piper, I can't comment on the supposed similarity, but the other two got a shake of my head. True, *The Family Trade* does borrow two plot devices straight from Zelazny's famed *Amber Chronicles*: there's the fratricidal, matricidal, patricidal, and (insert whatever is the word for *killing*, not *kissing*, cousins, here) extended family with the ability to slip to alternate Earths (via a vaguely Celtic medallion pattern, this time).

But there the resemblance ends. Zelazny's zestful, colorful-as-a-card-suite of siblings are done in grays and blacks in the Stross version. Perhaps that's because the pursuit of ill-gotten gain, not a royal throne, is the chief interest of this particular Family. Stross's characters don't scheme with the same passion and sense of fun the Amber siblings applied to their own murderous maneuverings. Alas! It's just not as much fun killing for mere filthy lucre... and in this case, it's not as much fun for the *reader*, either.

In fact, the protagonist of our story, thirty-two year old investigative journalist Miriam Beckstein, starts out with one heck of a bad day. She and an unsuspecting co-worker, Paulette, who also works

for the same high-tech business journal, stumble across what appears to be a humongous money-laundering scheme. But when she and Paulette take their painstaking research to the top, they find themselves flying out the door on a magic pink slip before they can draw breath to protest. Anonymous threats on the home answering machine and midnight invaders soon follow.

Miriam is furious, but soon diverted by another puzzle. Her unknown birthmother, found murdered long ago with her crying baby, little Miriam, beside her, bequeathed her a strange medallion. The medallion gives Miriam a bad headache. It also transports her to an alternate Earth: an Earth stuck, for its peasantry, in a sort of miserable Dark Ages. Its elite (Miriam's long-lost family, of course) live in a strange blend of Scandinavian-flavored feudal and bleeding-edge modern. The technology and associated luxury, of course, is stolen from our own world. Miriam's new family is seriously rich. They should be: they're drug couriers, conveying mass white death via their untraceable, border-skipping, world-walking talent.

It doesn't seem to occur to Miriam to blow the whistle to the DEA or CIA on these parasitic new relatives, not even after they abduct her and start planning her forced betrothal. Maybe their gift of a credit card with a two-million-dollar limit (just for starters) muddles Miriam's sense of patriotism and morality. No, in short order Miriam is jousting and scheming with the worst of them, along with a newly gained lover, her cousin Roland. She wants to reform the relatives... no, we're not talking exactly moral reform here: Miriam wants to find the Clan a New Business Model, a worthy goal that her new partner Roland has already tried and failed at. And if *that* isn't enough of a task, there might just be *another* secret collection of relatives, unknown even to her new Clan, to worry about... and who seem to have their *own* murderous agenda...

Miriam's a tough, somewhat humorless character, and this book has plenty of profanity to show us just how tough of a gal she is. She soon gains a collection of loyal female conspirators. By contrast, the men in the story are mostly either shadowy and barely sketched (Miriam's uncle Angbard, the Godfather of the Clan, for example)

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or distinctly diffident and weak-wristed (Miriam's genteel and well-dressed cousin Roland). Miriam, in fact, is more than a match for her new lover and partner Roland. When she decides to seduce him, for example, she briskly commands him to order dinner up to his suite, and when he *still* doesn't seem to get the idea, (his manners are on the edge of *too* good), she more or less knocks him (literally) off his feet with her, um, mammaries... a rather forthright, and if I may be pardoned for an admittedly peculiar view here, a somewhat *masculine* way of uh, making her point(s)!

I wish the supporting characters in *The Family Trade* were more colorful, and I wish the author had done more with the collision of cultures (modern vs. medieval) than he manages in his story. So far, Book One of *The Merchant Princes* is more of a crime yarn than a science fiction (or sociological) vision. I myself won't be spending too much time looking for the sequel, but then (smile) I never trust those back covers. *The Family Trade* isn't the "Next Best Thing", and it certainly isn't as fun as the much-referenced *Amber Chronicles*. But you think you might enjoy a gangster or crime thriller with a fantasy twist - check it out!

Filk (con't)

really, really boring). These groups are not for the sing-along, join-in crowd. And, unfortunately, when music and musicians are involved, there are exclusive Filkers out in Fandom who only feel a certain kind of music is *appropriate* and only *certain* people are allowed to Filk. Conversely, most Filkers just want to have fun within the group—listen, sing a little and leave happy.

So basically, if you can imagine singing "Amazing Grace" to the theme of *Gilligan's Island*, you've got a good idea of what Filking is. It can be innocent and it can be filthy—easily rivaling the bawdiest song you know. Songs range from Leonard Nimoy's original "Legend of Bilbo Baggins" to Klingon Opera to Weird Al Yankovic's parody of *Star Wars* called, "The Saga Begins" (to the tune of Don McLean's "American Pie").

