

Dusting for Fingerprints



I had been at it for about five weeks. It was Thursday, but you could hardly tell. My routine continued day after day, pretty much the same. Wake up in my hotel room. Have coffee and a granola bar for breakfast. Look over yesterday's notes and update my to-do list. Walk to the Wade Center, arriving just as they unlocked the doors. Sit down at a long wooden table, pull out my pencil, and start shuffling through loose sheaves of papers, searching for some shred of evidence.

I was on a mission. Years before, when I was still in high school, I discovered *The Lord of the Rings*, and I was quite simply enchanted. Hungry for more books like it, I stumbled upon C. S. Lewis and *Out of the Silent Planet*. And soon after, I discovered that J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis were friends. Both worked at Oxford University. They founded a writing group known as the Inklings.

When I discovered the Inklings, I was only 16 years old, and I wanted to know the answers to two simple questions. What did these writers talk about when they met to discuss their works in progress? And what difference did these conversations make to the books they were writing?

It seemed to me that it would be really easy to find the answers. I spent years reading everything I could get my hands on: everything written about the Inklings and everything written by them. While lots of books talked about the Inklings in general terms, no one offered me

a close-up, fly-on-the-wall perspective. No one seemed to be able to tell me exactly what they talked about or what difference it made.

About this time, one of my mentors got a whiff of what I was up to. He took me aside and said with all the kindness he could muster, "Here's what you need to do. Give this up. You will never find what you're looking for. Everyone knows the Inklings influenced each other, but you are never going to find enough evidence to prove it. And I don't want you wasting your life looking for something that just isn't there."

I cried for a week. No, more than that. I was a beginner, and he was a senior scholar. And he was my mentor, my teacher, and my friend.

Once I calmed down, I made a decision. Maybe he was right. Maybe I would never find the answers to my questions. But that didn't matter. I was going to keep looking anyway. And I was going to follow the evidence wherever it might lead.

That's how (years later) I found myself spending the summer at the Wade Center, a research library in Wheaton, Illinois. I'd exhausted every published resource, so I needed to dig into the primary documents. I wanted to read their letters and diaries to find out what the Inklings themselves had to say about the group. I wanted to study the manuscript pages, searching for evidence that might be hidden in the margins.

Then, on a Thursday in July, I was reading through the letters of J. R. R. Tolkien. I was tracking his progress on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*:

January 4, 1937: Tolkien has recovered from the flu and is redoing the illustrations for *The Hobbit*.

September 21, 1937: *The Hobbit* is published. The reviews are glowing, the sales are brisk, and as a result, the readers are restless. The book is selling so well that Stanley Unwin does what publishers always do: he demands a sequel.

October 15, 1937: Tolkien says no. He complains, "I cannot think of anything more to say about hobbits."

December 16, 1937: Tolkien relents. He promises to try to write something more about hobbits and manages to draft three chapters of a new story.

March 4, 1938: He shows the early chapters to C. S. Lewis and also to his son Christopher Tolkien. They like it very much.

April and May 1938: Unwin keeps pestering Tolkien for more chapters. Tolkien just ignores him.

June 4, 1938: Tolkien sends Unwin a brief progress report. He hems and haws and finally confesses, "I have not had a chance to touch any story-writing since the Christmas vacation."

Christmas vacation? That means he hasn't touched the book in more than five months. If that sounds like bad news for a publisher, the rest of the report is even worse. Tolkien tells Unwin that instead of drafting more material, he has decided to start over and rewrite the first three chapters.

What motivated Tolkien to go back and start the whole thing over again? He says he has been thinking about the "excellent criticism" he has received from his readers. C. S. Lewis is one of those readers, and Lewis has complained that there is too much dialogue, too much chatter, too much silly "hobbit talk." According to Lewis, all this dialogue is dragging down the story line.

Tolkien grumbles. "The trouble is that 'hobbit talk' amuses me . . . more than adventures; but I must curb this severely."

