



The Legend of Sigurd & Gudrún

J.R.R. Tolkien , Christopher Tolkien (Editor)

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Many years ago, J.R.R. Tolkien composed his own version, now published for the first time, of the great legend of Northern antiquity, in two closely related poems to which he gave the titles *The New Lay of the Völsungs* and *The New Lay of Gudrún*.

In the "Lay of the Völsungs" is told the ancestry of the great hero Sigurd, the slayer of Fáfnir most celebrated of dragons, whose treasure he took for his own; of his awakening of the Valkyrie Brynhild, who slept surrounded by a wall of fire, and of their betrothal; and of his coming to the court of the great princes who were named the Niflungs (or Nibelungs), with whom he entered into blood-brotherhood. In that court there sprang great love but also great hate, brought about by the power of the enchantress of the Niflungs, skilled in the arts of magic, of shape-changing and potions of forgetfulness.

In scenes of dramatic intensity, of confusion of identity, thwarted passion, jealousy, and bitter strife, the tragedy of Sigurd and Brynhild, of Gunnar the Niflung and Gudrún his sister, mounts to its end in the murder of Sigurd at the hands of his blood-brothers, the suicide of Brynhild, and the despair of Gudrún. In the "Lay of Gudrún" her fate after the death of Sigurd is told, her marriage against her will to the mighty Atli, ruler of the Huns (the Attila of history), his murder of her brothers the Niflung lords, and her hideous revenge.

Deriving his version primarily from his close study of the ancient poetry of Norway and Iceland known as the Poetic Edda (and where no old poetry exists, from the later prose work *Völsunga Saga*), J.R.R. Tolkien employed a verse-form of short stanzas whose lines embody in English the exacting alliterative rhythms and the concentrated energy of the poems of the Edda.

The Legend of Sigurd & Gudrún Details

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From Reader Review The Legend of Sigurd & Gudrún for online ebook

Kyle says

J.R.R. Tolkien's interpretation of two ancient epic poems, the "Lay of the Volsungs" and the "Lay of Gudrun," from the Poetic Edda of the Icelandic peoples in maybe the 13th century. Tolkien's son Christopher compiled and edited his father's work on them, and presents the finished volume as some kind of crazy combination of mind-crushingly detailed Norse poetics primer and loosey-goosey fantasy passion project. It's hard to know what you're reading.

The preface is pretty cool occasionally, as when a quick 1967 letter from Tolkien to W.H. Auden (where Tolkien mentions wanting to "lay my hands on it (I hope it isn't lost), a thing I did many years ago") is revealed to be one of the few mentions of this whole big project at all. But all the introductory chapters are so complicated, multi-faceted, yet still somehow stultifying and hurried. And that's not even mentioning the poems yet! It's all in some queer alliterative verse form (a punchy form, of short lines, to get sudden flashes instead of reflection), which just muddles a muddle.

Ben says

Any time a new book appears with J.R.R. Tolkien's name on it, it's bound to stir up interest and this should be no exception. Unlike much of his writing, however, this particular book is not directly related to Middle Earth and its hobbits, wizards, and elves. It's born of earlier interests of Tolkien's that predate *The Hobbit*, namely Old Norse mythology, literature, and language. The fascinating thing that most people don't know, is that language was Tolkien's foremost passion during his life and his earliest success. Philology was the source of inspiration for all his writing of Middle Earth. In fact he was a renowned scholar in the field. So it's no surprise he translated and interpreted a number of medieval works such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Beowulf*.

Two equally important works had been misplaced and forgotten until just recently, and those are published for the first time in this book, the one titled "The New Lay of the Volsungs" and the other "The New Lay of Gudrun". If these names at all sound familiar, they should, as they derive from some of the most well-known Germanic poems of old. The *Volsunga Saga* and *Nibelungenlied* have captured the imagination of scholars and readers for centuries, perhaps reaching a cultural pinnacle in the Ring of Nibelung cycle of operas by Richard Wagner. They tell the story of a great warrior, Sigurd (Siegfried), and his triumphs, loves, and losses. However, the stories are very different, with the original tale morphing into distinctly Germanic versions and distinctly Nordic versions.

Sadly the Norse version of the poems as preserved in the Poetic Edda has been irreparably corrupted and partially lost due to the ravages of time. Even in this lesser state, the tales are immediately compelling. We can overlook the plot conflicts, obscurities and confusions, to satisfy our need to know what happens in the end. Until now, we could only imagine how the complete tale might have sounded in the telling, nearly 1000 years ago.

