For over fifty years, J.R.R. Tolkien’s peerless fantasy has accumulated worldwide acclaim as the greatest adventure tale ever written.

No other writer has created a world as distinct as Middle-earth, complete with its own geography, history, languages, and legends. And no one has created characters as endearing as Tolkien’s large-hearted, hairy-footed hobbits. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings continues to seize the imaginations of readers of all ages, and this new three-volume paperback edition is designed to appeal to the youngest of them.

In ancient times the Rings of Power were crafted by the Elvensmiths, and Sauron, the Dark Lord, forged the One Ring, filling it with his own power so that he could rule all others. But the One Ring was taken from him, and though he sought it throughout Middle-earth, still it remained lost to him . . .

A new wave of readers have discovered The Fellowship of the Ring, thanks to the arrival of the epic movie hits. And that is definitely a good thing, because this trilogy not only spurred the fantasy genre into a respectable position, but also provided the template for virtually every elf, dwarf, lost king, and medieval fantasy world since. Its also a wicked good read.

We open some sixty years after the events of The Hobbit -- Bilbo Baggins is older, not much wiser, substantially wealthier, and quite eccentric (one not-so-affectionate nickname is Mad Baggins). He has also adopted his bright young cousin Frodo, who was orphaned at a young age and had led a rather fractured life since then. On his 111th birthday, Bilbo suddenly vanishes, leaving behind all his possessions to Frodo -- including the golden ring that allows its wearer to become invisible.

Seventeen years later, Gandalf the wizard shows up again on Frodos doorstep, and informs the young hobbit that his ring is in fact the One Ring of the Dark Lord Sauron. It inevitably corrupts those who have it, and most of Saurons power is invested in it. Trying to deflect danger from the Shire,
Frodo leaves with his best friend Sam and his loyal cousins Merry and Pippin. But Frodo has only the slightest idea of the hideous and dangerous journey ahead of him, that will take him across Middle-Earth to the evil land of Mordor.

Many fantasy cliches were spawned from this book (although they weren’t cliches when Tolkien used them). Orcs, elves, dwarves, halflings, sprawling medieval kingdoms, dethroned kings, gray-bearded wizards and evil Dark Lords. But no one will feel that these are stale; on the contrary, they feel fresh and unused, because that is what they were when the book was first penned.

Narrative-wise, this book begins on much the same note as The Hobbit: its lighter and more cheerful, since it opens in the Shire. But darker undertones begin to crop up in the very first chapter, when Bilbo begins clutching at the Ring and speaking in a Gollum-like manner. The pace is pretty slow and gradual until the hobbits reach Bree, at which point it becomes darker, faster and harsher in tone and pace. The matter in it also becomes more mature, particularly in the chilling scenes after Frodo is stabbed by a Nazgul.

One of the things that Tolkien did exceptionally well is atmosphere. With a minimum of words, he conveys the menace of the Black Riders, the beauty of the Elves, the decay of the ancient kingdom of Moria, the mystery of such characters as Aragorn. In some areas, he deliberately didn’t elaborate on the such things as the Balrog, leaving the visualization up to the readers.

Another strong point is a sense of epic proportions. Too often a fantasy writer TRIES to write an epic, at the expense of individual character development. Tolkien managed to balance both of them, by focusing on the individuals in the center of epic struggles.

Frodo himself is the quintessential little guy hero, one of the last people whom you’d expect to be on a mission to save the world. Hes prone to moods of either cheerfulness or sadness, a little immature and bored at the beginning, but incredibly brave and stout-hearted when the pressure is put on him. He has no astounding destiny or special powers to help him. Hes simply an ordinary person.

We also have Gandalf, who is fleshed out from the pleasantly crabby wizard of Hobbit -- we see more of his hidden sides and powers here. And Frodo is surrounded by a well-rounded cast of characters, including his loyal gardener Sam and his charmingly sneaky cousins, as well as a rich fellowship of ethereal Elves, mysterious men and doughty dwarves.

Tolkien wasnt the first fantasy writer, but he can rightly be described as the first noted fantasy writer, and he remains top of the heap today. Fellowship of the Ring is a must-read -- and then go watch the movies again.
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