

scathing review in *The Observer* entitled “A Boy’s World,” in which he savaged Tolkien in a manner designed to embarrass the author: “The astonishing thing is that all the characters are boys masquerading as adult heroes. The hobbits, or halflings, are ordinary boys; the fully human heroes have reached the fifth form; but hardly one of them knows anything about women, except by hearsay.” Muir’s characterization of the hobbits as boys, implying sexual immaturity, is a coded way of saying that the hobbits are not “real men,” i.e., sexually mature heterosexuals. In point of fact, Frodo at the beginning of the quest is about fifty, and Sam is in his thirties. The hobbits’ short stature (about half that of a human), through which Tolkien challenges masculine norms, is yet another reason why Muir degrades them.

In the 1950s, anti-gay sentiments were often cloaked in attacks on a man’s “masculinity” or a woman’s “femininity.” In addition to being scorned for his characters’ sexual and gender nonconformity, Tolkien continued to suffer the perennial fate of authors of fantasy fiction, what Tolkien called his “fairy stories.” Writers like Edwin Muir and his ilk might have saved themselves a lot of ink had they simply stated what they really meant when reviewing Tolkien’s books: “No more fairy stories.”

Fortunately, *The Lord of The Rings* found champions in powerful places, and these reviewers were even more impassioned in describing what the books meant in terms of fantasy, myth, masculinity, and love. Leading the charge in favor of Tolkien was none other than C.S. Lewis. Unfazed by the prospect of being accused of personal bias, given his Oxford connection and personal friendship with Tolkien (whose books he edited informally), Lewis penned rapturous reviews, including one in *Time and Tide*

extolling *The Fellowship of The Ring*. “This book is like lightning from a clear sky. To say that in it heroic romance, gorgeous, eloquent, and unashamed, has suddenly returned at a period almost pathological in its anti-romanticism, is inadequate.” Lewis was sincere in his belief in Tolkien’s genius, but the sensuous quality of his language (“gorgeous, eloquent, and unashamed”) suggest something more personal.

The poet W. H. Auden rhapsodized about *The Lord of The Rings* in *The New York Times*. “No fiction I have read in the last five years has given me more joy,” he wrote. While Auden did not mention homosexuality, his own poetry had become increasingly forthright in portraying gay themes. Although Auden had been a student of Tolkien at Oxford in the 1920s, they met very few times over the course of their lives. Auden moved to America in 1939, where he met his lover, Chester Kallman. Auden openly embraced his gay identity and become active in left-wing politics, while Tolkien remained married to Edith Bratt for more than fifty years and was a devout Catholic. But the authors forged a strong bond in a series of erudite letters that continued until the time of their deaths, by coincidence in the same year and month: September, 1973. Their shared literary and personal interest in same-sex love was never discussed openly.

### THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING ON THE BIG SCREEN

Attempts to translate *The Lord of The Rings* to the screen began in the late 1950s, with Tolkien serving as a skeptical script consultant, but the project fell through. The Beatles contemplated their own film version in the 1960s, but their plans also came to naught. In 1978, Ralph Bakshi directed an animated version of Tolkien’s epic. The visual style is dark and intriguing, but the film is marred by the director’s homophobic portrait of the creature Gollum, who’s presented as a lisping Hollywood stereotype of a bitter queen.

It remained for Peter Jackson to offer a spectacular film adaption of *The Fellowship of The Ring*. Released in 2001, the film garnered rave reviews, won four Oscars, and became an international blockbuster. As impressive as the computer-generated imagery is the homoerotic yearning that fills Jackson’s expansive screen. Jackson’s cinematography can be said to have a distinctly homoerotic directorial gaze. One of the pioneers of this perspective was Franco Zeffirelli in his 1968 film of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Zeffirelli’s camera gazes lingeringly on the beautiful visage of Leonard Whiting as Romeo, and the director is equally obsessed with the supple bodies and colorful codpieces worn by the young Capulets and Montagues.

As in Zeffirelli’s film, the male leads in *The Fellowship of The Ring* are photographed in vividly sensual ways, with frequent close-ups to portray intense emotional bonds among the virtually all-male cast. The effect is one of sustained homoeroticism. Elijah Wood, the youngest of the actors, is an androgynously lovely Frodo Baggins, with luminous eyes, featured in many soulful close-ups that convey both his spiritual purity and the beauty that he possesses in Sam’s eyes. Short in stature, with a lilting voice and many fey mannerisms, Elijah Wood is one of the most unconventional heroes in movie history.

Even more overtly homoerotic is Jackson’s photography of Sean Astin in the pivotal role of Sam Gamgee, the love of Frodo’s life. With his blond, curly hair, full, sensual lips, and beefy muscularity, Sean Astin is a brilliant screen realization of

## Seashore Cartoon

[ballpoint pen, notebook paper]

To replace the carrying sack,  
somehow gone missing,  
for our purple beach umbrella  
you brought home a *gun-case*.  
Hauling our gear from car to beach  
at Herring Cove, far end,

wearing khaki sun-hats  
with jutting brims and neck-flaps,  
Foreign Legion fashion,  
we looked like terrorists  
on holiday. You sketched us  
sternly marshaling cooler,

towels, canvas chairs,  
umbrella (snug as a rifle  
in its brand-new pouch)  
—prepared, evidently,  
to defend to the hilt  
one quilt-sized swatch of sand.

JUDITH SAUNDERS

