Round #1: Editorial

"Great Fiction is a Force for Peace" by Roxana Robinson

Great Fiction is a Force for Peace

Roxana Robinson

An archaeologist friend told me recently about the discovery of an oral tradition stretching back for 10,000 years.

They were stories told by Australian aboriginals, set on the great grazing-grounds of a plain near Melbourne. This was a group of related narratives, about the landscape and the animals and people who lived there. They were stories about kangaroos and wallabies, about where they grazed and where they bred, about the life they led on that plain, and about the life of the people who lived there with them. The stories of the animals and the people were deeply interconnected. The sites they described—the plain, and the grazing-ground with its low hills—were all named, and all identifiable. Everything is still there. The curious thing is that it has all been underwater for over 9,000 years. The hills are now islands, and the grazing ground is Melbourne Bay.

Those stories were handed down for some 400 generations. Oral history isn't always so reliable, but these narratives were kept intact because they were essential to the survival of the people who told them. Without the stories, how would they know where they were in the world, or how to live there?

Maybe science has just discovered the importance of narrative, but I don't think it's news. We humans are hard-wired for story. It's how we learn to be in the world.

As infants, our first response to the world is solipsistic, but once we begin watching others and engaging with them, we start to learn through an intimate form of narrative. We do this by observation and by empathy.

The first stories we learn are short ones, from our parents. Your mother tells you what she's done, or maybe you watch her do it: She puts salt instead of sugar in the cake batter. When she realizes it, she laughs, and says *what an idiot I am*. This is how you learn what happens when you make a mistake. You learn that it's not a catastrophe, that resilience is the proper response, and that the world is a pleasant place. Or you see that someone is rude to your mother in the supermarket, and you watch her face turn dark and anxious. Later, when

she tells the story, she says she wanted to kill the checkout girl. This is how you learn that people are threatening, your mother is vulnerable, and the world is dangerous. We learn these narratives long before we can read. It's through them that we begin learning how to live in the world. Like the aboriginal stories, these are essential. We need to learn where safety lies, and where we are at risk. We need to learn the difference between rage and laughter on our mother's face.

Stories are about feeling; it's through feeling that we learn about the world.

Narrative is more than anecdote, it does more than merely relate an event. Narrative contains meaning: *This is what happened, and this is what it means*. We watch our parents' faces to see how to respond, to see what it means. The only way we can learn this is by recognizing the feelings they express, and by entering into those feelings. Through empathy. Stories are about feeling; it's through feeling that we learn about the world.

Even if you don't read fiction, you've grown up depending on narrative. You live with stories, you always have.

As a child, you were read fairy tales, stories about children like you. The boy who chopped down the beanstalk, the girl who left a trail of bread crumbs to mark the way home. The girl who had to sleep in the fireplace but who then married a prince. Those stories instruct children to be virtuous and brave, loyal and patient and kind. The instruction works through empathy: We identify with the hero, or heroine, so the lesson is printed indelibly on our minds. We feel the story happened to us. We know for certain we'd have tricked that giant, chopped down that beanstalk, dropped those bread-crumbs in a careful line on the forest path. We'd have been kind and virtuous and uncomplaining, and our little foot would have slid easily into that glass slipper. Empathy for the character is what fiction encourages, in fact it's the whole point.

But now we're adults, and we know everything. We know how to read our parents' faces. We've done it a million times; we know what delights them and what threatens them. We know what those encounters mean, we know how to read the world. We don't need to read fiction. We've learned everything we need to know from narrative. We've finished with empathizing.

We live in a hard, fact-based world, one that runs on grids and electronics and data. Maybe now fiction is peripheral, ancillary, not really central. In a culture governed by technology and cyber-reality, do we really need it? All that empathy and cultural perception?

Let's imagine the world without it.

We'd have to get rid of the Bible, to start with. Whatever you believe about its origins, you know it's not scientific and fact-based. It's made up of unverifiable information that comes from uncheckable sources.

The Bible is made up of stories: fiction. These offer ways to interpret the world, to understand why we're alive and to plumb the depths of our own experience. These stories relate to the spiritual realm, but also to the temporal, quotidian world of families, failings, loves, and rages. The stories are about weather and crops, feuds and lies, adultery and constancy, revenge and forgiveness. A lot of them are about love, in its many manifestations—filial, erotic, fraternal, jealous—every kind. The Bible is not an abstract philosophical text, it's a vast web of interconnected stories about human beings and how they act. This narrative web has been the vehicle for Christianity for two thousand years. It's one of fiction's masterpieces.

