

EGSM 4: Hobbitry and other joys (Lord of the Rings)

Content warnings:

Discussions of: death and bereavement, war and PTSD

Mentions of: food

HELEN

I had a behind the scenes book of the Two Towers, and...but I had it when it was too young to appreciate what I was being told...

(laughing)

SUE

Oh...

HELEN

...really and I was just mostly looking at it for references to draw pictures of the characters.

[Show Theme - Intro]

HELEN GOULD

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusiasm. I am your host Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers, and this is the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. And today we are talking about one of my absolute most favouritest things, which is the Lord of the Rings, and I am totally stoked to be joined by Gavia, Jeffrey and Sue. We're going to do a little

round of introductions, we'll go alphabetically as always. So Gavia can you give us your pronouns and tell us what you do?

GAVIA

Hi, Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, she/her, and I am a film critic and fandom journalist so I will be talking probably mostly about Lord of the Rings movies which I love a great deal.

HELEN

Oh I look forward to that. And Jeffrey, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

JEFFREY

Hi, this is Jeffrey Nils Gardner. Pronouns they/them, status as second-best Rusty Quiller...

(Helen laughs)

...and I am Rusty Quill's mastering editor.

HELEN

Wonderful. And finally, Sue, give us your pronouns and tell us who you are.

SUE

I'm Sue Sims. Pronouns she, her, and your majesty.

(Helen laughs)

And I have been playing, on and off, Gertrude in the Magnus Archives for several years.

HELEN

Indeed you have.

JEFFREY

Is 'on and off Gertrude' the robot version?

(Sue and Helen laughing)

HELEN

Oh, a sci-fi version of the Magnus Archives where everyone's robots.

(Jeffrey laughs)

That would be fun. I mean we were talking before the recording about the different vibes of Lord of the Rings where in some places it feels like things are following fairytale logic, and in some places it feels more like, sort of mythology or legends. I was wondering whether anyone had any thoughts on that because, in a previous episode on Lord of the Rings in the pilot season over on Patreon, we had some thoughts about how characters like Tom Bombadil sort of follow fairytale logic, but characters from other parts and in other places of the book feel much more grounded and realistic. I'd be interested to hear what people think about that.

SUE

I think the problem with Tom Bombadil, I agree about the fairytale aspect, I think the reason is that when Tolkien started writing Lord of the Rings, he really didn't have a clue what he was doing. I mean he said...

(Helen laughs)

...this himself, this is not a criticism...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...he knew he was writing a sequel to The Hobbit, and he knew there was going to be quite a lot of hobbitry in it...

HELEN

Mmhmm.

SUE

...but he really didn't have much idea of where he was going at this stage. So, he put Tom Bombadil in because Tom Bombadil was a small wooden doll that actually belonged to one of his sons.

HELEN

Oh!

SUE

...and yeah, and he thought it would be rather fun. He had already written various verses which were much, much, much later on, I think in the 19 late 60s? I can't remember exactly...

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

...they were published as the Adventures of Tom Bombadil, and there are various poems about what he did and about Goldberry; if you want to read about his courting of Goldberry that's where you go. But, the great problem is that...

HELEN

Wow, I had no idea that it was based on a doll.

SUE

Yeah, it most certainly was, but the problem was of course that as the, as the story went on, Tom Bombadil becomes less and less relevant. And that's why Peter Jackson could cut him out of the film without anyone really missing him. I mean...

(Helen laughs)

...I didn't, because I never terribly liked Tom Bombadil anyway, but I don't know...

(Helen laughs)

...did you, did the rest of you miss him from the films?

GAVIA

I mean I didn't, but I read the books precisely once before seeing the films at the age of 11 so, although I remember the books, they are perhaps not as wedded to my image of the movies; but like in terms of the, like the different tones, I think that is the part of the reason why like such a wide variety of people kind of engage with the story...

SUE

Mm.

GAVIA

...because you have got some parts that are so cosy, all of the hobbits, and then you have got some parts that feel like these huge epic tales. And obviously Tolkien was kind of drawing from all this mythology, like he was really influenced by stuff like Beowulf. He was extremely influenced by Norse sagas and mythology, and like the Song of the Nibelungs which later become the Ring Cycle by Wagner, so he is like very influenced by that, which is also a story about dwarves and elves, and a magical ring...

(laughs)

...and Gandalf kind of has these resemblances to Odin. So he is really drawing

from all that stuff, and he basically as an academic was obviously like a linguist and was only interested in literature that happened kind of before medieval times, like for him Shakespeare was too modern so that's kind of why it has...

(Helen laughs)

JEFFREY

Amen.

GAVIA

...this tone and it's had this knock-on effect to other fantasy writers.

