



# From Middle-earth to Duckburg, Worlds of Fantastic Mythmaking and Mythbreaking: On J.R.R. Tolkien’s Sub- Creation and Carl Barks’ Organic World Building

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Guest of Honour Speech, Finncon 2024. Jyväskylä, Finland. July 6,  
2024. Keynote to Finncon Academic Track: “Worlds.”

I propose to speak about fantasy worlds, though I am aware that this is a rash adventure. Fantasy worlds are perilous lands, and in them are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. And overbold I may be accounted, for I’ve been a lover of fantasy since I learned to read, and I have read a lot of research on it.

Like J.R.R. Tolkien, who I am quoting creatively here (cf. “On Fairy-Stories” 1), I have been mostly a wandering explorer (or trespasser) in the fantasy land, full of wonder and amazement. It has been a lifelong journey. In his essay “On Fairy-Stories” (originally published 1939/1947), Tolkien writes that “the realm of fairy-story [in this occasion meaning fantasy] is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords. ...” (1).

Here, like Tolkien 85 years earlier, I attempt to share my thoughts on fantasy worlds. We will start our journey from Middle-earth, a place where mortals may wander; it is a small but most interesting part of Tolkien’s fantastic cosmos, Eä. Our journey will end in Carl Barks’ world of comics, which includes the fictitious American city of Duckburg and all its more and less realistic

surroundings. This is an author-centered essay. We will hear words straight from “the giants” of fantasy, the top picks in the “all-time-best-fantasy-authors” lists and best-selling authors in the world’s most popular literary genre.

In “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien first asks what fairy-stories are, what is “fantasy”, what is its origin, what is the use of it. Later, as if in passing or by accident, Tolkien ends up telling us *how* he creates fantasy worlds and writes fantasy. What are the inner drives of his imagination?

First, we have all read, and many of us have also written, a bunch of articles and books about the origins of fantasy, or fairy-stories. I am not going to waste our time talking about that. Secondly, what is the use of fantasy? We all know that it is one of the most ultimate desires we all have. So, enough of that. I am not going to bore you by telling you that fantasy is interesting, valuable, important, *precious*.

Therefore, I will end up answering the non-accidental third part of Tolkien’s famous lecture and essay: What is fantastic worldbuilding, and how is it achieved? I will approach this question by discussing works by Tolkien, Barks, and Sir Terry Pratchett, in terms of what I call *mythmaking* and *mythbreaking*.

## Mythmaking and mythbreaking

Simply put, mythmaking is an artistic practice of creating new myths or reforming already existing ones. In Rick Riordan’s *The Lightning Thief* (2005), for instance, when Percy Jackson learns he is the son of Poseidon, the God of Sea from Greek mythology, we know we are stepping into a realm of mythmaking. When Tolkien rewrites the myth of Kullervo, from Elias Lönnrot’s *Kalevala*, he is also re-telling a myth; when he calls his Kullervo Túrin Turambar, he does so as a mythmaker, or a mythopoetic author.

Mythbreaking is a bit more complicated. I use the term here to describe situations where a myth is proven false, or where a known myth is converted to another form. Northrop Frye (159–170) uses the term “displacing of myths” when describing, for example, religious Christian myths reused in secular ways in the contemporary world. In fantasy and speculative fiction, mythbreaking can be used intertextually when, for example, Paul Atreides, the protagonist of Frank Herbert’s *Dune* (1965), uses myths to transform the truth in the inner context of the fantastic world. Then again, authors such as Pratchett or Douglas Adams have perfected comical mythbreaking, where myths from are reformed for humorous purposes.

Tolkien wrote that he drew all his fantasy and imagination from “The Cauldron of Stories” that holds all the myths and stories ever imagined, or anything that would ever be imagined. In his famous letter to publisher Milton Waldman in 1951, he continued that searching for the origins of a story did not interest him (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* 150). Instead, for Tolkien, fantastic worldbuilding starts from the *myth*: “Basic passion of mine ad initio was for myth (not allegory!) and fairy-story, and above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history, of which there is far too little in the world (accessible to me) for my appetite” (143). Later, he describes his own passion for mythmaking: “I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story ...

which I could dedicate simply to ... England; to my country” (144). This was the creative reasoning behind his vast Legendarium: ranging from the fairytale-like *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (1937) to the heroic fantasy of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55), and to the mythopoeic, posthumously published *The Silmarillion* (1977), *The Book of Lost Tales* (1983), and most parts of The History of Middle-earth series (1983–1996).