Tolkien has really worked a miracle, by his careful analysis of sources, his knowledge of the languages, his

own judgement, and his significant artistic inclinations, he has reconstructed the poems into a coherent whole. And not in modern form, but in the old fornyrdislag meter, with the goal of preserving the feel of Old Norse poetry. This is not a mere translation, but a new work of art based on the available sources, maintaining the same spirit. Tolkien's Lays are more readable and enjoyable overall than the originals, as intended.

Earlier I said The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun is not directly related to Middle Earth, but that's only partially true. There are themes appearing in The Lord of the Rings and especially The Silmarillion which bear uncanny resemblance to these Lays and other Eddic/Norse sagas. This is not accidental. Tolkien was deeply influenced by Old Norse mythology and language and consciously made reference in Middle Earth to these ancient "real world" myths. The result is one feels the same sense of wonder and discovery reading his works on Middle Earth as reading the Poetic Edda, for instance -- as if those tales underwent changes in the telling and became the beloved world of hobbits, dwarves, elves, and orcs that so many of us know.

Christopher Tolkien has done a good job of presenting the lays as drafted, with no intrusive footnotes, but there is extensive commentary in the introduction and following each poem. Some of it is hard to digest and mostly of interest to scholars, the comparisons with extant sources are tedious, but the main reason you read this book is for the poems.

Tolkien was a great mind, a genius, and we are lucky that he shared so much with us, even posthumously, including the poems published in The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun. If they had been known in his lifetime, while attracting a certain amount of controversy, they would likewise have garnered praise. Perhaps it's just as well that we only discover them long after his passing, maybe that's how he wanted it...

I highly recommend The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun for fans of: Tolkien, medieval and fantasy literature, Norse and Germanic poetry, and mythology. If you enjoy it, read also the The Poetic Edda and Heimskringla translated by Lee M. Hollander, and if you really can't get enough, try The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, too. For something a bit different, discover John Martin Crawford's excellent translation of the Kalevala, the epic poem of Finland (and a significant influence on Tolkien's vision of Middle Earth!)

Volsung says

What a treat it is to find yet more from the pen of Tolkien. That there has continued to be a frequent publication of new works throughout the decades following his death is a testament to the Professor's vast literary output and imagination; that he wrote lengthy works such as this one, which could simply never have been published if not for the success of "The Lord of the Rings," is of course a testament to Tolkien as a poet and a storyteller. Something like this is only written because the author is moved to write it, with little or no hope of an audience.

Naturally the literary merits (or lack thereof) of this as a single work of poetry is a separate matter. It is surprising to see Tolkien restraining himself in this, a poetic retelling of the Norse cycle of Völsung-legends, and one is inclined towards the unexpected sensation "There's not much here." The point made by Christopher Tolkien in the "Introduction" is invaluable here: Tolkien was quite deliberately aiming to imitate the style of the Old Norse heroic poetry, resulting in something quite different than (perhaps) most readers expect from Tolkien. In one of his lectures, Tolkien spoke of the difference (this is quoted on p. 7) between Old English verse, in which "breadth, fullness, reflection, elegiac effect, were aimed at" (this might as well have been said of most of Tolkien's writings!), and the Old Norse, which "aims at seizing a situation, striking

a blow that will be remembered, illuminating a moment with a flash of lightning..." A reader of Tolkien's "Sigurd and Gudrún" may be tempted to feel disappointed by the brevity; but this, too, this literary style of terseness and series of striking images can be powerful, because it should be seen as something deliberate and artful, and appreciated as such. If it is not often slow and elegiac, it is powerful and striking. The poetry is often very moving, and filled with many good, memorable things: for example, Högni pounding on the door of his enemies, or the sympathetic and interesting figure of Gudrún (the elimination of her memory-loss by Tolkien makes for a far more interesting character). I look forward to future re-readings.

Any feeling of disappointment over brevity may be compounded by the deceiving thickness of the poems' pages: the poems are printed half-line by half-line, thus leaving wide margins, instead of the two half-lines of a full verse printed on one line with a tabbed space for the caesura, as is standard for editions of Old English poetry. Perhaps this latter option should have been adopted by Christopher Tolkien, despite his father's wishes -- I also incline to the feeling that it makes the verses easier for beginners to this meter to scan.

