

Epic

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 10 Dec 2001

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Alice K. Turner — 10 Dec 2001, 15:19

There's an essay in the already famous New Yorker of last week (famous for its wonderful "Middle Eastern" cover map of New York--look for it soon in a poster shop near you), by Anthony Lane, the magazine's intelligent, literate, British-born movie critic. It's about LotR, not the imminent movie version, but about the books and what they meant to him and his kind when he was growing up. I thought I'd quote from a somewhat apt paragraph for this group:

"There is so much that is wrong and flabby with the book, but there is one big thing that Tolkien got right: he got rhythm. His instinct for the procedures of Dark Age saga was as reliable as his indifference to the mores of the machine age, and he soon established a beat--a basic pulse, throbbing below the surface of the book and forcing you, day after day, to turn the page. We can no more leave Frodo stranded on his mission than his friends can. Not all works of literature share that pulse: the Odyssey has it, "Ulysses" doesn't. This is a way of suggesting that "The Lord of the Rings" may be the final stab at epic, and there is invariably something risky, if not downright risible, in a last gasp. Tolkien believed that he could reproduce the epic form under modern conditions, and that there was no call to update the epic vocabulary; hence both the mockery that met his enterprise and the more charitable amazement that anyone could strive for such a thing. (Read the comentaries of Tolkien scholars and you find them plaintively torn between crying up his serious literary credentials and claiming him for a man of the people, and Aragorn-like leader who will outwit the snares of the elite.) It is a book that bristles with bravado, and yet to give into it--to cave into it, as most of us did on a first reading--betrays a certain nerdishness, a reluctance to face the finer shades of life, that verges on the cowardly."

It goes on a bit, mostly with affection.

-alga