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Book Review of: *Gifted Amateurs and Other Essays on Tolkien, the Inklings, and Fantasy Literature* by David Bratman

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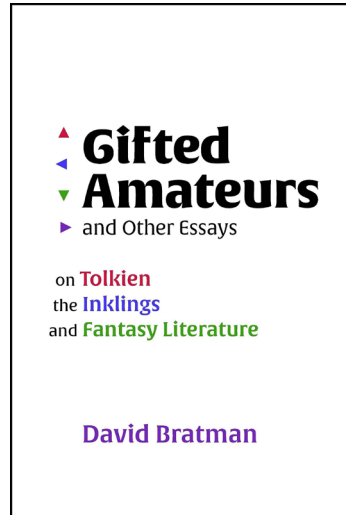
## Online Book Reviews

**David Bratman, *Gifted Amateurs and Other Essays on Tolkien, the Inklings, and Fantasy Literature*. Altadena, CA: Mythopoeic Press, 2024.**

David Bratman is a Tolkien scholar, librarian, and longstanding member of the Mythopoeic Society. Since 2004, he has been curating the Year's Work in Tolkien Studies section of the *Tolkien Studies* academic journal. Though Bratman is well-respected among Tolkien scholars and fans, it is worth briefly reintroducing his life and work to explain precisely what kind of book *Gifted Amateurs* is: the sum of the whole of decades Bratman has dedicated to the appreciation and study of Tolkien, the Inklings, and other fantasy authors such as Lord Dunsany, Mervyn Peake, Ursula K. Le Guin, Roger Zelazny, and Neil Gaiman.

*Gifted Amateurs* is divided into four parts, the first three of which correspond precisely to three divisions of interest: what is specifically Tolkienian, what concerns the Inklings, and what relates to other fantasy authors (especially the five authors mentioned above), respectively. The fourth part is a collection of six very short writings ("Squiggles") that are all concerned with Tolkien except for the obituary of fantasy author and Mythopoeic Society member Paul Edwin Zimmer. The squiggle on the condensed *Silmarillion* is hilarious, and the final biographical squiggle is often touching.

"Part 1: Tolkien," as might be expected, is the longest concentration dedicated to a single author in the whole book. It is made of six chapters. "J.R.R. Tolkien: An Introduction to His Work" serves well the purpose of presenting Tolkien's literary writings to new readers who may have not read him, or who may have only read *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. "The Literary Value of *The History of Middle-earth*" is my favorite chapter in Part 1, and I particularly appreciated the choice to reproduce the passage from "The Tale of Tinúviel" when Beren shows his severed hand to Tinwelint as an example of Tolkien's characterization of the early, eerie Elves through archaic style. "Top Ten Rejected Plot Twists from *The Lord of the Rings*" is amusing to read even when one is familiar with *The History of The Lord of the Rings* books. "The Artistry of Omissions and Revisions in *The Lord of the Rings*" should probably be skipped by the general reader, who may find it a bit tedious.



"Hobbit Names Aren't From Kentucky" is dedicated to disproving the interpretation of the Hobbit name origins suggested in the title, while "Smith of Wootton Major and Genre Fantasy" is a devoted tribute to one of Tolkien's later and lesser-known stories. Overall, a Tolkien scholar's understanding of Tolkien won't be revolutionized by reading this part, but many Tolkien readers and fans' appreciation of the author of *The Lord of the Rings* will be enriched by Bratman's writings.

"Part 2: Inklings," in four chapters, focuses more on C.S. Lewis than on any other author in the literary circle that Bratman is concerned with. "Gifted Amateurs: C.S. Lewis and the Inklings" is the best introduction to the Inklings that I have ever read, and it is informative and enlightening even if one has read Humphrey Carpenter's 1981 book *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their Friends*, and/or other dedicated monographs. "The Inklings and the Pacific Ocean" may feel a bit marginal, as the connections between the authors and the area being considered are tenuous at best. "C.S. Lewis's Space Trilogy: An Informed View" offers many interesting remarks on this underrated sequence of novels by the Narnia author, and "Unmasking Charles Williams" presents *The Masques of Amen House*, a trilogy of satirical plays by Charles Williams, highlighting some exhilarating passages of pure wit.

In "Part 3: Others," made of seven chapters, I was a bit disappointed by "Imaginary Worlds, Sliced and Preserved," detailing Lin Carter's motivations in establishing his choice of the canon of fantasy authors, and "How Do You Solve A Problem Like King Arthur," dedicated to twentieth-century Arthurian literature and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, but the chapter on "The Plays of Lord Dunsany" was another real discovery of underappreciated treasures, and "The Geography of Earthsea" felt like a deep dive into Le Guin's mythopoeic creation. The remaining chapters, dedicated to Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy, Roger Zelazny's massive fantasy and science fiction output (especially *Lord of Light*, inspired by Hindu mythology), and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comic books, felt a bit overloaded, especially the Zelazny chapter. These could have benefited from being more concise.

What is particularly noteworthy—and indeed praiseworthy—is the dedication with which Bratman focuses on neglected works of his choice authors, as he does with Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, and Lord Dunsany. I was already familiar with the whole corpus of Tolkien's works and already preferred *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength* to any Narnia book, but *The Masques of Amen House* is a genial parody of the academic publication process, and Dunsany's plays in some cases preserve bits not unworthy of his best-known masterworks such as *The Gods of Pegana* and *The King of Elfland's Daughter*.

"Part 4: Squibbles" gets serious with the heartfelt obituary of Paul Edwin Zimmer, but otherwise it feels a bit more like Tolkien fandom folklore than academic study, as it includes a review of *The Fellowship of the Ring* imag-

ined to have been written at the time of the book's first publication in 1954, an ironical summary of *The Silmarillion*, some comments on Peter Jackson's films written before the *Fellowship* film was released, remarks on religion in Middle-earth that might be profound if properly developed, and a personal reminiscence of Bratman's whole experience as a Tolkien fan. To be clear, it was worth including these pieces in the volume, but most of them are curiosities. However, as I already said, I was particularly moved by Bratman's memoirs of his own personal Tolkien history. First reading Tolkien in 1968 must have been a great privilege, at least in my view, as I had not even been born yet at that time (I first read *The Lord of the Rings* in 2000, shortly before the Peter Jackson films). The affection that Bratman displays for the other Mythopoeic Society members communicates the feeling of mutual inspiration and shared friendship that is experienced by so many enthusiasts worldwide. In particular, I personally relate to Bratman's experience of meeting his future wife in the circles of Tolkien fandom, since I had a similar experience. Bratman's *Gifted Amateurs*, then, should also be read as a celebration of the many kinds of love that Tolkien, the Inklings, and fantasy literature inspire in our lives.

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