If fiction doesn't matter we'll also have to get rid of the classical texts. *The Iliad*, for example, told in the form of narrative poetry. This is the great story of war between the Greeks and the Trojans, and it's instructive on many levels, like all great fiction. It's a historical source for the period, informing us about the way people dressed and ate, the weapons they used, the chariots they drove, the way in which they waged battles, how warriors fought and worshipped and mourned.

It's not just the ancient narratives that are useful. I once spent time at the National Humanities Center, which offers fellowships to scholars from all over the world. A German scholar was there, doing work on a 19th century writer. One day I asked him what the most useful tool was for historical research. I expected him to name sources of hard data: church records, or property transfers, or harvest yields.

"Novels," he said at once.

"Really?" I said, delighted.

"Of course," he said. "They give you a record of the way a society really functioned. Everything is laid out there: clothes, meals, marriage, family, everything. It's all in the novels."

This gave me a wonderful feeling, because of course I myself am a novelist, and this made me feel as though I might be making an important contribution to cultural studies, and not just making things up inside my head.

After that I pictured the great novels like large, handsome doll houses, lit from within, and with roofs that could be lifted up for us to look inside. We could peer in and see the whole household, with carpets and chairs and four-poster beds, a maid hurrying upstairs, a fire burning in the grate and someone knocking on the front door. There were books on the shelves, clothes in the closets, dinner on the table and pictures on the wall, and everything, everything, down to the smallest detail, was true and real and perfect. Life was being carried out there, right before our eyes. We could lift the lids on these flawless, intricate constructions and enter into them whenever we wished. It was a miraculous luxury.

We can learn about life in the 19th century from Bronte and Austen, Dickens and Trollope, Tolstoy and Flaubert and Wharton. The great novelists tell us exactly what it sounded like, walking through a small town in France, and how the Yorkshire moors smelled in springtime, and what the mean streets of London looked like. What servants worked in the household of a wealthy Muscovite, what a New York bachelor's flat looked like.

We learn about the 20th century from Woolf and Proust, Hemingway and Updike and Munro. We're learning about the 21st century from Egan and Ferrante and Knausgaard, and who knows who else will instruct us? It's fiction that will deliver the true idioms and rhythms of the times, how people talk and dress, how they use certain words, how fast people walk on the street, what time they eat dinner, and who irons the tablecloth.

So fiction matters a lot, in some ways. It's essential for our understanding of the world, as children; it's essential to Christian heritage and it's an important cultural resource. But what if we're not children or Christians or scholars? Anyway, all that lies in the past, and maybe the past is not so relevant today. Today is already nearly the future, when we can communicate over thousands of miles with the swipe of a fingertip, records are kept of everything and all facts are available forever, and data has overtaken us. Maybe there's no need for fictional narratives to create a historical record that can be mined in the future.

Does fiction matter now?

This brings us to the heart of things. The real reason that fiction matters is not because of history or religion, but because of the life of the emotions. Fiction offers us a way to enter into someone else's emotional life, and, no

matter how deeply into the future we have penetrated, entering into someone else's emotional life will always be crucial. Empathy is an essential part of being human.

Another recent study (I'm offering hard data, to convince you scientists and scholars; I think you fiction readers already agree with me) shows that people who read literary fiction become more empathetic than those who read nonfiction, or popular or genre fiction. Interestingly, it isn't just any fiction that will make this change happen, it's only literary fiction. My own definition of this form is fiction that's complex and engaging, well-wrought and demanding. It's fiction that's intended to offer something greater than entertainment or information. All great fiction falls within this category, so it's really great fiction we're discussing. And reading it will actually change your character. It will make you more adept at understanding other people.

> **Beauty offers us a portal into another way of being. It causes that indrawn breath, that reminder of a mysterious part of the world that we'd forgotten. A perfectly wrought sentence, a masterpiece on its own, enlarges us.**

There's also the matter of beauty: A kind of beauty is inherent in all great fiction. Sometimes it's present in the language itself, in the attentive placement of words. The sentence itself becomes like a piece of jewelry, perfectly made, a series of polished links glittering with gems. Here's the opening of a novel:

"By nightfall, the headlines would be reporting devastation.

It was simply that the sky, on a shadeless day, suddenly lowered itself like an awning. Purple silence petrified the limbs of trees and stood crops upright in the fields like hair on end. Whatever there was of fresh white paint sprang out from downs or dunes, or lacerated a roadside with a streak of fencing. This occurred shortly after midday on a summer Monday in the south of England."