Whoa. I had been spending day after day in the library, sitting on a wooden chair, turning pages, jotting notes. Then I ran smack into this: primary evidence from Tolkien's letters that Lewis was involved with the first draft of the very first chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*. Lewis read the chapters, liked the story, and encouraged Tolkien. He also took the time to critique it and make specific suggestions for its improvement. And Tolkien sounds like he is taking this feedback very seriously.

This was the breakthrough I was looking for. I was thrilled by these discoveries, but they just led me to the Next Big Question: What happened next? Did Tolkien actually follow Lewis's advice?

To find the answer, I turned my attention to the manuscripts themselves. In this case, the detective work was pretty straightforward: find a copy of Tolkien's early draft, and then compare it side-by-side with his revised version.

Take a look. Here's an excerpt, a short section from Book One of *The Lord of the Rings*. At this point in the story, three Hobbits named Bingo, Odo, and Frodo are sorting through their travel gear and stuffing it into heavy backpacks as they prepare to leave Hobbiton behind and begin their adventures.

Tolkien's Early Draft:

"Be kind to a poor ruined Hobbit!" laughed Bingo. "I shall be thin as a willow-wand, I'm sure, before a week is out. But now what about it? Let's have a council! What shall we do first?"

"I thought that was settled," said Odo. "Surely we have got to pick up Marmaduke first of all?"

"O yes! I didn't mean that," said Bingo. "I meant: what about this evening? Shall we walk a little or a lot? All night or not at all?"

"We'd better find some snug corner in a haystack, or somewhere, and turn in soon," said Odo. "We shall do more tomorrow, if we start fresh."

"Let's put a bit of the road behind us to-night," said Frodo. "I want to get away from Hobbiton. Besides it's jolly under the stars, and cool."

"I vote for Frodo," said Bingo. And so they started, shouldering their packs, and swinging their stout sticks. They went very quietly over fields and along hedgerows and the borders of coppices, until night fell. In their dark grey cloaks they were invisible without the help of any magic rings, and since they were all hobbits, they made no noise that even hobbits would hear (or indeed even wild creatures in the woods and fields).

Tolkien's Revised Version:

"Be kind to a poor old hobbit!" laughed Frodo. "I shall be as thin as a willow-wand, I'm sure, before I get to Buckland. But I was talking nonsense. I suspect you have taken more than your share, Sam, and I shall look into it at our next packing." He picked up his stick again. "Well, we all like walking in the dark," he said, "so let's put some miles behind us before bed."

For a short way they followed the lane westwards. Then leaving it they turned left and took quietly to the fields again. They went in

single file along hedgerows and the borders of coppices, and night fell dark about them. In their dark cloaks they were as invisible as if they all had magic rings. Since they were all hobbits, and were trying to be silent, they made no noise that even hobbits would hear. Even the wild things in the fields and woods hardly noticed their passing.

Tolkien completely changes the names and relationships of these characters. In the first draft, the story centers on a hobbit named Bingo, who sets out with two companions (Odo Took and Frodo Took). As Tolkien revises, Bingo becomes Frodo, and he is joined by his friends Sam and Pippin. (I wonder—would *The Lord of the Rings* have been nearly so popular if the main character had been called Bingo all along?)

But more than just names have been transformed. The revised version is shorter and much clearer, too. It takes Tolkien 211 words to cover this material in the draft, but only 162 words in the revised version. What's even more striking is how the proportions of narrative and dialogue have changed. When Tolkien rewrote this material, he cut nearly half of the dialogue.

Tolkien's work in these paragraphs is typical of his work on all three of these beginning chapters. Page after page, he cuts out long conversations, and he picks up the action. Even though he personally prefers a story with much more "hobbit talk," he bows to his critics and creates a tale with much less.

He also makes small but elegant refinements throughout the pages. While the biggest change is in the proportions of dialogue and action, and the way that changes the pace of the story, I can't help noticing how much better the style is, how much smoother the sentences are, how much better they sound.