In “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien states that the essential power of Faërie is the power of making effective by the will the visions of fantasy. He continues that fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. “I desired dragons with a profound desire (19),” he famously writes, and continues: “The human mind is capable of forming mental images of things not actually present. The faculty of conceiving the images is (or was) naturally called Imagination” (21). For Tolkien’s mythmaking – his fantastic worldbuilding – however, the fantastic elements and imaginative ideas are not the only important things. He wanted his fantasy world to also be realistic within the laws of its own sub-creation: “Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it.” (“On Fairy-Stories” 33). The fantastic world is made credible, even plausible, by giving it realistic and logical elements. There should be trees, plants, animals, the sun and the moon, stars, earth, wind and fire, songs, *et cetera*.

Pratchett and Barks are, by comparison, not just famous for their mythmaking, but for *mythbreaking*, since they take famous myths and stories from our (primary) world and give them imaginative twists and changes for comic purposes. Pratchett makes fun of, for example, grim Christian images of Hell and demons. He turns Death itself into a comic personification of the concept, he ridicules magic in many ways, and breaks the logic of story-building. He even laughs at the genre of fantasy as a concept – but it is a gentle laugh we can all join in if we want to.

Barks, in turn, makes comical uses of mythic milieus like the Seven Cities of Cibola (made of gold), the utopian lost city of Tralla La (a reference to James Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*’s Shangri La), or the land of Terries and Ferries beneath the ground. There are science fiction milieus of outer space, the Moon, and Mars. Barks also constantly remakes and breaks myths like the philosopher’s stone and the flying carpet, and depicts fantastic creatures like dragons, hydras, harpies, Loch Ness monster, witches and knights. He also creates his own mythical devices, such as the golden helmet of Olaf the Blue, capable of making its owner an emperor of America, or the first coin of Scrooge McDuck, thought to be a magical artefact by some. Barks’ comics also include lots of science-fictional elements like futuristic machines capable of shrinking or enlarging objects, brain-altering devices, forces of shapeshifting, hypnotism, teleportation, and time travel. His comics are certainly rich with fantastic and mythic elements.

## Tolkien's mythmaking

Tolkien's mythopoeic vision could be seen as linguistically centered (Shippey 6–13): although his basic passion was for myth, he started his creation from the languages. He first created fictitious languages with his brother Hilary when they were children, with warm guidance from his mother Mabel, and he continued it throughout his life. He and his wife Edith wrote each other letters in secret writing, which had to be decoded to become understandable. He was a philologist, a professor of language, and a true lover of languages both real and imagined. Tolkien's fantastic *Legendarium* and his fantasy world – Middle-earth and its surrounding Arda and Eä – also started with a lingual play. Tolkien invented his first elven languages, and only after that started wondering what kinds of creatures might be speaking those languages, and inventing stories revolving around those speakers and their cultures.

As a sub-creator, a maker of his own world, Tolkien follows the mythopoetic logics discussed and pondered earlier by numerous thinkers, like Plato, Aristotle, Plotin, Origen, and later Sir Philip Sidney and Percy Bysshe Shelley. One of the (quite) modern fantasy authors, Scottish writer George MacDonald, also writes in his seminal essay "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893) that "man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws, for there is in him which delights in calling up new forms – which is the nearest he can come, perhaps, to creation." Expressing the same sentiment in "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien follows in the footsteps of earlier Victorian fantasists.

It is not, however, just the frames of the world – the big picture – that the fantasy author is creating. Tolkien, for example, was initially interested in those Elves who spoke his invented language, later known as Quenya. In the 1930s, for another instance, he wrote down a sentence in the back of an exam paper: "In a hole in the ground there lived a *hobbit*" (Tolkien, *The Hobbit* 1). He then began to ponder "what is a hobbit?" What is the meaning of that word? Is that thing a character of a story? This became a creative impulse for *The Hobbit*. As we all know, such *characters* inhabiting the fantasy world are vital; readers can become familiar with them, identify with them, and share feelings with them. These characters need places to be, and they need background, history, and future. There's the geography of the world, there are the (changing) maps of the world, as well as genealogies and family trees that give characters a sense of rootedness, history and pedigree. Characters can also be outsiders, unfamiliar with the surroundings, orphans, misguided thugs, or whatever you can imagine.