The extra material is most welcome. This includes notes by Christopher Tolkien (detailed as ever), covering both his father's manuscripts and scholarly opinions about the Norse poems; a lecture and commentary on the Norse poems by Professor Tolkien; and an unexpected goodie, a poem on *Ætla* (Attila) in Old English by Professor Tolkien appended to the rear (which has the distinction of providing us with literally the single existing Old English poem about Attila the Hun!).

It is enjoyable for those familiar with the Norse originals to see how Tolkien handles long-standing scholarly debates or discrepancies in the various versions of the story (for example it was interesting that he chose to follow the version of the ring-transmission as given by Snorri, which I always took to be the unnecessarily complicated one as it involves TWO rings instead of one). The sudden appearance of the opening lines of the Old English "Battle at Finnsburh" in Gunnar's mouth, during the last assault, was a treat; so too was a development with the Goths under Atli's rule which is entirely original to Tolkien. For those not already familiar with the stories, the brevity mentioned previously will naturally make for some confusion, though Christopher Tolkien's notes fill in these gaps nicely. It may be wondered how many readers want to take the time to consult "the Notes" at the rear; but it is well worth it to take the time to dive deeper into these stories which so moved and inspired Tolkien and many others, and which still do so now.

Joey Woolfardis says

Tolkien is most famous for the Lord of the Rings and, my particular favourite, The Hobbit. I think every other book he's written pales in to insignificance when you think of him as a writer. He was, in fact, first and foremost, an academic. The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún denotes something that Tolkien was obsessed and ultimately influenced by, and that is Norse mythology. Norwegian and Icelandic poetry was his forté and here Tolkien has devised his own version of ancient poems regarding the legend of Sigurd and the fall of the Niflungs.

Written in narrative poetry form with short stanzas, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún is quite difficult to get in to if your heart is not in it. If you love Tolkien and enjoy his often epic narrative style, then I'd recommend this book purely because his son (Christopher) has used Tolkien's own notes to add accompanying notes that explain what is happened during each section, which is invaluable. At first read the text is difficult to digest because of the archaic English that is used, but after you have grasped what is happening you can retrace your steps and revel in the story.

Like most things, I'd prefer this to have been written in novel format and I'm sure someone somewhere has done such a thing.

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Beulah Pragg says

Reading the Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun, one starts to get a feel for where Tolkien was coming from when he wrote the Lord of the Rings. Told in the style of a very old English epic poem, Tolkien has rewritten the ancient Norse Classics from the Elder Edda into two distinct stories, the Lay of the Volsungs and the Lay of Gudrun.

Many of the characters are easily recognizable by those possessing some familiarity with general Norse mythology (or anyone who has played Age of Mythology recently) - Loki, Odin, Brynhild (the valkyries) and of course the shining hall of Valholl (better known as Valhalla). Yet while on the surface, both lays (the technical term for this style of poem) deal with epic battles and tragic, honourable ends to noble heroes, I came away with the distinct impression that it was the women (Gudrun and Brynhild especially) who really decide the course of fate - at least once they are jaded.

I was surprised to find the poetic storytelling much more readable than I had initially anticipated. There is a rhythm and flavour to the prose that carries you along, even when you don't fully understand all the references: you still keep reading just to know what happens. That is one thing consistent with Lord of the Rings, Tolkien is truly a master story-teller, bringing together many different threads of these original classics and weaving them into his own cohesive version.

The lays themselves would have been quite confusing without the context of the commentaries, both by Tolkien himself (in the form of preserved notes and lectures) and by his son Christopher. I occasionally found my attention drifting through these notes, which are written in a similar form to the average university text book, but they were ultimately invaluable in understanding the book as a whole.

In the end, I was pleasantly surprised by this book and would highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in Tolkien's work, or classical mythology in general. It certainly inspired me to give epic poetry a go (I found it really hard to get the metre right and find words that actually fit). This sort of poetry is a meticulous art form and I admire the skill that has gone into crafting such a masterpiece.

X says

So, I may have given this four stars, but it's Tolkien and I'm biased. It's a glorious, dramatic poem based on the Norse legend, and while I prefer prose to poetry, I found it fairly easy to read all things considered. I did have a bit of trouble following all the details, but that never bothered me very much.

Christopher Tolkien's notes are very informative, though sometimes beyond my knowledge of poetic structure, linguistics and ancient history. They do give a better overall understanding of the legend and its historical context, and they also helped clarify the parts where I wasn't sure what had happened.

On another note, it is interesting to compare this to LOTR and the Silmarillion, as there are certain similarities.