JEFFREY

I think there's a thing there also, in that it always felt to me, and maybe it was just that these were kind of the stories I grew up with simultaneously, the Iliad and Greek history and mythology and Tolkien. I think that there is a piece of it that is, I am going to say 'Epic' with a capital E rather than mythology in that like the, the disconnect of like were these real people, were these not, this is just history even though it is obviously fantastical, kind of gets blurred in the way you know yeah, of an Iliad, a Herodotus maybe even. That this is, this is an early kind of history.

HELEN

Mm.

GAVIA

That completely makes sense, that's such a good point because it's like Tolkien is writing from the perspective of embedding himself in this world that he has created and it's like people talk about escapism, but no one...

(laughs)

...had as much escapism in his life as Tolkien, because he like started creating you know Quenya the Elvish language when he was like 17 or 18 when he just started undergrad and...

HELEN

Oh.

GAVIA

...he was completely obsessed with this world for his entire life so, I mean, he wanted to be in Middle Earth, like he kind of thought of himself as a hobbit type person like in terms of his own personality. And obviously like when he was a young man he lived through World War I which you can really kind of tell in the books and the movies...

HELEN AND JEFFREY

Mm.

GAVIA

...because it is all these stories which have the sense of kind of pain and grief but also nostalgia, so he was kind of escaping from the real world into this ancient saga that he had created of a world that I think kind of felt real to him.

HELEN

I feel like whenever, as a writer, whatever you create does feel real to you in some way otherwise you probably wouldn't be making it. And the amount of words that he wrote about this world and about this mythos, I can absolutely see it being a form of escapism, because that's also, you know, that's part of the reason why I write to have like, well let me think about other people's problems for a while...

(laughing)

...and let's make them worse than mine, so I can feel better.

JEFFREY

Gavia what you're saying there really, it makes a lot of sense. I think back to when I was first encountering these stories, I think my father read The Hobbit to me at four and...

HELEN

Wow.

JEFFREY

...we kind of read it, or talked about it or Lord of the Rings just about every year since.

(Helen laughs)

So much of the story is nested in that like you know the ages of the world and like, the idea that like no this is, this is earth, you know, elves have gone away now, sure, but like these humans are the same humans we have here, it's just this is way back in the day...

HELEN

Mm.

JEFFREY

...and you know hobbits are there if you look for them, they just don't really come out much anymore. Yeah, that was always... I think it is there in the text but also you know consuming it at a very young age I think they all had that air of like "oh this is a reality that we could step into pretty easily"...

HELEN

Mm.

JEFFREY

...and there's so much infrastructure behind everything in the Lord of the Rings you know through the Silmarillion that was unlike something like the Star Wars universe where it's created by hundreds of people over time, it's really just, this incredible amount of backstory built by just, you know, one person, or you know, I guess one person and his son completing things.

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

Yes, I think that's absolutely true. From a reader's point of view it can really be escapism and you are quite right of course about Tolkien. The languages I think weren't escapism, but the stories probably were...

HELEN

Mmhmm.

SUE

...but we do tend to use that word escapism, don't we, very negatively. Do you remember the...was it an actual conversation? I think it was, between CS Lewis and Tolkien, when Tolkien had been accused of escapism and Lewis said well yes, but who would be most worried about people escaping? Answer: jailers.

HELEN

Mm, yeah I am on Lewis' side. I don't think that escapism is a dirty word and I think if none of us were able to escape into our imaginations, I think we would all go even madder than we all are right now.

(laughing)

GAVIA

I don't think there is going to many anti-escapism voices on this podcast.

(All laughing)

SUE

This is true.

JEFFREY

And what a world to escape into, if you think...

HELEN

Yeah.

JEFFREY

...I mean like it is a world where there is you know evil with a capital E, and dangerous creatures, and war, but it's also a world in which, you know no one gets sick, no one, there are- people die, but it is at the, um, it is in service of a greater good and in...

HELEN

Mm.

JEFFREY

...it's not random or small or sad? Well sad maybe.

GAVIA

And there's lots of delicious descriptions of food
(laughs).

JEFFREY

Mm hm.

HELEN

I mean in the Silmarillion I would argue there is definitely...I am sure people do get sick. There are definitely people who die of having broken hearts...

JEFFREY

Well, but that is like the opposite of a small inconsequential death, that is feeling so deeply...

HELEN

Oh.

JEFFREY

...whereas there is I think, there is a cause and a meaning to death.

HELEN

I see, so you are talking about how nothing feels...

SUE

It's not accidental.

JEFFREY

Mm hm.

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

It's not just random chance.

HELEN

I want to go back briefly because um, Jeffrey you said that your dad read the- was it the Lord of the Rings or The Hobbit to you when you were four?

JEFFREY

We started with The Hobbit yeah. I was given a copy of The Hobbit when my, I was going to say baby sister, she now has a two year old of her own, so not so much baby sister anymore, but um. Yeah at my sister's birth I was given a beautiful copy of The Hobbit with the, these gorgeous oil paintings I believe, all throughout just- and I still have it. It looks like an ancient tome, it's weathered, and you know cracked, and pages browning and all that.