## Carl Barks's mythmaking and mythbreaking – following Tolkien's footsteps?

Millions of readers were and are inspired by Tolkien's creative work. One of the authors who saw Tolkien's genius in worldbuilding was Barks, a comics author most renowned for his stories about Disney characters like Donald Duck. Walt Disney Company created the first few of these original characters, but Barks also did a huge amount of work inhabiting his comics world with new ones. Most importantly, he created Scrooge McDuck, who became the most successful character in the Disney adventure comics era. Scrooge is a peculiar

character; hermit-like but warm-hearted, when necessary. He is an extremely rich and mingy billionaire and adventurer, who goes into various fantastic journeys with his nephew Donald and grand-nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie. Barks also created important side characters like Gyro Gearloose and Gladstone Gander, developed existing characters like the nephews and Daisy Duck, and created interesting villains like the Beagle Boys, Flintheart Glomgold, and the witch Magica De Spell. The names of these characters are witty, funny, and revealing of character traits.

Barks was already an esteemed author of comics, when he became familiar with Tolkien's fantasy, first introduced to Middle-earth by Barbara Anderson (under her maiden name E. B. Boatner). In the 1960s, American youth was infatuated by Tolkien's work. It is assumed that Barks never actually finished reading *The Lord of the Rings*, but he read large parts of it and was amazed by the amount of work Tolkien had to put into his trilogy – writing to Anderson in 1965: “How could anyone invent those family trees and surroundings and keep them all in perfect order, if he was not a genius?” In his letter to Malcolm Willits in 1960 Barks wrote that patience and a big trash bin are the writer's most important tools (283). When reading Tolkien's fantasy, accordingly, he was perplexed by the number of maps, family trees, languages and background stories of the books.

Barks, however, also saw some similarities between Tolkien's creative targets and methods and those of his own. He was pleased by Tolkien's insistence that his fantasy did not have any hidden messages. Like Tolkien, who once wrote that his goal was “literary pleasure” (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* 414), Barks emphasized the enjoyment of reading the stories – but was also glad that somebody took fantasy so seriously. On the other hand, he also contrasted his own use of mythmaking to Tolkien's. He writes that his style was not a result of researching classic, stating instead that “it was the summaries of classic fairy tales and stories that I've read when achieving my public-school education that left a permanent mark on my style for creating plots, choosing topics and milieus” (Barks 283). Barks even admitted that Tolkien's works were the first fantasy books he had ever read; he had, for instance, not read Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) or the fairy tales of the brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen – only summaries.

When Barks was reading *The Lord of the Rings*, as a strange coincidence, someone wrote him a fan letter from Seattle saying that “long Donald Duck and Scrooge McDuck adventures create that sense of wonder that is usually lacking in most fantasy stories.” Another fan had just earlier written to him, “You have created a great fantasy world – and you make it more plausible by humor aimed for the adult audience” (Barks 283). Surprised by such remarks, Barks started thinking about the fantasy aspects in his works. Earlier, he had considered his “speaking animals” – as he called them – just caricatures of human beings. Now he started wondering whether he was in fact a fantasy maker and wrote to Anderson that “maybe for the last 23 years I've written stories about Middle-earth, just not knowing it” (283).

So, is Barks writing fantasy? He is certainly (sub)creating “another world” and, in a way, he is also mythmaking and mythbreaking. Barks' creative style is what I call *organic worldbuilding*. His world is never created wholly; worldbuilding is a reactive and on-going, constant process of creation and recreation. Everything is invented for a reason, and those reasons focus on three

central frames of reference: milieus and atmosphere, the story, and characters. Barks' imaginative work expands when needed from the starting point of just telling a story. After all, he considered himself a "working man," who was simply paid for writing interesting comics for young audiences – and he did that to the best of his abilities. If the most suitable central character to tell the story was Donald Duck, he wrote about Donald. If not, he chose again. If the publisher wanted a story about Gyro Gearloose, Barks wrote about Gyro.

Barks would, then, perhaps not have called his creative work "worldbuilding" as such, but he was still following classical creative style. His work was greatly influenced by the working methods he learned as an animation maker at Disney studios, and he also rebuilt some characters taken from there for his comics. For instance, while Donald Duck of the original animations was an aggressive rascal whose speech was hard to understand, Barks recreated him in his comics as a lazy but occasionally enterprising, likable everyman character with whom the readers could easily relate. Even though Barks wrote what he was asked to by the publisher, then, he used his creative freedom when developing a story from that starting point. In Michael Naiman's interview in 1993, Barks states that his favourite subjects were treasure hunting, the resolution of old myths, and outer space (83). Quite fantastic and speculative?

