

SOME COMPARISONS.

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Before I start - I know I have only read "The Narnia Chronicles" and the three Garner books, but you're getting this anyway.

Coming all at once into the realms of fiction other than the standard Sci Fi type, one notices that it is much harder to create another world than to write a straightforward S.F. novel. To create a truly viable other world, it is no use merely to set your story in another world geography, or to have wierd and peculiar peoples. One has to capture that sense of something far more deeply interfused, a reality with which to cloak your alien peoples' motives, histories, and lands. And most important of all, you must involve the fellow traveller in the fate of your world.

The standard method for doing this seems to be some sort of Adventure, which you follow, or otherwise involves you in the properties of that world. In Middle Earth of course we have two main adventures: Bilbo's and Frodo's - plus of neccessity their attendant minor skirmishes. These provide the prime means of exploring the terrain of Middle Earth, and in the Narnia tales adventure once again carries the can. But here there is the knowledge that Narnia is an other world, unlike Middle Earth wherein we "live". There is another interesting difference here; in Narnia the various children seem to be fairly free agents (only in "The Silver Chair" is any compulsion placed on them) and take up sides as they will. In 'the Rings of course Frodo does choose his fate freely, but one feels that certain social pressures are put on him, and after all the Ring HAD to be destroyed. Once this compulsion is in motion the further happenings proceed in quite a logical manner.

What then do these adventures reveal? In the Narnia Chronicles one feels that the facets of Narnia revealed through the children are created on the spot by Lewis, though any disbelief thus engendered is removed by Lewis's humour, and to a great extent rendered acceptable by the chronological nature of the books. Anyway, who cares if it's a bit odd in places? it's the story that counts! Such frivolity has no place in Middle Earth, ordered as it is by its history, carefully collated and revealed in dribs and drabs throughout the story. It is this almost painful documentation which sets 'the Rings above its fellows (forgive me if I haven't read Cabell etc.) and provides almost endless oportunities for the reader to become involved. One is free to wander through the whole histories of four races, two continents, the power of evil, and the Three Ages of the World. The story is sprinkled with allusions to these various pasts, mostly in the form of assured knowledge or names spoken with obvious significance: "Elendil!", "A!Elbereth" etc. But occasionally Gandalf or Aragorn or other will give us (via the Hobbits) a potted history lecture to fill us in. These historical backflashes occur in Narnia too, but the essence of revelation in Narnia is action. It is easy to see that the methods of revealing the World so far mentioned are very closely related to the plot; we may need to know the history of, say, Mordor, in order to continue the journey or fight. This is clearly of importance; no plot - no journey- no discovery. Even more so in Narnia, we can only explore that world by adventure in Narnia's terrain and through Narnia's time.

But for Middle Earth there is yet another method, perhaps the most powerful descriptive method there is: Poetry! Incredibly

there are nearly sixty poems, chants and similar in 'the Rings alone! Ranging from tantalising glimpses of past heroism (The Lay of Gil-galad. And I find it tantalising even if you don't) to the epic poems of Earendil and Nimrodel. From the homely fresh air pleasures of Hobbits to the Incantation of the One Ring! Whole stories are encompassed by these incidentals, and more, they capture as nothing else, the atmosphere of Middle Earth.

Somewhere at the beginning of this I mentioned those Garner books. Well, here I go: to me they lie squarely in the realm of childrens fiction, just a little better than the Famous Five books. There just isn't any meat in them. Cadellin (Garner's wizard) seems slightly comic, he certainly doesn't inspire any confidence in me at all. His Elves are like a bad dream, it is only his Dwarves who have any semblance of reality. And what of Garner's other world? Yes, I know the story is set in our world, and the magical elements are only projections from outside - or outwhen - but their impact on me and my world (apart from its relevance to the plot) was virtually non-existent. It is only the Old Magic in "The Moon of Gornath" which moves me, and this by nature of Old Magic not Garner's handling of it in the story.

So there we are then, Garner's up the shute, Narnia's a good read but not liveable; only Middle Earth seems to live on in solitary splendour. Though somewhere there must be books of equal standing - can anyone tell me where?



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