There are many other changes in the various drafts of the manuscript. Tolkien revises and improves his material constantly, and many different readers offer input along the way. As I did my work, it was tempting to try to document all of these changes and chase down all of these influencers. But I wanted to find out what the Inklings said, and I wanted to figure out what difference it made. So I tried to stay focused. In looking at these early chapters, I traced the impact of one specific comment. Lewis told Tolkien to cut down the dialogue. Did he? Yes, without question. The changes in the manuscript show he did. And the

timing of events shows that Tolkien was responding to Lewis's comments when he did it. And the unfolding story suggests that Tolkien kept this advice in mind as he wrote the following chapters.

Discoveries like that sustained me. I traveled and read and researched and wrote. I presented sections of my findings at conferences. And I dug deeper, always going back to the primary documents. I was privileged to correspond with Christopher Tolkien, the last living member of the Inklings. I was honored by the patience and kindness he showed in answering my questions and verifying my hunches.

As I learned about the Inklings, something else began to dawn on me, something wholly unexpected. Something bigger. I wasn't prepared for just how important this group was, how essential it had become to the work of these writers. I thought that being an Inklings was probably helpful and encouraging. But I was starting to see that the group was, somehow, necessary.

Why was this such a surprise? I had tried working collaboratively, mostly when I was in school. It had not proved helpful. One person (usually me) ended up doing all the work while everyone else took the credit. I also remembered participating in committees at work, and more often than not, the whole thing was frustrating. Instead of making progress, very little was accomplished. Instead of finding better ideas, it felt like a waste of my time.

But when I read about the Inklings, one thing was certain: Much of what they accomplished was the direct result of this group. How was that possible? What was I missing?

I had a hunch that maybe they saw collaboration differently than I did. Maybe they had a bigger picture of what it involved. When I started my research, I just wanted to know what their collaborative process looked like. Now I began to wonder if there were larger lessons here, ones that could make a difference in the projects I was working on, in the breakthroughs I was seeking.

I spent 23 years sifting through letters and studying drafts. I presented my findings in a book called *The Company They Keep: C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*. That book changed the way we talk about these authors because it showed how much the Inklings influenced each other week after week as they worked together.

The Company They Keep is a book for scholars, detailing the threads of influence that connected all of the members of this writers group. As one reviewer noted, it is accessible and lively but, nonetheless, it is fundamentally academic in nature.

Several years ago, it occurred to me that the stories of Lewis and Tolkien and their collaboration should be presented for a wider audience. *Bandersnatch* is a new version of their story. It is my hope that it will enchant any reader who loves these authors and wants to learn more about how they worked together.



DOING WHAT THEY DID: Evidence of creative breakthrough is found in unlikely places: a quick note, an offhand remark, a journal entry, or a formal letter. We gather the scraps, and we piece them together the best we can. The fact is, creativity itself is a messy business. We want to think of it as linear and efficient, but in actuality, it is full of false starts, dead ends, long hours, setbacks, discouragement, and frustrations. Knowing that it works that way can help us be more patient with our own untidy processes.

Thank you!

I hope you enjoyed the first chapter
of Bandersnatch

It is truly my hope that your interest in how C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Inklings collaborated has been piqued. If you want to learn more, make sure you buy the book, join the Facebook page, and check out the bander-blog for more great tips on creative collaboration and to meet fellow collaborators. It's a lonely world out there, and being creative can sometimes be even lonelier, but it doesn't have to be that way.

We in the Bandersnatch movement are a welcoming bunch, who share the same goal - to dispel the myth that in order to create, you must create alone. That myth has never been true. And we have solid proof that the very best in all fields of creativity - from the author, to the artist, from the sculptor to the entrepreneur - have always had collaborators.

So join us! Join the hundreds of other like-minded people who want to hone their craft and improve their work by letting others into their creative process. We hope to hear from you soon!

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dina G." with a stylized flourish at the beginning.

Dina Pavlac Glyer