If we compare Barks' organic worldbuilding to Tolkien's large-scale mythopoeic sub-creation, we can easily see that Tolkien, by contrast, does not worry too much about characters or the flow of the narrative. He concentrates instead on languages, races of people, larger structures and battles of cosmological depths. Barks, in turn, is not interested in battles of good and evil or philosophical questions of faith and friendship, struggle or defeat. He does, however, like Tolkien, consider milieus important. In 1963, Barks wrote that he always tried to tie his stories in a certain place: "If it is supposed to be the Andes, it should look like the Andes. Even the jokes should be something reflecting the atmosphere, locals, nature and geography of the Andes" (Blum, "Barksin klassikot" 9). According to Geoffrey Blum ("Barksin klassikot" 9–10), Barks always criticized contemporary adventure movies like the Star Wars trilogy (1977–1983) and the Indiana Jones films (1981–2023) for focusing on quick-paced action at the expense of storytelling, instead of the kinds of plot junctions and connections that he himself gave a lot of effort creating. "Milieus and atmosphere should be described accurately, because the plausible story is tied together by them," he writes (*ibid.*).

In "Mystery of the Swamp" (1945), one of the early Donald Duck adventure comics, Barks also practised some creative work similar to Tolkien's conception of *The Hobbit* – without being familiar with Tolkien's work at the time. When creating the gnome-like creatures of Gneezles, Barks used his own concept art of Disney's seven dwarfs, from 1935, as a starting point (the movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* came out two years later). He used the word gnome (no-me, noumi, with a folkstyle pronunciation) and gave these comic characters funny appearances with long beards, big noses and Amish-style hats, medieval helmets and halberds, and Oklahoman accents (Blum, "Myytti vie mennessään" 273). Barks describes his spontaneous creative work on the "Mystery of the Swamp:"

Suddenly I began thinking of the Everglades. What could Donald do there? What sort of creatures besides alligators would he find? And just like that, I thought of all these weird little people, like gnomes. The name Gneezle came from gnome. I tried to make them look strange, like fairy creatures rather than part of our human world. They had pointy ears and funny feet and wore crazy costumes, but they had lived in the area so long that they had become swamp Okies (Blum, "Myytti vie mennessään" 273).

Later, Barks created lots of similar "little people," like the funny-looking small humans in "Plain Awful" in "Lost in Andes" (1949), Terries and Fermies in "Land Beneath the Ground" (1955), and pygmy Indians in the "Land of the Pygmy Indians" (1957). There's something hobbit-like in his sympathy for these little humanoid creatures. The land of Gneezles, however, was Barks' first attempt to create a whole imagined world.

## Conclusion: The legacy

Finally, what about Duckburg? In Barks' long active career, it started as an inconspicuous background for his Donald Duck comics, but later evolved into a fictitious city, located in the fictitious state of Calisota. It is not, however, always there; it travels a lot, moves, and changes. Barks writes in a letter to Pål Jansen in 1978:

Duckburg was originally supposed to be near Burbank, California, where the Disney Studios were. But it of course moved regarding what the story needed. It became an imaginative city, a sort of fairyland. It had a desert, a lake, a sea, snow and tropical thunders, whatever was necessary. I would have ended up with a lot of problems, if I would have kept it in California" (Blum, "Surffausta verkossa ja vesillä" 178).

Later, following Barks' trail, the so-called Donald Duck universe became a fictional shared universe of animations, games and comics that included his Duckburg. Most famously, comics author Don Rosa continued Barks' work, notably by retelling Scrooge McDuck's life story built up from Barks' own hints and details. Rosa rebuilt and developed both Duckburg and its characters in his stories from 1987 to 2006, and many others have continued in both of their footsteps.

Tolkien, then again, with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, invigorated the genre of fantasy. He became the father of modern fantasy, and predecessor and godfather for generations of fantasy authors. Hundreds of millions of people have read his books and watched the film and tv adaptations (Korpua 1).

In fantasy, myths are remodelled, changed, and remade endlessly. Fantasy worlds are constantly created, and many of them follow the steps of the giants. Both Tolkien's and Barks' work lives on in that work of creation. Their legacy is to inspire us and open our imagination for many types of mythmaking and mythbreaking, mythopoeic creating and sub-creating, lingual creation, and organic making. The result is fantasy in its many forms, for us to enjoy as the authors themselves wanted.

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