



From Glory to Governments

A Disenchanting Journey

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In this vivid, introspective coming-of-age narrative, Anastasia Dulle recounts the turmoil of reconciling the fantasy novels of her childhood—tales of clear-cut good and evil like *The Hobbit*—with the moral uncertainties of real-world politics that gradually came to occupy her attention. This essay was written for Writing I with Alex Coleman, MFA.

“**T**HEN SOMETHING TOOKISH woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking-stick,” Tolkien wrote (15). My eyes flitted across the page, my smile widening and heart burning as the story continued. Something “Tookish” was awake in me, too—I longed to be in Bilbo’s place, to arm myself with a backpack, sword, and quest for glory, to adventure across the world with a company of dwarves, to outwit trolls and run from a dragon. As my exhilarating journey through *The Hobbit* continued, and later took me through the entirety of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series, my thirst for adventure only grew. By the time I was nine years old, I had looked up from where I inhaled these books—hunched over on the worn carpeted floor in my bedroom, a sloppily written “keep out”

sign on the door warning the world not to disturb me—and determined that when I grew up, I was going to do something as exciting and wondrous as the characters in these stories.

But “keep out” signs could only do so much. Around the same time as this merry decision, reality started invading my mind, and my hazy awareness of the realm of politics began to grow sharper. Up until then, I had been a kid, gap-toothed and uncaring, with tangled hair, skinned knees, and big dreams. To me, “politics” was a strange and elusive construct that stayed in history books, and “government” was likewise something that revolved solely around the monarchs, dictators, and presidents of the gilded past. I had sat through enough history lessons to know, on a certain level, that the events in my history textbooks were real, but that was a difficult fact for my mind to fully grasp, especially since the illustrious deeds of fallen historical figures more often read like fiction than reality. That suited me just fine, however—I loved reading fiction, and lived for tales of armies, dragons, glory, and sarcastic heroines. I was happy to think of history and all the political issues within it as nothing more than another story.

The political subplots of my cherished adventure books were always very clear-cut: in *The Lord of the Rings*, it was good vs. evil; it was light vs. darkness; it was kingdoms joining together to fight against the giant, looming threat of Sauron and all his forces. I never had any question as to who were the good guys and who were the bad. Even in times when good characters succumbed to evil forces and villains disguised themselves as heroes, I always had a clear understanding of what, and who, were good and right. Inevitably, these plots fed my assumptions of how reality worked. I was excited to grow up and take my place in the world—my nine-year-old limbs were aching to pick up a sword and charge into battle, to be swept away on breathtaking journeys, or to join a ragged band of misfits on a mission to infiltrate an evil tyrant’s lair. But as I continued to grow and learn more, what I began to discover around me was not a

world full of excitement and wonder, but one full of tension and confusion, the weight of which I had not expected to have to learn to bear.

First came the growing awareness that the concept of politics was not a distant historical construct after all. I would overhear snippets of political news and commentary from neighbors or my parents' colleagues. My other source of political input was car radios. On car rides, I would buckle my seatbelt and wait a moment before the lilt of my patchwork British-American accent would rise above the car seats.

“Can we listen to music?”

Sometimes the adult driving would oblige, especially if they happened to be my mom. But inevitably, one or another adult would deny my request.

“No,” they would reply. “Music stations these days only play the same trashy songs over and over. We’re going to listen to something more important.” And they would proceed to fiddle with the buttons on the radio until they had landed on a news station.

I would groan, settle back into my seat, and look out the window at the landscape passing by, attempting to daydream over the buzz of the speakers. Eventually, however, instead of hearing a meaningless drone of information, I began to comprehend the implications of what the reporters and talk show hosts on the radio were saying. News about various politicians and political parties still didn’t matter to me at all—I was far more interested in the overplayed pop music—but I began to realize that political issues were ongoing conversations and problems that hadn’t ended with my history textbook. Still, though, matters of government were far away from me, and I assumed they would stay that way.

Contrary to my innocent expectations, I was eventually forced to come to terms with the unsettling realization that politics was actually a topic many adults—including my parents—considered to be extremely important. Up until this point, the only hint I had gotten that my parents cared about anything political was seeing my mom

vote in the 2012 U.S. presidential election. We were living in England at the time, and I walked in on my mom sitting at her desk, sealing an envelope.