This language, with its brilliance and precision, its absolute authority, is itself electrifying. Through this closely-observed description we learn that the world we are about to enter is always vulnerable, meteorology is a powerful presence, and that the heavens may erupt at any moment. All these things will be important: This is the beginning of Shirley Hazzard's masterful novel, *Transit of Venus*, one of the best books of the 20th century.

Another opening:

"His children are falling from the sky. He watches from horseback, acres of England stretching behind him; they drop, gilt-winged, each with a blood-filled gaze. Grace Cromwell hovers in thin air. She is silent when she takes her prey, silent as she glides to his fist. But the sounds she makes then, the rustle of feathers and the creak, the sigh and riffle of pinion, the small cluck-cluck from her throat, these are sounds of recognition, intimate, daughterly, almost disapproving. Her breast is gore-streaked and flesh clings to her claws."

The command of language and imagery here is also masterful. The meaning of this passage is deliberately obscure, and requires our close and respectful attention. It is only by inference that we learn that these children must be raptors, birds of prey. By inference we learn that this story will be about loss, family, premeditated destruction, gore and murder. And so it is: This is the opening of Hilary Mantel's great historical novel about Thomas Cromwell, *Bring Up the Bodies*.

All beauty is transformative; we need it in our lives. Beauty offers us a portal into another way of being. It causes that indrawn breath, that reminder of a mysterious part of the world that we'd forgotten. A perfectly wrought sentence, a masterpiece on its own, enlarges us.

Sometimes we can only read a work in translation, and we'll miss that perfectly wrought sentence. We can't see it, but we know beauty is there. Its presence informs the text, flickering beyond it like the shadow of a flame. All great fiction contains a kind of metaphysical beauty, a widening of the heart, an opening of the soul. This expansion is part of what we need to know about the world, and about how to lead our lives. This kind of beauty informs *King Lear*, and *Anna Karenina*, and *To the Lighthouse*, and *Death in Venice*. Beauty lies in the vision of the world created by these writers. Beauty lies in their deep understanding of the characters whose lives they chronicle, in their understanding of the great emotions, grief and joy and rage.

And through them we understand ourselves. While reading a great novel we think, yes, I recognize myself. Just as I recognized myself in Cinderella, or Jack and the Beanstalk, I recognize myself here. This person could be me. I myself might do just this: sin so abysmally, fail so utterly, grieve so profoundly. I might love so passionately, so selfishly, so wrongly. I might wound someone so horribly, I might dance so wildly, or so clumsily, drink so much, sleep so long, ride so fast. I might kiss, just like that. That could be me.

Entering into another's heart is one of the most compelling ventures we can undertake, and fiction makes it possible. We use a great novel as a hinge on which to swing back and forth between the two worlds, fiction and reality. The novel allows us to understand how it is to take on the mantle of someone else's mind, withhold

judgment on someone else's decision, understand someone else's failure. All those things are part of what it means to be human. Not judgment but humility is the mark of the large soul; and the larger the soul, the greater the capacity for humility. Compassion is the way to understand the world.

> **Entering into another's heart is one of the most compelling ventures we can undertake, and fiction makes it possible.**

No matter what you do in your work, you will need to enter into someone else's life. We humans aren't meant to be solitary, we do badly alone: We sicken, we fail to thrive. Connection is essential. Great fiction offers us a way to connect with others of our tribe—I mean the human one—over the long span of thousands of years.

And great fiction lessens our sense of alienation from others. One source of war is a feeling of distance, which makes it possible to see other people as the enemy, the Other. Empathy diminishes this distance; empathy allows you to recognize the person in that strange face, strange skin, strange language, strange religion. Great fiction reminds you that this person is a human being, with needs like yours. So, yes: Great fiction is a force for peace.

Great fiction is spectacle, it wheels across the heavens like the Aurora Borealis. Thunderous and light-shot, it's a pyrotechnical explosion, revealing things we've never imagined. It illuminates the night sky in sheets of rippling light; it illuminates the breadth and width of the world, as well as the small and intimate spaces within our hearts. It shocks us, in those bold and dazzling flashes, by revealing our own understanding of ourselves.

Does fiction matter?

Only if you want to be alive in the world. Only if you want to learn what it means to be human. Only if you care about what it's like to slip inside someone else's skin, to feel her life move within you, quick and vivid, like a trout in clear dark water.