Alan Smith says

It is with a feeling of disquiet that I write anything bad about John Ronald Rouel Tolkien - After all, in "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings" he has given me - and millions of others - reading pleasure to last a lifetime. These two alone would be enough to mark him as one of the greats, and when you add in "Smith of Wootton Major", "Farmer Giles of Ham" (a genuinely funny work), and "Leaf by Niggle" I can't help putting him in that rare pantheon of the real, true greats.

However, "The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun" is, one has to say, one of his less approachable works. It should not be forgotten that Tolkien was an Oxford don more than he was a professional writer, and this translation of a long, turgid Norse saga is a scholarly work, that (if it didn't have JRRT's name on the cover) would probably only be read by a few intellectuals.

However, the capitalist society being what it is, it comes as no surprise to me that it's out there on the bookshelves with the best sellers. But frankly, anyone who buys this on the strength of his better known works is due for a massive cold draft of disappointment.

The Norse mythology - unlike most other religions (such as Christianity, which holds that good will eventually triumph over evil) - is a dark one, holding that eventually, at a time called Ragnarok, the evil ice-giants will defeat the gods and the world will die. Their poetry tends to reflect this, and this work is no exception. The first poem ends in the death of the main hero and the suicide of the heroine, (who is already a spirit, specifically a Valkyrie - the metaphysics of this are confusing), while the second poem is a tale of dramatic revenge.

But to be fair, few readers will get this far. I confess, I forced myself to go on reading because it *was* Tolkien. Had it been a translation by "John Smith" I'd have given up more than half way through.

I repeat, as a Tolkien tragic, I hate writing this review. But honesty is honesty. Given the small amount of creative work Tolkien produced in his lifetime, I can't help feeling that the time he spent on this translation would have been better used on something with more general appeal. Another of his brilliant short stories, for example, or one of those intriguing essays along the lines of "On Fairy Stories" - or even some more about Middle Earth.

Denise ?? Hutchins says

This is the first book I've had to shelve both as fiction and nonfiction (maybe I just need to make a shelf for hybrids?) but that's actually my only problem with it. I LOVED this book. I went in with a bit of trepidation, remembering my high school and college attempts to read Beowulf, Shakespeare plays, and other literature written in ancient styles. I was worried that I'd find myself struggling to understand anything and, in a worst case scenario, giving up on the book entirely. I won't deny that throughout the book I did find myself rereading passages--both those written in ancient poetic style and those written in a modern academic style--but the information and stories contained in the words were all so fascinating that I felt no irritation at the

extra effort it required of me. It felt like digging for treasure; sure it was more work than, say, reading a manga, but the payoff was worth every minute of my time.

The first thing I came to appreciate about this book was the position the editor took as a guide for the reader. He established himself as an expert (or at least knowledgeable enough) in the subjects that the book covered but never came across as pompous or arrogant. It felt like he knew his audience, that people were sure to be interested in his father's ideas above all else, and that he didn't feel jealousy in knowing this, rather that he was honored to share what he could with us. The editor's good attitude made me feel confident in the material I was reading.

The main poems themselves, the meat of the book even if they didn't take up more than half of it, were EXCELLENT. This was my first experience with Nordic style poetry (even though written in English) and I found it exciting and fast-paced. More than anything, I felt it was a cousin to Japanese short-style poetry (the best known being, of course, haiku). The poems got straight to the point and never lagged or wasted space on trivial details. It was action after action, non-stop plot movement. And then it was awesome to read the editor's notes after each Lay, to understand them better, to discover what went into their construction, learning where they differed from the source material (and where they were required to be wholly original). Even though I've long finished the book, I still get excited thinking about it.

Finally, the appendices at the end were a welcome addition. The book would have been just as entertaining, educating, and satisfying without them but they also felt completely at home here. It was a good way to end the tome, even though I felt I could have consumed more if it had been provided. I wouldn't mind reading this book again and recommend it highly to general Tolkien fans, anyone interested in Norse mythology and ancient literary history, and even those who appreciate the pithy nature of Japanese poetry.

Nonethousand Oberrhein says

Norse but *Tolkienish*

Tapping from all the sources of the Norse myth, JRR Tolkien delivers his own narration in two poetic lays of the fateful destinies of Sigurd, slayer of Fafnir, and Gudrún, the woman he was tricked to marry over the Valkyrie Brynhild. Keeping the traditional eddaic metric, the author manages to propose an ageless tale, filled with magic and heroic deeds. The punctual and never too intrusive notes and comments from the author's son, Christopher, complete this publication giving scholarly depth to the fantastical adventure.