HELEN

So, you clearly heard or read the books before you saw the films?

JEFFREY

Yes. Yeah.

HELEN

Is that true for the other two of you, Gavia, Sue?

GAVIA

Yeah, yeah I read the books when I was 11, right before the movies came out. So I was kind of right at like the apex of the millennial generation that were just like obsessed with Lord of the Rings in our early teens when it like came to yet another really big audience. So, I think I read the books either once or twice, but I still feel like I remember them much better than most books I would have read, because obviously I have seen the films so many times and they are kind of part of the pop culture discourse still.

(Jeffrey laughs)

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

As for me I talked about reading The Hobbit, certainly well, well before the films.

(laughing)

HELEN

Yes.

(laughs)

SUE

Well, the films didn't come out, I think the first film was 2001 I think...

GAVIA

Mm, yes.

SUE

...and by that time I was, mm well, much, much older than the rest of you...

(Helen laughs)

...but yeah, reading The Hobbit on the backflap of the dustjacket it... there was

a little sort of puff for Lord of the Rings and it was quite clearly, it was a grown up book and I was seven and I thought “well I will read these when I am 12” ...

HELEN

Aw.

SUE

...and I did!

(Helen laughs)

I saved up my pocket money and my Christmas money, and then I went out and I bought all three volumes of the Lord of the Rings...

GAVIA

I mean it's the ideal age!

SUE

...which I still have.

JEFFREY

Yeah.

SUE

Oh yes, it was amazing and then I just sort of submerged myself in them for days and days, I don't think my parents could get anything out of me at all.

(Helen laughs)

It was, ah.

HELEN

Yeah, you would never find me without, in general you would never find me without a book when I was a kid, I just took a book everywhere with me no matter where I was going.

SUE

Oh yeah. Absolutely.

HELEN

So, that's really interesting because my first introduction to Lord of the Rings was the films. I remember seeing the advert on the television and there was that shot of Frodo and his... and like when he puts the ring on in Bree. And that shot is very golden, and like the ring is coming up towards the camera and his finger is just coming up into it...

SUE

Yes, yes.

HELEN

...I remember that so vividly. Not, not because of the films but I remember that advert. And I was like this looks interesting and I made my dad take me to see it.

GAVIA

I think that's really a testament to the quality of the visual imagery in those movies like they are...

JEFFREY

Oh yeah.

GAVIA

Just incomparably good in terms of like Hollywood releases? Just unbelievable movies.

SUE

Yes, they are incredible.

HELEN

Yes!

SUE

I mean the Return of the King of course won all those Oscars...

GAVIA

Mm.

SUE

...but they were really being given for the whole trilogy, weren't they?

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

Not just for, in the way that CS Lewis got the Carnegie Medal for The Last Battle, but obviously it was really for the whole of the seven Narnia books. But yeah I thought the films were...I didn't expect to enjoy them, but I really did!

(Helen laughs)

GAVIA

I mean they are really eye opening in the context of like other big Hollywood blockbusters, because...

HELEN

Yeah.

GAVIA

...there was pretty much nothing apart from Star Wars that's at that calibre of film making, and you know they have got this incredible cast. Obviously, we all know the cast of Lord of the Rings is perfect and amazing.

(laughing)

SUE

Oh yes.

(Helen laughs)

GAVIA

But it's, you know, the level of craft and kind of care that was kind of put into that is not something you see in any other blockbuster franchise. Because you know there are so many cooks involved in cooking the meal you know, and they're not made by people who really care about it. And it really does feel like a fluke you know that Peter Jackson was able to get this massive army of artisans together to make this just like extremely artistically complex series of movies. And when you re-watch them it's like yes, they are extremely entertaining but as a critic watching them as an adult, I was just like blown away by you know the lighting...

(laughs)

...the costume design, the music which I could talk about for hours is just...

SUE

Yeah, the Lord of the Rings films are just astonishing. It's things like, well the swords.

HELEN

Mmm.

SUE

Now you don't get really close ups of most of the swords, but every one of them, they're made by craftsmen, they have got the, what do you call it? Um, like an engraving...

GAVIA

Yeah, the runes and stuff, uh huh.

HELEN

Yeah.

GAVIA

And they had all of the pieces of writing they just had this one calligrapher who was writing like letters that would remain...

SUE

Yes.

GAVIA

...inside envelopes and that sort of thing!
(laughing).

SUE

Yes, yes.

HELEN

The attention to detail in the films is just incredible. I had a behind the scenes book of the Two Towers, and...but I had it when it was too young to appreciate what I was being told...
(laughing)

SUE

Mm.

HELEN

...really, and I was just mostly looking at it for references to draw pictures of the characters.

SUE

Oh bless.

GAVIA

I remember my friends and I would all watch and re-watch all the special features on the DVDs and honestly...

SUE

Mm.

GAVIA

...DVD special features – they should bring those back for movies that are released on streaming...

JEFFREY

Mmhmm.