Round #2: Art

“The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke” by Richard Dadd



Round #3: Article

[“Why Silicon Valley’s Most Powerful People Are So Obsessed With Hobbits”]

Why Silicon Valley’s Most Powerful People Are So Obsessed With Hobbits

Tech power players and the global far-right are learning all the wrong lessons from “The Lord of the Rings.”

By Michiko Kakutani
Michiko Kakutani is a former book critic for The Times.

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For generations of fans, J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic fantasy “The Lord of the Rings” remains their first experience of the immersive magic of fiction. The trilogy recounts how a motley group of friends set out on a journey to destroy the great Ring of Power and defeat the dark Lord Sauron, who intends to use its dreadful magic to rule all of Middle-earth through “force and fear.” The Ring corrupts all who use it, and its story endures as a potent allegory about the corrupting effects of greed and pride and what Tolkien called the evil “lust for domination.”

Given the trilogy’s idealistic overtones, it’s easy to understand why the books gained a cult following in the 1970s among hippies and Vietnam War protesters, who embraced its love of nature and rejection of consumer culture, and what they saw as its passionate denunciation of militarism and power politics. It’s more difficult to understand why the trilogy’s most prominent fans today are Silicon Valley tech lords like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, and a rising group of far-right politicians in both Europe and the United States.

How did a trilogy of novels about wizards and elves and furry-footed hobbits become a touchstone for right-wing power brokers? How did books that evince nostalgia for a pastoral, preindustrial past win an ardent following among the people who are shaping our digital future? Why do so many of today’s high-profile fans of “The Lord of the Rings” and other fantasy and sci-fi classics insist on turning these cautionary tales into aspirational road maps for mastering the universe?

Some of the answers lie in the sheer popularity of the trilogy, which has sold more than 150 million copies across the world and permeated the public imagination, as genre fiction has moved from the margins to the mainstream.

Right-wing operatives realized that references to works like “The Lord of the Rings,” “Star Wars” and role-playing games (many of which are heavily indebted to Tolkien) could serve their own political ends. Steve Bannon was fascinated by World of Warcraft gamers — “rootless white males” with, he said, “monster power” — and sought to channel their passions toward the right-wing site Breitbart News and, later, Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign.

In Spain, the far-right party Vox tried to hijack “Lord of the Rings” imagery, posting a picture of the warrior Aragorn facing off against a group of enemies depicted as left-wing, feminist and L.G.B.T.Q. groups.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni of Italy is famous for her love of Tolkien. The Times correspondent Jason Horowitz has chronicled how as a teenager in the 1990s, she attended a Hobbit Camp organized by members of the country’s post-fascist right, which had embraced the fantasy series as a way of turning their own political marginalization into an asset: By identifying with hobbits, they hoped to override memories of Mussolini and recast themselves as underdogs. The young Meloni dressed up as a hobbit and attended singalongs with the extremist folk band Compagnia dell’Anello, or Fellowship of the Ring.

For some right-wing politicians today, “Lord of the Rings” embodies nostalgia for a bygone era, conjuring a vaguely medieval past where there are clear hierarchies of authority and class, and sharply delineated races (elves, dwarves, hobbits and orcs) with distinctive appearances and talents. Others argue that “Lord of the Rings” embodies the tenets of Traditionalism — a once arcane philosophical doctrine that has recently gained influential adherents around the world including Aleksandr Dugin, a Russian philosopher and adviser to President Vladimir V. Putin, and Bannon. According to the scholar Benjamin Teitelbaum, Traditionalism posits that we are currently living in a dark age brought on by modernity and globalization; if today’s corrupt status quo is toppled, we might return to a golden age of order — much the way that Tolkien’s trilogy ends with the rightful king of Arnor and Gondor assuming the throne and ushering in a new era of peace and prosperity.

A similar taste for kingly power has taken hold in Silicon Valley. In a guest essay in The Times last year, the former Apple and Google executive Kim Scott pointed to “a creeping attraction to one-man rule in some corners of tech.” This management style known as “founder mode,” she explained, “embraces the notion that a company’s founder must make decisions unilaterally rather than partner with direct reports or frontline employees.”

The new mood of autocratic certainty in Silicon Valley is summed up in a 2023 manifesto written by the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who describes himself and his fellow travelers as “Undertaking the Hero’s Journey, rebelling against the status quo, mapping uncharted territory, conquering dragons and bringing home the spoils for our community.”