“What are you doing?” I questioned, leaning over to see if I recognized the person it was addressed to.

“I’m mailing my vote to the U.S. It’s a paper that says who I want to be the president,” my mom answered patiently.

Looking back on it, she was probably expecting me to question her further. But I just shrugged and moved on with my day, likely going on to ask whether or not I could have a snack, and that was the end of my introduction to the U.S. voting system. Eventually, however, issues of government evolved into a topic my parents would discuss around the dinner table. And over time, I began to join in on the conversations.

After dinner one night, once the sun had lowered, the clatter of cutlery had ceased, and the final remnants of food had been scraped off our plates, my dad somehow managed to bring up the topic of economic and governmental models in what retrospectively can only be described as a talent. At this point, the rest of my siblings wisely left the room under the guise of helping clear the table, but I, eleven years old and determined to understand this yet-confusing topic, stayed. I started asking questions, the answers to which were never satisfying. What began as a relatively simple question-and-answer process stretched into a two-hour-long discussion that largely centered around the concept of communism. I propped my chin up with my fists, trying in vain to understand why the answers to my questions had to be so complicated.

“Sometimes ideas seem great on paper, but they just don’t work in real life,” my dad tried to explain. I shook my head, not understanding how that was possible. When I eventually left the table, I did so more confused than ever, my mind swamped and confidence shattered with the realization of how complex some topics were.

As I continued to grow more aware of politics, I experienced a growing disillusionment with the outside world. I still loved my fantasy novels, but I began to understand why their plots had been labeled “fantastical” in the first place. The enchanting characters, heroic quests, and simplistic black-and-white conflicts just didn’t translate to most real-life scenarios. As a kid, there’s a kind of innocent arrogance that comes with not knowing how staggeringly big and complex the world and all of its issues are. The biggest problems I was aware of at nine years old were my math homework, or the mean boys next door, or the fact that, to my mom’s chagrin, I kept getting grass stains on my jeans. The realization that the things that made up my life—adventure books, grass stains, bike rides, and scraped knees—were so small in the face of global, sociopolitical issues was a harsh and almost overwhelming one. And it was a realization I wasn’t sure what to do with.

Eventually, I came to the internal conclusion that political matters were issues best left ignored. The realm of politics was too vast, too heavy, and too complicated for my young and fragile self to bear for very long, and it frustrated me; it frustrated me that, contrary to the easily identifiable good vs. evil dichotomy built into the problems and conflicts of fictional worlds, in the real-world issues tended to be far more complex and morally gray. It frustrated me that the world was so complicated that perfect systems seemed impossible to achieve. It frustrated me that, in blatant opposition to the plots and messages of the adventure stories I loved so dearly, the selfishness and cruelty of a lot of powerful leaders went unchecked. And most of all, it frustrated and discouraged me that the optimistic mindset I had learned from my books was a perspective the rest of the world called unrealistic and naïve. I had become aware by this point that the real world wasn’t and never could be perfect, but that was a truth that felt like bitter poison to a heart that had learned to hope in heroes that saved the day and villains who were always vanquished by the end of the story. So I pushed that truth away. I decided that politics was a topic I would do best to stay away from and

try to ignore. And though I had always loved fiction, for the first time in my almost lifelong career of reading I started truly using it as a form of escapism from the world and all of its weight and problems.

Unfortunately, that resolution couldn't change the fact that I *had* become aware of politics and the enormity of the world, at least to a small extent. As I was still young, I didn't have the self-awareness or vocabulary to even begin to process or describe what I was dealing with, but the effects remained, nonetheless. Feelings of confusion, betrayal, and uncertainty—as if halfway down the road toward optimism, reality had stuck out a leg and tripped me, knocking me to the ground—festered within me and put added strain on my already wavering mental health. My life appeared to continue to go on as normal—I still had homework, I still rode bikes and climbed trees, I still devoured fantasy novels at a terrifying rate, and my jeans were still grass-stained—but I carried within my small frame a heavy awareness of the outside world and an accompanying sense of unease that would come and go. ▶▶

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TOLKIEN, JOHN R. R. *The Hobbit*. Allen & Unwin, 1937.