Siren says

One of my favourite tales of all time is that of the heroic lays in the Poetic Edda. It tells of Sigurd the Dragonslayer, Brynhild the Valkyrie and Gudrun the Burgundqueen. Its a story that spans centuries and have a different folktale version all over europe, though the most famous is that of the Poetic Edda, and the German Nibelungenlied.

I was psyched when I saw that Tolkien had worked on a translation of this, and even more so when I realised that there were notes and -imagine this- *his own tries at eddic poetry*.

The text is sectioned into scholarly notes on the heroic lays as they are in the Poetic Edda and the Saga of the Volsungs, what Tolkien chose to use in his rendition as well as Christopher Tolkien's own thoughts and work. If you, like me, is a total nerd for old Norse literature and Tolkien's scholarly work then this is a must read.

Ethan Gilsdorf says

BOOK REVIEW

In 'Legend' poems, Tolkien the storyteller

By Ethan Gilsdorf, Boston Globe Correspondent | September 4, 2009

J.R.R. Tolkien is best known as the author of fantasy tales like "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings." But some may not know that he was an academic first and writer second. The reclusive British scholar, lexicographer, and Oxford don was, in a way, the original geek. He specialized in the rather arcane field of philology (the history of languages), and pored over Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse texts. To Tolkien (1892-1973), Icelandic sagas and 1,000-year-old poems like "Beowulf" were the finest stuff ever written. He didn't even read contemporary fiction.

Tolkien hung out with other medievalists in Oxford pubs, where they drank ale, smoked pipes, and made up stories by firelight. While most authors of the early 20th century were busy smashing Victorian conventions and reassembling the pieces into irony-laden modernism, Tolkien was penning stories and poems about domineering dragons and world-weary wizards.

Since he was more inclined to tinker rather than finish many of his projects, reams of uncompleted drafts remain, like treasures to unearth. Gradually, his son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien, has been deciding which are worthy of publication. So it comes as no surprise that the son has discovered another of his father's old works.

Written in the early 1930s, some years before "The Hobbit" and "Rings," "The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún" almost vanished. The elder Tolkien lamented in a 1967 letter to W.H. Auden that he wanted to "lay my hands on it (I hope it isn't lost), a thing I did many years ago"; it appears he never revised the poems since those early days. Christopher, now 84, edited the manuscript.

The two poems that make up "The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún" are Tolkien's version of the Old Norse Völsung and Nibelung legends, an attempt to unify and organize the material dealing with Sigurd, Brynhild, Gunnar, and other characters, using the same source materials that Richard Wagner drew upon for his opera series "The Ring."

Tolkien's task was to fit modern English to the Old Norse meter: eight-line stanzas, each short line only four to six syllables and containing two to three stresses each. The poems were an exercise, he said, in "trying to learn the art of writing alliterative poetry." He also wanted to capture the essence of Old Norse poetry, with its "demonic energy and force," the lines chiseled to seize a situation and strike a blow.

The poems do deliver the desired blows. In the dense yet spare lines, we are told of Odin, Thor and Loki; dark forests and doors to caverns; giants and a monstrous wolf Fenrir. Abysses yawn; brothers murder

fathers and “men sing of serpents / ceaselessly guarding / gold and silver / greedy-hearted.” Wise words are uttered, like these from Sigurd: “Stout heart is better / than strongest sword.” And yes, there are dungeons and dragons. In short, all the raw materials for 100 epics.

In “Sigurd and Gudrún,” one feels Tolkien warming up his own storytelling muscles and voice, recasting an old song in a new language so he, soon, could take the reins to tell his own original tales. And one also senses the sweetness of the son, Christopher, uncovering his father’s many “small slips of paper” and putting them in order, bent on making certain his father’s legend grows, too, along with the many tales he told.

Ethan Gilsdorf can be reached at ethan@ethangilsdorf.com His book “Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms” has just been released.

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Jonathan Terrington says

3.5 to 4 star book

This was, as a volume, a curious mix of prose and poetry which covers the Norse legends which inspired Tolkien's Middle Earth. In short The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún is Tolkien's version of those myths in poetic form.