Andreessen, along with Musk and Thiel, helped muster support for Trump in Silicon Valley, and he depicts the tech entrepreneur as a conqueror who achieves "virtuous things" through brazen aggression, and villainizes anything that might slow growth and innovation — like government regulation and demoralizing concepts like "tech ethics" and "risk management."

"We believe in nature, but we also believe in overcoming nature," Andreesen writes. "We are not primitives, cowering in fear of the lightning bolt. We are the apex predator; the lightning works for us."

'A Duty to Save the World'

Silicon Valley's love of Tolkien — and fantasy and science fiction more broadly — dates to its earliest days, when rooms at the Stanford A.I. Lab were named after locations in Middle-earth, and a popular thread called "SF-Lovers" effectively became the first online social network in the 1970s.

In those days, the fledgling computer community was very much a part of the Bay Area counterculture, and hackers there saw themselves as rebels going up against the establishment represented by big corporations like IBM. Like many hippies of the day, they identified with the little hobbits who help save Middle-earth and the eccentric outsiders who populate the work of science fiction masters like Isaac Asimov and Philip K. Dick.

Today, of course, Apple, Google, Microsoft, Amazon and Meta are more powerful than IBM, and the best-known figures in Silicon Valley are entrepreneurs and venture capitalists worth billions. Affection for Tolkien endures — partly because a love for fantasy and science fiction seems hard-wired in many geeks. But the small gestures of tribute to Tolkien that techies made decades ago (like equipping office printers with Elvish fonts) have given way to extravagant spectacles like the Napster co-founder Sean Parker's "Lord of the Rings"-inspired wedding, which cost, by some estimates, more than $10 million and featured Middle-earth-inspired costumes for several hundred guests.

Amazon's founder, Jeff Bezos, a lifelong Tolkien fan, oversaw the company's purchase of the rights to the "Lord of the Rings" back story for $250 million. Multiple seasons of its streaming series "The Rings of Power," Vanity Fair reports, will most likely cost over $1 billion, making it the most expensive series ever made.

Thiel, a billionaire venture capitalist and mega donor to right-wing causes, says he's read the trilogy at least 10 times. He has named several companies after magical objects in "Lord of the Rings." Vice President JD Vance, whose careers in business and politics were nurtured by Thiel, followed in his steps. Vance has said that a lot of his "conservative worldview was influenced by Tolkien growing up," and he named his venture firm Narya Capital after Gandalf's magic ring of fire.

Classic fantasy and science fiction stories have informed how many fans think about the world, giving them a Manichaean vocabulary of good vs. evil, and a propensity for asserting that the future of civilization is constantly at stake. The stories also acted as an exhortation to think big and to pursue huge, improbable dreams.

In much the way that sci-fi anticipated many of the remarkable inventions we now take for granted (think: cellphones, video conferencing or biometric screenings), many engineers and inventors today aspire to create transformative technologies that might one day enable humans to merge with machine intelligence, say, or live in outer space. On one hand: the possibility of groundbreaking, disruptive innovations. On the other: all the dangers of hubris and carelessness we were warned about by science fiction from "Frankenstein" to "Metropolis" to "2001: A Space Odyssey."

When he was a child, Musk read Asimov's "Foundation" series — books that inspired his dream of building a colony on Mars and would spur his resolve, as he put it in a speech at the United States Air Force Academy, "to work hard to make science fiction not fiction." The Asimov novels feature a brilliant mathematician named Hari Seldon, who develops an algorithmic scheme for predicting the future, which enables him to foresee the end of the Galactic Empire and make plans to preserve human civilization by building a new society on another planet. Asimov's "Foundation" series and Tolkien's trilogy ("my favorite book ever," Musk has said) helped forge his grandiose sense of mission, as the heroes in those books, he told The New Yorker in 2009, "felt a duty to save the world."

Like "Lord of the Rings," the Foundation novels trace a narrative arc that has resonated with right-wing politicians intent on remaking the world. It's a story line in which a hero or a group of heroes takes on the challenge of a civilization in crisis. They wage war against a dangerous or moribund establishment and aspire to build a brave new world out of the ashes of the old. Similar plot dynamics are at work in Robert A. Heinlein's "The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress," which depicts a colony of freedom-loving settlers on the moon and their successful revolt against the oppressive rule of bureaucrats on planet Earth.

Suspicious of 'Machine Worshipers'

Literary classics, of course, can support myriad interpretations, and we live in an age when the points of view of readers are increasingly prioritized over authorial intentions. At the same time, it's astonishing how many contemporary takes on classic works of fantasy and science fiction fly in the face of both common sense and authors' known views of the world.