GAVIA

...because they are really interesting and the ones for Lord of the Rings, they think they really understood that they wanted to record everything for posterity because there were so many people involved...

HELEN AND SUE

Yes.

GAVIA

...and like most average viewers are not going to be aware of the level of work that goes into that stuff...

SUE

Yes, absolutely.

GAVIA

...and you know the costuming alone is astounding.

SUE

Well, everything. I have got all those behind-the-scenes books and you know they are just unbelievable, and of course filming in New Zealand...

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

...I watched that, and I watched the mountains and I thought they can't be real, it has to be CGI, but they're real!

HELEN

They are, they are. It's incredible.

JEFFREY

I think there is also something to be said for the quality of them as adaptations, you know I think about...

HELEN

Mm.

GAVIA

Yeah.

JEFFREY

...I mean Marvel obviously adaptations in kind of loose or strict ways from a vast wealth of comic books but- you know I think about the film version of the Golden Compass that came out, not exactly in that era, a little after, but not too long after...

GAVIA

Mm hm.

JEFFREY

...and just the vast gulf of, not just quality, but care that went into the adaptation.

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

Yes.

JEFFREY

I mean I think the cutting of Tom Bombadil - it's, whether or not you like that character, it's a thing - that and numerous other shifts or changes I think were done really intelligently in terms of bringing this from a, you know an epic book into an epic film. I also think it's, and I will say having only seen the first of The Hobbit movies and you know being someone who has especially to The Hobbit a deep emotional connection, I think those were really poorly adapted.

GAVIA

Yeah, I elected not to watch those. I was just like I do not want to see this charming short children's fantasy story turned into three extremely overlong action movies.

(laughing)

SUE

Oh.

JEFFREY

Yeah, well and exactly, exactly that. I mean a part of the thing that is so beautiful about The Hobbit is you know how, how many of the problems are solved through cleverness or riddles or...

HELEN

Yeah, yeah.

JEFFREY

...you know through delaying and playing the trolls off of each other until the sun dawns. And I felt like at least in the first film, those were all replaced with combat, with you know sword fights and...

HELEN

Yeah, it felt like Peter Jackson had gone “oh um, we had lots of--”, or I don’t know who, it may not have been Peter, but someone had gone “oh, Lord of the Rings had loads of really good battles in it, we should probably put those into The Hobbit, because that’s what people liked about Lord of the Rings right...

JEFFREY

Yeah.

HELEN

...it was all the battles”. I was so disappointed. I went to see The Hobbit at Leicester Square cinema on like the night it came out, and I had such goosebumps when I heard the old familiar music and I saw the font coming up on the screen and by the end of it I was like, oh no I don’t think I liked that very much.

(laughing)

JEFFREY

(laughing).

GAVIA

I mean it kind of turns The Hobbit into just like any other blockbuster franchise and the thing that is so magical about Lord of the Rings films is that instead of listening to kind of some studio exec that thinks they know what the audience wants, and is making decisions based on sort of focus grouping and you know, three act structures where you have to have a battle at a certain point. Even though the Lord of the Rings movies depart from the source text in some ways, they're extremely emotionally sincere in a way that the vast majority...

HELEN

Yeah.

JEFFREY

Mmhm.

GAVIA

...of other movies aren't, and they kind of understand the core themes and the things that you are meant to be feeling when you are just looking at certain things so like, you get this sense of like nostalgia, or you get this sense of kind of worshipful impressiveness at certain scenarios and that kind of...

HELEN

Yeah.

GAVIA

...religiosity is just not something you see in other blockbusters. And also like I said, like in terms of the emotional sincerity the fact that it is just like a very sensitive story, like they are just completely...

JEFFREY

Yeah.

GAVIA

...unironically delving into the emotions of these characters you know...

HELEN

Yes.

GAVIA

...which is not something you see a lot in films that are about men, because Hollywood is really into either critical or just like completely endorsing depictions of toxic masculinity and Lord of the Rings films are like, no, these people all have very close ties and they are very open about their feelings and we understand that, you know.

HELEN

There's a really good YouTube video out there, I think it's Pop Culture Detective who did it? So they did this, it's about half an hour long and it's called "Boys don't cry (except when they do)" and it's a really interesting - because a lot of the videos that they do are about examinations of masculinity and femininity and sexism and society in film - and this video is so interesting for like, it's a deep dive into the ways in which men are allowed, or not allowed to cry, and to display vulnerability or weakness. And we do see a lot of vulnerability and weakness in the, in the male characters of the Lord of the Rings in a way that you don't often see.

GAVIA

Well they're allowed to comfort each other...

JEFFERY

Mm hm.

GAVIA

...they are allowed to be warm and affectionate to each other.

HELEN

Yes.

SUE

It can go too far. I got terribly bored by the last bit of, or nearly the last bit, of Return of the King where Frodo and Sam are sitting on the slopes of Mount Doom, and I kept saying "oh, come on eagles. Come on!"