Filking can encompass everything from concert-type performance to cozy get-togethers with people who can sing (or not but do anyway) solo or collectively, read poetry (if the group allows that), perform original songs or trumped up parodies with familiar tunes (one group even includes Broadway show tunes). Folk, oops, *Filk* songs are fun, emotional and are *sing-able!* Even if you can't carry a tune, listening is enjoyable as well.

Filking is not a well-broadcast event at most conventions, but ask around and someone will likely tell you where to find it. If you can't find Filkers, form your own Filk Fandom. In fact, next month Fandom who Filk will explore ways to do just that!

The Soul Weaver

Carol Berg



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Review by Harriet Klausner

While Karon rules in Avonor on the world of Gondai, a place where magic is practiced openly; his wife Seri and their son Gerik live on the mundane world of Valleorn, where magic is stamped out whenever the anomaly appears. Gerick recovers from being held prisoner by the lords of Zhev'Na, powerful evil sorcerers. They hoped to break Gerick and make him one of them but his parents rescued him.

In Avonor, Karon battles the Lords of Zhev'Na, a war that has been going on for a millennium. The only time he sees his wife and son is when he crosses D'Arnath's Bridge that links the two worlds. He takes Gerick to Avonor for a day and returns him to his mother. Not long afterward Karon believes Gerick betrayed his plans to the Lords.

Gerick crosses the bridge into a new world whose people say he is their rightful king. He cares for these people, damaged, broken, but kind. Still he knows he must leave them to so he can root out the traitors that counsel his father. He also wants to use his knowledge to help Karon put an end to the Lords and bring peace to a world that knows only war.

Carol Berg is one of those rare and talented fantasists who has the ability to create worlds out of her imagination, populates them with tortured but likeable characters and place them in realms that feel believable. After reading *The Soul Weaver* readers will feel as if they have gone through an emotional wringer having empathized with the three main characters. This exciting finale brings to a close one of the best fantasy series in a long time.

Original Fiction

Cabbolt

By: Trent L Urness

"Behavior standards will be strictly followed. I expect everyone here to listen and learn, and be respectful of their elders, myself and Mrs.Jonesif. If you have to talk you will raise your hand and Mrs.Jonesif will come to your desk. You will *whisper* what you have to say into her ear and she will then repeat it to the class in a respectful and calm manner.

If you are caught passing notes or, god forbid, *speaking*, you will be immediately removed from class for the rest of the day and sent to the Gabberdine's Office where you'll be made to sort mail, sharpen pencils... these sorts of things. And you wouldn't want *that*, would you class? If you repeatedly make mistakes and interruptions you'll be permanently expelled from school and probably die a wretch somewhere. Any questions?"

A hand slowly rose over the crowd, shaking and warbling in terror. Mrs.Cabbolt looked at the seating chart and addressed it, "Yes, Jerald?" She then nodded to the other old woman, Mrs.Jonesif, who's heels resonated fine clicks on the tile floor. Jerald whispered into Jonesif's ear and she nodded. "Mrs.Cabbolt", she said, "Jerald would like to know what time" – a smile perking her face – "*lunch* is."

Cabbolt slid a ruler in her hands across a palm of crevassed age. With a thin smirk, one of ginger wisdom, she said, "*Lunch*, Jerald, is when I say it is." And with that she turned to begin writing on the board, Jonesif sat back down in her chair, and the class sat in silence.

Forgive me Lord for what I am about to do. Please do not send me to hell or into purgatory for too long. This thought was in the brain of Mary Bengil as she wadded up a bit of paper and spit into her palm, rubbed the two together, and made a beautiful, perfectly round, winter white, gooshy spitball.

The expulsion of a paper bullet out the end of a red and white straw is nearly inaudible. Had Cabbolt not been writing ever-so-screetchingly on the black board there may have been time for her to hear and react. It may have saved some lives.

SPLAT!!!

Cabbolt reeled backwards, sending her hair pin flying, which let the fullness of her long black locks dance wildly in the air. In one instant, a quick, fluid motion, her head sank lower and lower behind her, until finally she lost her balance.

"Aaaaaeeeeeeeeaaaaah!" Her head hit the floor in a deep *Unk!* Her feet, in counterbalance, ricocheted off the thin shelf for chalk and erasers and these things also danced untamed in the air. Now on the floor, still screaming, her arms moved like hoses spewing water, like dying, thrashing snakes.

Suddenly Jonesif, watching all this, began to do the same, jumping out of her chair and onto the ground. She landed flatly on her left hand and a loud crack leapt out from under her. She imitated Cabbolt's mad thrashings and screaming.

Smoke began to rise from the two women's eyes and ears and mouths and noses. Thickly black sick clouds rose into the air. As it did their screams became distorted with other tones, so that a high, low, and mid pitch echoed chaos in the room. Now their heads began to shake, up and down, as jaws hit floors and crunched under the pressure. Faster and faster, and faster yet, gobs of flesh and bone on the women's necks vibrated, until finally it looked like a pinkish yellow black blur.