Consider Mark Zuckerberg's decision to rebrand Facebook as "Meta" — a reference to the so-called metaverse, a term coined by Neal Stephenson in his 1992 novel "Snow Crash," which depicts an alarming dystopian future where corporate power has replaced government institutions and a dangerous virus is on the loose.

Or take Stargate, the name of OpenAI's new artificial intelligence initiative with SoftBank and Oracle, announced in conjunction with the Trump administration. Its name, weirdly, is the title of a campy 1994 sci-fi movie in which a stargate device opens a portal to a faraway planet, where a despotic alien vows to destroy Earth with a supercharged atomic bomb. Not exactly the sort of magical portal most people would want to open.

Tolkien himself regarded "machine worshipers" with suspicion, even aversion. His experiences as a soldier who survived the gruesome World War I Battle of the Somme left him with a lasting horror of

mechanized warfare; on returning home, he was dismayed as well by the factories and roadways that were transforming England's landscape. This is why Mordor is depicted as a hellish, industrial wasteland, ravaged by war and environmental destruction, in contrast to the green, edenic Shire that the hobbits call home.

Of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, Tolkien wrote that nuclear physics — or, for that matter, any technological innovation — need not be used for war. "They need not be used at all. If there is any contemporary reference in my story at all it is to what seems to me the most widespread assumption of our time: that if a thing can be done, it must be done. This seems to me wholly false."

Given these views, Tolkien would have been confounded by Silicon Valley's penchant for naming tech companies after objects in "Lord of the Rings" — particularly firms with Pentagon and national security ties. And yet two Thiel-backed companies with Tolkien-inspired names are becoming cornerstones of today's military-industrial complex: The data analytics firm Palantir gets its name from the magical "seeing stones" in "Lord of the Rings," while the artificial intelligence military start-up Anduril refers to Aragorn's reforged sword.

The growing embrace in Silicon Valley of "transhumanism" — including research into life extension, machine enhancements and even finding a solution to death — underscores one of the central questions animating fantasy and science fiction: What does it mean to be human? This question drives stories set in outer space (from "Star Trek" to "Star Wars" to "Doctor Who") and stories set in a mythical past. In the case of "The Lord of the Rings," Tolkien argued that mortality is part of "the given nature of Men," and the Elves called it "the Gift of God (to Men)," allowing them "release from the weariness of Time." Sauron, he noted, used the fear of death to lure humans to the dark side with false promises of immortality, which turned them into his servants.

Many prominent readers of "Lord of the Rings" no longer identify with the hobbits in Middle-earth but crave more magical powers (of the very sort that the dangerous Ring promises to bestow at a terrible price).

In a 2023 interview with The Atlantic, Thiel traced his fascination with immortality to the elves in "Lord of the Rings," calling them "humans who don't die." Echoing the interviewer he asked: "Why can't we be elves?" The neoreactionary ideologue Curtis Yarvin, who thinks American democracy should be replaced by a monarchy or "chief executive," dismissively refers to the sort of ordinary voters who helped elect Trump as hobbits who only "want to grill and raise kids."

Tolkien, in contrast, proudly described himself as "a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking." Not only is "Lord of the Rings" told from the point of view of the hobbits, but it's Frodo's gardener, the humble Sam Gamgee — not the noble king Aragorn or the great wizard Gandalf — who emerges as the real hero of the epic.

Sam plays a crucial role in carrying out the mission of destroying the Ring, and his story is the one that concludes the trilogy. After the war of the Ring, we learn, Sam returns home to the Shire, where he is elected mayor, marries his girlfriend, Rosie, and raises 13 children.

Sam, Tolkien wrote in a 1956 letter, was inspired by the brave English soldiers he'd served with during World War I, and other letters suggest that he saw the heroics of Sam and Frodo as a testament to his belief that small hands "move the wheels of the world" because "they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere."

Michiko Kakutani, a former book critic for The Times, is the author of "The Great Wave: The Era of Radical Disruption and the Rise of the Outsider."

Round #4: Poem

"Dragon Greed"

Dragon Greed

by **Dan Linn**

In seven dimensions,
time is a folded note,
on a desk of emotion,
afloat on castle moat.

Tears blossom in ice,
propelled by math blues,
heads of pins dance
in angel's ballet shoes

All senses bounce,
and taste like impact,
paper tigers pounce
and fantasy forms fact.

Wishing beyond wealthy,
makes the universe tiny.
Dragons aren't greedy
only some of it is shiny.