I didn't personally find the story of this legend particularly gripping or exciting. However it was astounding to read this from the perspective of observing the sources that fueled Tolkien's own creativity. And having a personal fondness for mythology and in particular Norse mythology I found the setting and characters rather familiar. However those with a tendency towards less academic reads could find that The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún tends to drag at times and is a slow and ponderous read. However I found that despite being at times confusing the poetic element of the narrative made it rather easy to flick through the pages rapidly once I began.

I would say however that compared to other Tolkien works this would be the hardest for the general public to swallow. Its a pure literary mythological read, a work based on the style and ideas of the past Norse epic poetry. However if that appeals to your reading taste buds I encourage you to eat and savor this work.

Chris says

When I was seven years old, I went with my mother to her eye appointment. While we were waiting for her to be called, she started reading *The Fellowship of the Ring* to me. We got two chapters in before the appointment. Afterwards, she couldn't read because of the eye drops, so I got tired of waiting and started to read it myself. This explains my absolute love for Tolkien, among other things. It also explains my love for

Norse mythology at a young age, even though I didn't know the connection at the time.

For me, *The Lord of the Rings* is one of those books that I will always be re-reading, maybe not every year, but every year and a half. It is in many ways like *Star Wars* for me. *Star Wars* was the first movie I can ever remember going to a theater to see. It was a drive-in and I fell asleep during the Three Stooges pre show, and woke up right after they left Tattotone. It's strange. It's the first movie I remember seeing in a theater, but that wasn't the first time I saw it.

There are major differences. The World of Middle Earth is far better drafted and more real than the world of *Star Wars*. It is hard to imagine Tolkien making a mistake like having Padme die but Leia remembering her real mother, or having such a weakly thought out group as the Jedi. Really, why can't they get married when they get married in some of earlier comic books? It is impossible to even think that Tolkien would make such a mistake as in *Revenge of the Sith* where Obi-Wan says, "Only a Sith believe in absolutes". As one critic has correctly pointed out, such a statement not only insults any person who believes in religion, but is also an absolute sentence, so Obi-Wan is a Sith as well.

No. Middle Earth is far, far, far better thought out. Everything fits. But there is one overwhelming similarity between the two, and that is marketing. Look at *Star Wars*, even during the first, the good, trilogy, you had the toys, you had the comics, you had the cartoons (*Droids* and *Ewoks* and those god awful Ewok movies, anyone else remember them?). More recently, there have been episodes 1-3, video games, books, a Cartoon Network series of 2 minute shorts, a cartoon movie as well as a cartoon series based on the movie. The drawback to that marketing is that the *Clone Wars* movie (the cartoon) has completely destroyed my blind watching of anything *Star Wars*. Honestly what does Skywalker Ranch, Lucas studios or whatever, have against New Orleans transvestites, and why would a Hutt talk like one?

Thankfully, Christopher Tolkien can't destroy *LOTR* the same way. It's true that Middle Earth has had its down points. Does anyone remember the Rankin Bass *Return of the King*? It's true that Christopher Tolkien has published what seems to be every single scrap of paper his father scribbled on, regardless of whether or not it has anything to do with Middle Earth. We not only have *The Hobbit* and *LOTR*, but the *Sil*, The History of Middle Earth, *Letters from Father Christmas*, and *Roverandom* among others. We even have "lost" or "new" tales that aren't really new or lost, for instance, *The Children of Hurin*, which is far easier to read in its new format. It's enough to wonder, if one is feeling mean, if Christopher Tolkien "finds" something whenever he needs cash. This doesn't seem to be the case. It does truly seem to be the case that Christopher Tolkien loved his father and his father's work. That is enough, unlike the case with *Star Wars* to keep people like me buying the books, even in hardcover.

This work, *The Legend of Sigurd & Gudrun* is not Middle-Earth. It is part of the inspiration for Middle Earth, or to be more exact, a translation/retelling of work that helped inspire Middle Earth. But it is also a misnamed work. A better title would be *J. R. R. Tolkien's Translation/Re-Telling of the Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun with notes by Christopher Tolkien*, for there seems to be far more C. Tolkien than J. R. R. Tolkien in this book. In part, this is understandable for the book is culled from Lecture notes, scribbled notes, and a hand written translation. Sadly, it also highlights the books two major flaws.

The first flaw is connected to the translation/retelling itself. J. R. R. Tolkien's translation/retelling is not a smooth retelling; it is jumpy in spots. It is not so jumpy that it puts off an informed reader. And that might be a problem. While it is true that some people reading this book (c'est moi, for instance) are more than familiar with the Volsung saga, it is equally likely to be true that some people are picking up the book without this familiarity, buying the book because of the Tolkien name. If you are one of these people, I would highly recommend that you read a gloss of the saga, be it a short prose version or another lyric translation. This will

help make some plot points clearer.