(Helen laughs)

It did go on a bit.

HELEN

No, that's one of my favourite parts, Sue.

SUE

Yeah, I'm sorry it's not mine.

GAVIA

Got all that catharsis.

HELEN

They love each other, Sue!

(laughing)

SUE

Well, I know! I am happy with them, but you know they don't have to just keep going on and on and on because, it's, the problem is...

(Helen laughs)

...that um, basically I wanted to get to the bit which in fact they didn't show....

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

...which was the scouring of the Shire.

HELEN

Ah.

SUE

That was the problem for me. You know there was a lot of the emoting between Frodo and Sam there, but there wasn't any emoting over the scouring of the Shire where in the books, there is a lot of emoting, especially from Sam because of the...

HELEN

Yes.

SUE

...ghastly things that, that Saruman and his crew had been doing you know. But because Jackson decided, understandably, to leave that out, and he explains it of course in one of the extended versions you know with people discussing things. But I missed that, and I just kept thinking well you know, if they just cut out about, you know, five hours of Frodo and Sam emoting...

(Helen laughs)

...we could have had the scouring of the Shire. So, I got annoyed about that, and Faramir. I got very annoyed about what Jackson did with Faramir!

HELEN

I think we're going to take a break and we're going to come back to that in a second because that sounds like something I want to hear about!

HELEN

And welcome back! So, I want to go back briefly, and I want to discuss the difference in the endings between the books and the films. Because as you mention Sue, the scouring of the Shire is taken completely out of the films, but it is a substantial chunk of Return of the King, and it gives a very different feeling to the ending. Because in the films they come back and the Shire is just how they left it; and in the books they come back and the war has followed them home. And I would really love to hear people's opinions on um, I guess on the differences between those two endings. I mean, Sue, you would prefer to have the scouring stuff in I guess?

SUE

Well, I don't know. When I heard Peter Jackson actually explaining why he'd done it...

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

...it made very, very good sense. He basically wanted to end on a more triumphant note.

HELEN

Yeah, fair.

SUE

The scouring of the Shire of course is very un-triumphant – I mean they win, and they beat Lotho and Saruman and all the rest of it...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...but there's a sort of, its melancholy, ultimately, isn't it...

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

...um and I can see exactly why Jackson changed that. And of course to be fair, he did have a tiny, tiny bit of it didn't he, in the...

JEFFREY

In the vision.

SUE

...I can't even remember, is it the Fellowship of the Ring? Yeah when they are in Lothlorien...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...and um Frodo follows Galadriel, and she has that beautiful bowl of water which is straight from the book of course...

HELEN

Yes.

SUE

...and he looks into it, and what he sees is the scouring of the Shire...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...and then Galadriel says that bit about, it may never happen, and it's only if people perhaps turn aside to try and prevent it and that's it. So he- you could say, he gets it in a tiny bit.

JEFFREY

Yes, well, but I think there is something... I mean really looking at that like, how true and difficult of a thing to chew on of you know, Frodo does everything right, and does win and does destroy the ring, and still his worst vision comes true and like...

HELEN

Yeah.

JEFFREY

...and that's a really powerful thing. So, the films are, you know, heavily produced by American companies, and I want to advance the idea that the

ending of the films is a much more kind of American understanding of war, with Tolkien in World War I and you know looking at things in World War II even, you have a world where the war does come home and is fought on home soil. And for America, you know the experience of the World Wars is going out and fighting and then coming home to a boom and to prosperity and to safety...

HELEN

Yeah.

JEFFREY

...and I think that's kind of the fundamental difference.

SUE

That's really interesting.

GAVIA

Yeah.

SUE

That hadn't struck me.

GAVIA

I mean structurally it fits much more in with the sort of conventional victory arc. I mean for me...

HELEN

Yeah.

GAVIA

...they're both very different stories and I don't think it's like one is the better one, I think they are both good and just different...

HELEN

No, no.

GAVIA

...but people do still kind of remark about how Frodo's finale at the end of those films, despite the fact that they have given it this much more victorious arc overall, like Frodo's role is still much more downbeat than we're used to seeing. Like it's not like, oh...

HELEN

Yeah.

GAVIA

..."life's a party now" because it does actually end with him you know, he has lifelong trauma and he feels isolated from his original community and he never recovers from it, which is kind of the end of the film. So, it still feels very unusually bittersweet for this kind of story.

JEFFREY

And I think that's, that's even, that's very much there in the films and is really strong in the books in some similar and some different ways. Yeah, Frodo is,

you know, obviously physically is the nine fingered hobbit and that gets highlighted a lot, but also just there are all of these descriptions of, of him having kind of wasted and being thin and...

HELEN

Mm, pale and...

JEFFREY

...yeah and both and you see that in Bilbo too in Lord of the Rings.

HELEN

I was about to say that Bilbo did the same thing when he came back from the Lonely Mountain, he also locked himself away and became sort of... but Bilbo was sort of like a friendly eccentric, and Frodo has become a sad eccentric.