Then Cabbolt's ears hit Jimmy Connelly in the face and fell into his lap. They quickly melted. All the skin on the two women melted, revealing the metal frames beneath. Pools of melted flesh bubbled and spat. Sparks jolted out of the two and smoke spewed from all about the women's bodies.

Suddenly there was a bright, blinding flash. Jimmy Connelly fell out of his chair onto to the floor, and his arms began to shake. And his head jumped up and down as he screamed in three differing tones...

§

"What the hell happened here?" Stan Potterby asked. He'd just gotten on his shift and found another janitor already cleaning up. "I dunno", said the other, "Some kind of schooling experiment or something." Stan surveyed the scene. "*Jesus Christ*", he said, "Look at all these things. Must've cost the company hundreds of thousands just to build 'em all."

"Yup", said the other. Stan reached for his bucket and asked, "Well what the hell went wrong?"

"I dunno. I *don't* know. But if you ask me I don't like robots acting like humans. Talk like humans, sure, smell like humans, even *laugh* like humans. But they don't have that instinct, you know? They don't have that Darwin, God-given instinct. You know?"

Tolkien Can (con't)

6) *Nearly* killing off every major character but one. Frodo is nearly killed by Shelob. Faramir is nearly killed by orcs. Eowyn is nearly killed by the Witch King. Gandalf *is* killed, then comes back. Sam nearly drowns and Aragorn falls off a cliff and also nearly drowns. Oh wait . . . that was Peter Jackson. Never mind.

7) Sauron, Saruman. Could two character names sound more similar? Naturally, Tolkien did this because each name actually meant something in some language or another, and the roots meant something dating back to the twelfth century of the Second Age, which saw a combining of Elvish and Numenorean, flecked with a smattering of the 84th dialect of the seventeenth king of blah, blah, blah. Tolkien got away with it. You won't.

8) West = Good. Everything Else = Bad. The orcs are 'dark skinned'. The elves are 'very fair'. The Southrons are 'swarthy'. The Easterlings are . . . you get the idea. There is no way editors of today let this slide. Of course, Tolkien didn't mean anything by it, but today he would be labeled as a Eurocentric, non-ethnosympathetic, culturofascist member of an anarchosyndiclist commune.

9) Endless descriptions of terrain. Reading some parts of *The Lord of the Rings* feels like perusing a nineteenth century travelogue through some newly discovered country. Each tree, each brook, each mountain is accounted for, and probably has a name, and a history, and a linguistic pedagogical analect dating back three hundred years. As usual, sigh, it works, and because it seems so real.

10) And of course, there's the end. It refuses to. Frodo destroys the ring. Then, there's the crowning. Then, there's the Scouring of the Shire. Then, there's the Grey Havens. Then, there are the Appendices. Then there are the forty two books of unfinished material related to Middle Earth. How does Tolkien get away with this???

The answer is simple. Middle Earth is a character in its own right. Tolkien's creation is so vivid, so detailed, so rich, you cannot deny it and you don't want to leave it, despite the odd things he does with the story. Of course there is a lot more to his story than the setting, in which themes of death and heroism and friendship are dealt with in a mature and powerful manner, but it is the setting that really stands out in his epic. But unless you are willing to put that much detail into your setting (and you have a couple of decades in which to do it), you are not going to get away with the things he did. Which brings me to the end of this article.

RPG Corner (con't)

will pay off in spades in Player enjoyment. A GM must be humble and willing to rewrite major sections of his scenario to support player initiative. If a GM wants the PCs to be in a certain place or see a particular person, the best thing he can do is provide compelling reasons for the PCs to want to be there or see them.

There is a pitfall to relying too heavily on player initiative, however. Sometimes, the GM plans for an idea or connection that the PCs just don't come up with on their own, and this can lead to stretches of time where the Players just sit and look at one another without a clue as to where to go or what to do. The GM should always have a backup plan to help the PCs out if they get stuck. Usually this help comes in the form of a NPC mentor or contact, but a bit of gossip, an intercepted note or a hunch can be just the spark that the PCs need.

In closing, I think it's a good idea to mention that the GM should have an essentially humble personality, and like the great magicians we all love to watch, he should never reveal his tricks to the audience. It can be tempting, as the Players sit back and congratulate themselves on finding an important clue or solving the scenario, to explain how difficult it was for you the GM, to arrange things in just the right way for the characters to succeed. The GM's machinations, however clever or subtle, should always remain behind the scenes. Stealing the Players' thunder as they enjoy their success by explaining exactly how you arranged it so that there was no way they *couldn't* miss the clue will only rob them of the illusion that they had a real hand in directing the outcome of the scenario. It will leave their victory hollow. Ultimately this kind of behavior could cause apathy about the game, as the Players believe that no matter what they do they will eventually reach the end of the scenario, and if the Players don't care, they won't want to play.

"Most people can't think, most of the remainder won't think, the small fraction who do think mostly can't do it very well. The extremely tiny fraction who think regularly, accurately, creatively, and without self-delusion- in the long run, these are the only people who count.

— Robert Heinlein