The second problem is the editing (or book structure). Large parts of the book are Christopher Tolkien's notes. This includes discussions of plot differences, translation difference, or what he thinks his father thought about a certain aspect of the saga. There are several problems with this. The first is that Christopher Tolkien's writing is pedantically dry. If you know about the sagas, none of the information related is new, and you lack the pleasure of reading what the J. R. R. Tolkien himself thought. Instead, you are told what someone else thinks he might have thought. If you are new to the saga, the information might be interesting, if you can stay awake to read it. It is really, really dry. Additionally, the notes are not footnotes or endnotes, but instead form a selection of the book. There is no indication in the actual text of the lay that there is a note about particular word or stanza. This is frustrating, or would be if you needed the information. It means that someone who is coming to the saga first hand is getting knowledge of the notes late. Would've adding note numbers been that much of a problem?

Despite these problems, the book is not a waste. Well the story can at times be choppy, it also can be powerful. Take for instance, "In sweet embrace/to sleep she went,/to grief unending/Gudrun wakened". It is a powerful in its starkness, and allows the reader to share something that Tolkien himself loved. It also is a good retelling of the story. It is constructed as a chant so that any reader can imagine a scop in front of fire singing it. Such a wonderful image is one that I'm happy the book could give me.

Nikki says

Tolkien's scholarship is always pretty impressive, even if it's out of date, now. Reading the bits of his lectures pieced together by his son is very interesting, and I rather wish I could attend them. (If I could be a member of Connie Willis' time travelling department of historians, I'd go visit Tolkien if I could.)

It's also amazing how much work he did on keeping the metre and language of Old Norse in a modern English version of the stories. The verse itself is probably the main attraction for readers. The story can be difficult to follow, but I think once you get into the swing of it -- or if you know the basic ideas already -- it's no harder to follow than a translation of The Saga of the Volsungs, though it is obviously in verse whereas that is mostly prose.

Captain Sir Roddy, R.N. (Ret.) says

As soon as I found this hardbound edition in the bookstore, I snapped it up. This 350-page book contains J.R.R. Tolkien's interpretation of the two ancient epic poems from the Poetic Edda of the Icelandic peoples. Tolkien's son, Christopher has compiled and edited his father's work on the "Lay of the Volsungs" and the "Lay of Gudrun." This is earthy and spare poetry; rich in story and tradition; and provides a tangible connection to our ancestors and their mythology more than a thousand years ago. This is a book to read, re-read, and study; and, I have to say, it somehow feels canonical, as "Beowulf" is considered to be. Christopher Tolkien's notes and comments on his father's work help place these poems in their proper context. Finally, I see that some of the ideas and concepts developed in Tolkien's fiction are the direct result of his life-long fascination and study of the Poetic Edda. I highly recommend this book; it is real a treasure!

Aoife says

Yes this is an epic poem inspired by Norse mythology. This will not be everybody's cup of tea. I enjoyed the poem itself (but then when it comes to poetry my opinion tends to be either 'yeah I like this' and 'no I don't like this' you won't really find me gushing over poetry) and the additional commentary (most of it by Christopher Tolkien but much of it is based on notes his father left and there is also a transcript of a whole lecture JRR Tolkien once gave on the Edda) was interesting - at least large parts of it were interesting. The thing is that it assumes all readers are 120% Norse mythology and ancient Norse language geeks and interested in everything. So the commentary included (few) cross-references to Middle-Earth (very interesting for me), background on the myths (still interesting), info on where/when manuscripts had been found etc. (not something I care terribly much about) and tidbits on old Norse grammar (ehm...well...). So I admit to skipping a couple of paragraphs here and there.

If you're just interested in Tolkien's Middle Earth you can skip the book. There are really only a handful of direct references to Middle Earth (and those are just references to names of characters and places) and while Norse mythology did inspire Middle Earth you'll have an easier read with a prose-retelling of it. However if you do enjoy (Norse) mythology in general and aren't turned off by poetry (and lots of very archaic language) this book might interest you.

Paul says

Though I have great respect for Tolkien's works in general, I have never been a fan of his poetry. I won't say that this made me one, but it was surprisingly good.