JEFFREY

Well, and the idea that you know, Sam stays in the Shire and you know continues life; but Frodo and Bilbo kind of, it's maybe framed it as a reward, but kind of have to depart and go into the west...

HELEN

Yeah.

JEFFREY

...because they are, they have been so diminished by the, the horror of the ring, of being corrupted by this thing...

GAVIA

Yeah, and the fact that Frodo was so young when he went away because like he is effectively...

HELEN

Mm.

GAVIA

...kind of 18 in the world of hobbits, and you know that's very visible in the movies because Elijah Wood was so young when they started filming...

JEFFREY

Mm hm.

GAVIA

...and Sam is kind of canonically this established adult.

SUE

Actually, he wasn't 18. I think he's more like 30.

GAVIA

Well, no he is 33, but in terms of the hobbit life...

SUE

Oh, I know, but 33 is when hobbits come of age, but actually he is older than that. He is 33 when Bilbo is 101, but then there is a stretch of years between...

HELEN

And then there's a few years, isn't there?

SUE

Yes. He's about 50 actually.

GAVIA

Oh well I guess I was thinking of the movie where he does just pop off.

(laughing)

(Helen laughs)

SUE

Yeah no, no that's right but he's about 50 in, in human years that would be about 30. On the other hand, Merry and Pippin are really, really young.

GAVIA

Okay.

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

Neither of them have- I think Pippin particularly is about the equivalent of 17...

HELEN

Aw, Pippin.

SUE

...if you look at the family trees in the back of the books, the back of the Return of the King, you can actually work out all their ages, which of course I did.

(laughing)

(Helen laughs)

How sad.

GAVIA

It sounds like me organising all of the Sherlock Holmes stories by chronology.

(Group laughter)

SUE

Yeah absolutely. Um, but Jeffrey I think you are absolutely right. I mean Bilbo describes himself as feeling stretched...

HELEN, GAVIA AND JEFFREY

Mm.

SUE

...like butter scraped across too much bread. And of course he hasn't used the ring very much at all...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...whereas Frodo is using it and carrying it all the time for 13 months...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...and he says, doesn't he, towards the end "I've been wounded"; "I have been wounded by knife and sting and tooth". And it's not just the ring, it's all the other horrible things that have happened to him.

HELEN

Yeah, yes I, I will say I have become so much more sympathetic to Frodo as I have gotten older, and so much more admiring of like, the courage that it takes because, I guess because my understanding of trauma has grown a lot...

JEFFREY

Mm hm.

HELEN

...since I was, well obviously since I was like 11. But like-
(laughing)

SUE

(laughing)

Yes.

HELEN

The idea of having to carry something that to other people might seem small, but to you is like a massive weight in your mind, and it takes everything that you have just to take another step, and then the marks of that staying with you for such a long time...

SUE

Yes.

HELEN

...like I really empathise with Frodo. I think a lot, especially over the last couple of years, about that phrase “I feel like butter over too much bread”...

JEFFREY

Yeah.

HELEN

...like I have...like that is so relatable.

(laughing)

Lately.

SUE

Yeah, I know, it’s a wonderful phrase isn’t it.

HELEN

It is.

SUE

But in the end, I think Tolkien did...he says, doesn't he, that in the end Sam also went, the last of the ring bearers...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...he goes to the west.

JEFFREY

Mm hm.

SUE

But I've never quite believed that, because Sam fits so nicely into his world, doesn't he?

HELEN

Mm. I think he did though.

GAVIA

I always interpreted that as his love and loyalty to Frodo.

HELEN

Me too.

SUE

Yes, I agree about that. I agree, but- and I am not sure to be fair that...it's a bit of a throwaway as far as Tolkien is concerned, you know he says it, but he's not really, he's not really worried that much one way or the other...

(Helen laughs)

...not sure I am either, but um, yeah.

HELEN

I think he followed Frodo. I think that um...

SUE

He does! Well, he does, Tolkien says so, so we'll have to believe him.

(Group laughter)

And he, he was a ring bearer for a little bit.

JEFFREY

There is another thing in terms of the adaptation that I think is really, is really powerful in the Peter Jackson Lord of the Rings and I think that is the kind of deep awareness of kind of all of the ancillary material. I feel like...

HELEN

Mm.

JEFFREY

...Peter Jackson is always in conversation with, also with the Silmarillion...

HELEN

Yeah.

JEFFREY

...even at times where you know yes there are some kind of, they feel a bit like fan service like 'oh we are going to throw in Manwe here' and things like that but like...

HELEN

Mm hm.

JEFFREY

...it does, it feels like it is being built in... they're building a reality where those, those stories and that history exists also.

HELEN

Yeah.

JEFFREY

And I think that is really important, I mean I...

(laughs)

I remember, again, having the Lord of the Rings read to me I guess it would have been you know five/six years old. I had, I guess you would say a lot of like abstract questions...

