

## tnr.com Flick Chicks

Don't be surprised if the audience at your screening of *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* is made up mostly of teenage girls. Although Tolkien's trilogy has traditionally been the exclusive cultural province of the sort of pimple-ridden, Hot Pockets-eating boys who go on to make millions as software developers, Peter Jackson's movies, with their wide distribution and teen magazine-ready stars, have created a whole new genre of *LotR* freaks: high-school females.

But, whatever else you do at that screening, don't assume that the teenage-girl *LotR* fans are there only to scream at cute boys. They'll fight you to the death to make you understand they aren't just in love with Orlando Bloom and Elijah Wood; they're in love with the story itself. The recent *LotR* coverage in *ym* (where I work) provoked a torrent of letters on the subject, so I asked 50 self-described *LotR* fanatic girls to answer some questions about their interest in the trilogy. I got an effusive response. Bethany, age 13, wrote, "I proudly say that I sobbed [while I was reading] the last few chapters of the second half of *Return of the King*." Could J.R.R. Tolkien be the new Beatles? These girls gush like he is: "Tolkien's skill in creating his world was so complete, it's astounding," says Meir, 16. Mandy, 16, adds, "There are entire languages in the books. ... It's all so much and it came from just one mind. That seriously rocks."

Many teenage girls obsessively catalog information about old punk bands or animal rights issues, and harbor utter scorn for those who don't know as much about the topic as they do. *LotR*, with its extensive (and frequently convoluted) mythology, is a perfect outlet for this behavior. It turns out that female teenage Tolkien fans are militant about setting themselves apart from the girls (they call them "fangirls") who only like the movies because of Bloom and Wood, and who know nothing about the plot. Julia, 13, responded to my question about her favorite character with a healthy dose of haughtiness, saying her favorite character from "all of the Middle-Earth canon" is Maglor, who appears in *The Silmarillion*, a Tolkien book that's not even part of the trilogy. "Not that you know who that is, I suppose," Julia sniffs. (Ouch, that burns.) She also calls the movies "abominations" and "overblown action films."

Most girls don't go so far as to disdain Jackson's rendering of the books, but they still make it clear that they know the differences between the movies and what Tolkien "really meant." Explaining why she stopped composing fan fiction, for example, Willa, 16, says she "realized that these were BadFics, even if slightly well written, and that I was acting like the annoying fangirls who believe Legolas is 29031 years old, or so, and that it was Arwen who saved Frodo at the Ford and not Glorfindell." What, pray tell, is a BadFic? "Fanfic stories that read like this: 'I took a napp and fel into Midlearth and leglas saved me from Orcks and named my Goldenhair Brigthenfair and joint the quietest-Thing and then We got Married!'" So explains Rachael, 16, who like many of the "true" girl fans, is highly critical of the illiteracy rampant among these "Mary Sue" fanfic authors--girls who focus only on inserting themselves into the story so they can fall in love with hunky characters like Legolas or Aragorn.

These girl-fanatics tend to focus more on other characters of the trilogy than on the attractive elves and kings. One favorite is Eowyn, the niece of Theoden, king of Rohan, who, in the third part of the trilogy (spoiler alert), defeats the Witch King in battle. Girls see Eowyn as an example of a woman who is a "role model"--who is "strong, beautiful, noble, honorable, and absolutely wonderful in my eyes" (Kelsie, 13). Interestingly, a few girls hastened to make clear to me that Eowyn is a "symbol of feminism, without being too annoying"--Kate, 16--and "not the usual princess stereotype, but not overly feminist, either"--Alice, 15. (Score one for the "antifeminist" backlash.) Second favorite, by consensus, is Samwise Gamgee, the

protagonist Frodo's steady friend, who stays by his side during the whole ordeal. Girls scarred from the friend wars of adolescence, where allegiances shift and pressures divide cliques, seem to appreciate Sam's steadfastness: "He's not the most intelligent of hobbits, but his loyalty and determination is amazing," says Samantha, 17. "He sticks by Frodo's side no matter what and shows what a caring person, er, hobbit he is."

But probably the biggest reason these fans are so drawn to *LotR* is that it's an outlet for their repressed idealism. "I can't help but want to go on some life-or-death adventure in the wide world beyond," says Kira, 18. "Even now, I feel like I should be somewhere else at this moment, trying to chuck a ring into a volcano or something of the like." Pop culture for and about teenagers is suffused with a kind of bland hedonism--from Ja Rule videos to "The Simple Life," the new reality show featuring professional celebrity Paris Hilton and sidekick Nicole Ritchie. Even MTV, which treats social issues more earnestly than most outlets, sandwiches thin slices of shows on homophobia and racism between thick slabs of "Cribs" (in which celebrities give tours of their mansions) and "Road Rules" (in which a group of twentysomethings drive around in an RV on a glorified scavenger hunt). Teenage girls are left casting about desperately for something to care about. Sadly, the straightforward, black and white morals and high drama of the *LotR* canon may be as close as they get. "In a world where we're on the verge of nuclear Armageddon and are killing our fellow man," says Alice, 15, "it's nice to believe that people still believe in valor and honor. The old values that Tolkien immortalized in his work are something I wish the world can learn from." Hear, hear.

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