Part of that is perhaps due to the unforgiving form Tolkien strove to emulate - a concise alliterative verse that aimed at sudden 'flashes' of vision rather than sustained reflection. There are relatively few aspects of these poems that would remind one of anything found in 'Lord of the Rings'; the neo-Romantic gentility normally associated with Tolkien's writing is given little rein here.

It is a decidedly odd book, difficult to explain. These two poems are not translations of Eddaic poetry, but re-imaginings, in modern English, of the stories that grew up around the Germanic heroes and villains of the 'Heroic Age'. Tolkien here plays the part of a modern-day *scop*, weaving material from various sources (the so-called 'Poetic Edda' but also later sagas) into a shape that fits his vision of things - or how he thinks things should have been. The old Norse and Germanic literature is fragmentary and corrupted as we have it, and Tolkien brings his scholarship to bear on this endeavor, 'correcting' his source texts to make a better story.

Some years ago, at a party involving several other graduate students in English, I was trying to explain my opinion on the state of current literature. (Being 26 or 27, I naturally had one.) Little of it appealed to me. What tried to be original was too often solipsistic. Writers have (I tried to argue) practically run out of idols to smash. What is next? The solution, I felt, was somehow to be found in the old rather than the new.

Of course it was Tolkien who had got there already.

Ettelwen says

Opravdu nikdy jsem nebyla na poezii a prozatím si myslím, že ani nikdy nebudu, ale v případě Tolkiena vždy ráda jednou za čas udělám výjimku. V těchto knihách mi Tolkien vždy dokazuje, že byl opravdu člověkem na pravém místě. Zůstalo nám toho po něm tolik, ale přesto tak málo.

Leanne says

A story about love, betrayal, death & sorrow. Written in verse in two parts.

The Lay Of Sigurd and The Lay Of Gudrun.

The lays written by J.R.R. Tolkien and after each Lay a commentary from his son Christopher Tolkien.

Written similar to a psychology paper, explaining each stanza and referencing where it came from.

Tolkien based most of his work off Norse Mythology and he based most of his life's work off of it. From this he created Middle Earth.

I know some people are not a fan of his work as it can be a bit dry and he heavily detailed his work in old English but Lord Of The Rings & The Hobbit when compared to Norse Mythology and where it all came from is quite interesting.

This story itself reminded me of a darker, grim version of Tristan & Isolde.

Chris says

One of the best-known heroes in Norse mythology, Sigurd is better known as Siegfried from German versions of the legends, and his exploits and interactions – from killing a dragon and re-forging a mighty sword, say, to his relationships with his wife Gudrún, with warrior princess Brynhild and with a host of other personages – characterise him as much as they echo the exploits and interactions of other heroes in other times and cultures. Here Tolkien attempts a harmonisation of the various early tales, particularly those in the *Poetic Edda*, and versifies them in English as 'The New Lay of the Völsungs' (in ten parts) and 'The New Lay of Gudrún', using forms and alliteration modelled on those early originals.

This posthumous publication ought by rights to appeal to a wide range of readers, from hobbit-fanciers to Wagnerites, from poets to psychologists, and from medieval literature specialists to mythologists, but I suspect it will end up satisfying only those whose interests overlap a number of these categories; for any single one of those categories of readers it may well end up a disappointment. Many fantasy fans may well come with false expectations of more Middle Earth action or a tale compatible with the Ring Cycle; or they may vainly hope for more than just a pastiche of medieval poetry, however erudite, or a deeper psychological study of the motivations of the main characters; and knowledgeable scholars may like to be told more than they already know from Christopher Tolkien's otherwise praiseworthy notes and editing. However, for those like me who just have a fascination with that certain mix of medieval legend, fantasy, character motivation and mythic resonance *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, complete with introductions and notes, supplies an extra dimension; all that is lacking is a selection of annotated colour plates of the medieval wooden carvings hinted at on the book's cover and inside line illustrations.

Anyway, this reviewer enjoyed it, even if he did have to use two bookmarks to go from text to notes and back again. However, this method rather defeats Tolkien's intention of letting a good story stand on its own feet, and in all fairness I should have read the poems straight through, aloud for preference, to judge its merits. Actually, mostly what it encourages me to do is to go back to the originals or related works such as *The Saga of the Volsungs* or *The Nibelungenlied*, albeit in translation. Tolkien worked on *The Legend* in the 20s and 30s before abandoning it for original creations like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; perhaps the majority of readers will principally judge this as preparation for the literary legacy he is best known for.

<http://wp.me/s2oNj1-sigurd>