HELEN

Yeah?

JEFFREY

...and my father having read the Silmarillion had answers for them. You know I remember very clearly, you know the “Balrog is down in Moria”...

(Helen laughs)

...and I’m, “ooh, so who is the Balrog?” and my dad said “well, uh, you know Gandalf is kind of like an angel and the Balrog is...

(Helen laughs)

...one of those” and what I took from that was oh okay, so the Balrog and Gandalf are cousins and...

(Group laughter)

...they just haven’t seen each other for a long time, this is like my cousin Nat and Katie, who live in Utah, and like okay, yeah! Which I mean is...but I think the Peter Jackson Lord of the Rings has that mythic weight on Gandalf like is very clearly not just some human who has learned some spells, you know, this is a creature...

HELEN

Yeah.

JEFFREY

...inhabiting, boy having also talked about Hannibal with you all, you know inhabiting a human suit and...

(Helen laughs)

...kind of on par with this 30 foot tall creature of smoke and fire...

GAVIA

And that's why you hire Ian McKellen.

(Group laughter)

JEFFREY

(laughing) Yeah! Yeah.

GAVIA

It's very impressive the way the movies manage to kind of illustrate that sense of there being this really deep world building, because obviously Tolkien attracts a very specific kind of reader who loves to learn a massive amount of information and like study the Silmarillion and all of the appendices and stuff, but you can't put that kind of information in a movie, and whenever...

HELEN

Yeah.

GAVIA

...a film tries to do that kind of thing and gives you loads of lore, it doesn't work, because your emotions need to focus on the film, not your brain really...

HELEN

Yes, yeah.

GAVIA

...and the thing that makes Lord of the Rings so good is most of that world building apart from the stuff that is plot specific, is illustrated visually...

JEFFREY

Mm hm.

HELEN

Yes.

GAVIA

..so as the movies like travel through Middle Earth, we get this sense of history, even if you are not thinking about it consciously because you kind of start in Hobbiton and like...

HELEN

Yeah, all the ruins and stuff, mm.

GAVIA

...yeah, because literally you are travelling back in time from Hobbiton in like the 19th century like rural environment where it's really comforting, and you travel back through these different stages of history as you go to like the Elvish lands, and the Viking warriors of Rohan, and then you basically end up in this sort of primordial volcano at the end. So it's like time travel through architecture and kind of the scenery design and the types of tree and like the size of things and...

HELEN

Yeah.

GAVIA

...you just, you engage with that without understanding what you're seeing, and then the more you learn you are like wow I really do understand that there is this deep history that's happening.

HELEN

That is a fascinating...

SUE

That's a very intelligent comment actually.

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

I shouldn't sound surprised!

GAVIA

Thank you.

(laughing)

That's why they pay me to do the film criticism.

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Oh, Sue, I can hear the teacher in you there.

SUE

Oh, I am afraid so, yeah absolutely it's...

GAVIA

I treasure a compliment from a teacher.

(laughs)

SUE

...as my husband said, you can take the girl out of the school when you retire, but you can't take the school out of the girl so, yeah.

HELEN

No.

(laughs)

SUE

I think that's...this whole Balrog thing was fascinating, because of course I read the Lord of the Rings when I was 12 which would have been 1964 and the Silmarillion wasn't published until 1977...

HELEN

Oh, wow!

SUE

...so, I had no idea what this Balrog was, and obviously Gandalf knows.

GAVIA

Did you have a vision in your head? I can't remember how clearly it is described.

SUE

I had no vision at all. I am very bad actually at visualising things and I tend not to do it very much. It's all language for me.

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

So, Gandalf says, "A Balrog, and I am already weary" and I thought what the hell is a Balrog!

(Group laughter)

I suppose I thought what the hell because I was 12 but you know it was that sort of reaction...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...and it really isn't, the Balrog isn't described that much!

HELEN

No, its weapons are described I think...

SUE

I envisaged him insofar as I imagined anything, as a creature with wings, because Tolkien talks about... he has used the words wings, but I think it's metaphorical...

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

And it wasn't until...it's the same with Treebeard, I mean, you know imagining an Ent is really, really hard.

HELEN

(laughing)

And yet I have an instant- I know what I think an Ent looks like because of the films...

SUE

Because of the films.

HELEN

...I can't imagine. Yeah.

SUE

Yeah, but I mean you know, we're talking about a gap of almost 40 years between my first reading, and when I saw the film, the first film.

HELEN

Mm. Yeah.

SUE

...and in that time, I think I just didn't really imagine...

(Helen laughs)

...I didn't...I couldn't imagine the Balrog, and I didn't imagine the Ent.

HELEN

Wow.

SUE

I loved the Balrog in the films. I wasn't quite so convinced by the Ents, I don't know, perhaps I am being unfair to the films, what do you think?

