

Book Adaptation Review

A Review of The Lord of the Rings, BBC Radio 4 (1981) adaptation

JRR Tolkien's massive three volume novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, was masterly adapted for radio by the BBC in 1981 by Brian Sibley and Michael Bakewell. It was broadcast in 26 half-hour stereo instalments on BBC Radio 4; each episode was broadcast twice each week with an hour-long omnibus repeat on Sunday mornings.

The all-star cast included Ian Holm as Frodo, John Le Mesurier as Bilbo, Michael Hordern as Gandalf and Robert Stephenson as Aragorn. Sam Gamgee was marvellously brought to life by Bill Nighy and Peter Woodthorpe was stunning as Gollum/Smeagol. The outstanding soundtrack by Stephen Oliver evoked an Anglo-Saxon-inspired Middle-earth of traditions, poetry and prophecy.

The story of the *Lord of the Rings* follows the quest to destroy Sauron's One Ring during the War of the Ring. The Ring which came into Bilbo's possession in *The Hobbit* has been passed to Frodo. He leaves the Shire pursued by nine Black Riders and makes for the Elven refuge of Rivendell. There, a fellowship of hobbits, men, elves and dwarves is formed to take the Ring to Mount Doom. Against the nine riders are set the nine walkers of the Fellowship. They set off from Rivendell towards Gondor and Doom.

In adapting such a long novel sacrifices and simplifications had to be made. An episode in the book in which the hobbits visit Tom Bombadil is omitted, as were the Old Forest and the Barrow Wights sections, and some relatively minor characters do not appear. Apart from these cuts from the first volume, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, all the other episodes, including the final act, the Scouring of the Shire, happens as it was written in the book. Many old favourites like Gaffer Gamgee, Farmer Maggot, Nob, Glorfindel, Gamling and Ioreth are still to be heard even if very briefly.

This radio adaptation also includes the mythic poetry (often spoken to music) and prophetic elements (which guide the character's actions) to great effect, and the two writers refrained from making changes to the major character's motivations and actions. The characters speak the words Tolkien wrote for them and the story follows the events of the book with great fidelity.

As it is a radio play there is a certain amount of expository dialogue like '*Look, I can see some orcs approaching*' to explain what is happening, rather than being shown as in the cinema but this is skilfully done and merely helps the listener to imagine what is happening. This is all part of the aural imagining of the radio play where dialogue, sound effects, the music and poetry all combine to help the listener imagine the realities of Middle-earth: The Shire, Rivendell, Khazad-dûm, Rohan, Gondor, Mordor and the Grey Havens. It is a marvellously evocative and haunting aural experience.

Brian Sibley and Michael Bakewell's script, and Stephen Oliver's score evoke an epic Middle-earth adventure of good triumphing over evil, the dawning of the age of the supremacy of man, and the passing of the elves. History and myth are blended together in a wonderful adventure which remains faithful in all important aspects to the vision of JRR Tolkien's original work. It is truly the best and the truest adaptation of the *Lord of the Rings*, and well worth your time listening to it.