HELEN

I quite like the Ents. I really liked how they were different kinds of trees, and you could tell what different kinds of trees they were because of the way, shown in like their physicality and stuff like that.

SUE

Yes.

HELEN

I quite liked them.

SUE

Yeah, I think that's certainly true. I think it was just the slightly sort of CGI-ishness...

HELEN

Mm.

SUE

...really...

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

...because so much of the rest of the film wasn't CGI, and it, you know, it was ah, I don't know. But even yeah, even so they did it really well. And I love the idea of going back in time. I think that's brilliant.

JEFFREY

Yeah.

HELEN

We've almost come to time, so I just want a quick, quick-fire question, which I did warn you about before the recording, which is that I would like to hear who your favourite characters are, and why. As I have said many times previously, my favourite is Sam. I appreciate a down to earth, loyal friend very much, but I have different soft spots for all of, literally every character, but Sam I think is my fave.

GAVIA

Well, Aragorn is my favourite because he is very cool, and I think...

(Helen laughs)

...Viggo Mortensen's performance and physical beauty are unparalleled, but Legolas is a close second because I think he is just secretly a huge freak. I think Legolas...

JEFFREY AND HELEN

(laughing)

GAVIA

...is undercover a very weird character, and I love that for him.

SUE

Ooh.

HELEN

(laughing)

Have you ever done that thing where you watch for Orlando Bloom's facial expressions...

GAVIA

Oh God!

HELEN

Because he only has like ten lines!

(laughing)

GAVIA

I, just wonderful, marvellous, just empty – nothing going on in the head. I- God, I love him.

(laughs)

HELEN

Just twitching in the distance.

(laughing)

GAVIA

(laughing)

Some primo wig acting.

JEFFREY AND HELEN

(laughing)

HELEN

How about you Jeffrey?

JEFFREY

Ooh, um, if we can expand it, I am going to say Beorn.

HELEN AND GAVIA

Ooh.

JEFFREY

The warrior skin-changer from The Hobbit is just, just one of my favourite characters this- and maybe it's because I, too, am large and you know, was built to swing axes and survive the cold, and love cooking for people in my house.

(Helen laughs)

But if we are sticking to Lord of the Rings, I am going to say Gandalf, just as a...

HELEN

Ooh.

JEFFREY

...powerful, wise, and...I am always attracted to characters that are shaped like people, but are kind of expanded out, and are in fact lots of dimensions folded in and packed in tightly.

HELEN

Mm, yeah. Also, Gavia thanks for, at least I think it was you earlier who mentioned that Gandalf and Odin have lots of similarities, because I don't know why it hadn't occurred to me beforehand, but of course they're similar.

(laughing)

It's just like an old man walking around with a hat and a stick. Um, and Sue, do you have a favourite character?

SUE

Yeah, well, really my favourite character is Sam, I agree totally.

GAVIA

Yes.

SUE

...and for the same reasons as yours, Helen...

(Helen laughs)

...but we can't have the same character for this. So, I am going to choose, in the book, and to some extent in the film, Eowyn, who I love.

JEFFREY

Mm.

HELEN

Ooh, good choice.

SUE

I just love her, oh, I don't know. She is the original strong woman, but most of the strong women in modern films are completely stupidly unrealistic, you know. Someone who is sort of 5ft tall and weighs about 100lbs and beating up sort of 6ft 8" guys and that's silly. But, Eowyn, she's incredibly brave but equally she is a sword maiden, she works within her own sphere of skill, so I love her. And also, can I just put in a word in the films for Gollum who was Andy Serkis...

(Jeffrey laughs)

HELEN

Yes!

SUE

...who is just the most amazing actor. And of course they, they only had him originally as a voice actor.

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

But then they actually based all the film Gollum's movements on Andy Serkis, and he's just exceptional...

GAVIA

No, he is a phenomenon.

(laughs)

SUE

A total phenomenon.

HELEN

It's, it's excellent. I really appreciate what he did and what they were able to do with his performance.

JEFFREY

Oh yeah.

HELEN

Um, and that's all we have time for! This has been another one of those conversations where I am like "everybody is so smart, I am surrounded by intelligent people, what am I going to do?" Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and your wisdom with me. Listeners, I hope you have enjoyed it as

much as we have; or least as much as I have, I hope that you participants have also enjoyed it.

(laughing)

SUE

Oh yes.

GAVIA

It's been great. Love Lord of the Rings. Love to learn about Lord of the Rings.

(laughing).

JEFFREY

Mm hm.

HELEN

Yes.

SUE

Absolutely. I think we have all learnt, you know.

HELEN

Yeah.

SUE

It's been really great.

HELEN

(Laughs)

Well, thank you all for coming on. Thank you listener, for listening. And for now it's goodbye from me, goodbye, and it's goodbye from all of them, do you want to say goodbye everybody?

GAVIA AND JEFFREY

Goodbye.

SUE

Goodbye.

[Show Theme - Outro]

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[Show Theme – Outro Ends]

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