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The Wood Between the Worlds

Read in numerical order or roll d20 to begin.

I

There is a moment in *The Hobbit* when Tolkien's world suddenly feels real. It comes after Bilbo's encounter with Smaug in his lair beneath the Lonely Mountain, where Bilbo learns of a vulnerability in the dragon's armor. That chapter seems to be setting the scene for a subsequent confrontation between Smaug and the dwarves, in which Bilbo's discovery enables him to slay the dragon and win the day. But instead things take an unexpected turn. Smaug flies away from the mountain and attacks Lake-town, burning and destroying everything, until an archer named Bard shoots him with the Black Arrow and the dragon dies.

This is the turning point – a moment that always feels disorienting when I read it. If we follow the rules of a typical hero quest, Bilbo should slay the dragon or at least should play a central role in his death. And initially that was Tolkien's plan: his early notes have Bilbo stabbing Smaug while the dragon slept. But in the final version, our hero is abruptly sidelined and the climax of his quest occurs without him. For the rest of the novel, Bilbo is something of a bystander, as the political consequences of Smaug's destruction unfold, ending with the Battle of Five Armies.

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J. R. R. Tolkien

Reading this as a child, that strange, sudden shift affected me deeply. This was not like other novels I had read. One moment, I'm following the story of an unlikely hero having an adventure in a magical world; next thing I know, that world has pushed its way to the foreground, with its complex history and politics seizing control of events. Bard is a descendent of the lords of Dale and his Black Arrow is a family heirloom. The aftermath

of that battle becomes a morally ambiguous struggle between Bard and Thorin over possession of the dragon's horde, which leads to violence and a tragic conclusion. In short, things suddenly feel very grown-up and unpredictable.

Smaug's departure from the mountain is the moment when *The Hobbit* changes from a story to *history*. And Middle Earth comes into view: a real place, a living world. Strange, mysterious and magical.

From that moment on, I wanted to go there.

2

In *The Magician's Nephew*, Tolkien's friend C. S. Lewis introduced the Wood Between the Worlds: a peaceful forest where everything seems especially vivid and alive, free from the ravages of time: 'green and bright and still.' On the ground are many small ponds, each one a magical portal to another world. But the Wood itself is not a world; it is an 'in-between' place where nothing ever happens. Those who linger soon become relaxed and lazy until, overcome by drowsiness, they doze and dream, perhaps forever.

Lewis is the great poet of portal fantasy. The first Narnia book begins with a child playing a game. She climbs into an old wardrobe and finds herself in an enchanted world: a clear, delicious metaphor for the way the imagination can transport us to another reality.

The Wood Between the Worlds is a more complex image, ambiguous and ambivalent. For the witch queen Jadis, the Wood is stifling, its air unbreathable. Even the heroes, Polly and Digory, struggle to resist the overpowering lethargy and torpor that soon take hold in that place between worlds, between adventures, where all is peaceful and bright, and nothing ever happens.



C. S. Lewis

3

When I was thirteen, an older acquaintance introduced me to *Dungeons & Dragons*. Using a photocopy of the original boxed set rules, he guided us through a simple dungeon adventure that lasted all day. I played a hobbit, of course. I remember the first monster we encountered was a single goblin. When the dungeon master described it striding down

the dark dungeon corridor towards us, I knew exactly what to do; my character turned and ran.

Late in the afternoon, I phoned my mother to ask if I could stay the night and keep playing. I tried to explain to her why this new game was so fascinating. ‘It’s like being *inside* a novel,’ I said.

When our dungeon master had to finish for the day, the rest of us went to another friend’s house and made up our own game, with a couple of dice and some vaguely remembered rules. I created a world on the fly, with evil sorcerers and a quest to complete. We played in that world till sunrise.

4

The first ever role-playing game was run by David Wesely in Minneapolis-St Paul in 1967. Wesely wanted to try a table-top wargame in which various players took control of different characters in a Napoleonic battle. Two players served as the commanders of opposing armies approaching a town named Braunstein. Others were residents of the town: the mayor, the university chancellor, students, a banker. Over the course of the day, players became caught up in political disputes and their own characters’ personal agendas. Questions of strategy and tactics were abandoned and the game descended into chaos. At one point two characters challenged each other to a duel and Wesely was forced to improvise rules from scratch.

In the end, Wesely deemed the experiment a failure. But his players were hugely excited, begging him to run another ‘Braunstein’ as soon as he could. They had experienced something new: a deep immersion in a shared imaginary reality. They had stepped through the wardrobe. The dragon had flown. And they wanted more.

5

One of the players in David Wesely's subsequent 'Braunstein' games was Dave Arneson. When Wesely went into the army, Arneson took over refereeing the latest scenario, which involved staging (or preventing) a coup in a fictional Latin American republic. Arneson then ran his own 'Braunsteins', including one in which the players found themselves magically transported from modern Minnesota to a fantasy world called 'Blackmoor'. There, they explored dungeons and fought monsters, eventually becoming lords and monarchs and heroes.

The Blackmoor campaign formed the basis for Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson's *Dungeons & Dragons*, first published in 1974. Many of the rules had come from Gygax and Jeff Perren's *Chainmail* medieval and fantasy wargame. But the crucial innovation – the thing that made it a role-playing game – was that sense of immersion felt by the Braunstein players in 1967. *Dungeons & Dragons* wasn't simply a game. It was a magical wardrobe. The Wood Between the Worlds. It was a way in.

6

When he was six years old, Ed Greenwood began writing fantasy stories set in a world that would eventually come to be known as the Forgotten Realms. Over time, his imaginary world grew more detailed, the setting for numerous stories and day-dreams. In the mid-1970s, Greenwood encountered *Dungeons & Dragons* in a Toronto bookstore in 1974. He was intrigued, but his few attempts at playing with friends didn't amount to much.

But then along came a girl called September: 'the most beautiful being I'd ever laid eyes on'. She ran *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* for Greenwood and his friends 'in a sun-dappled ravine in Don Mills, Ontario, on a fern-strewn, sandy



David Wesely, Dave Arneson, Gary Gygax

bank of Wilket Creek’. September dressed for the occasion in ‘splendid half-armor, cloak thrown back, leather gauntlets on her wrists’, with a ‘real longsword gleam[ing] in her hand’. She adopted distinctive voices and mannerisms for non-player characters and leapt around the clearing with glee. ‘Tears ran down her face when things grew sad.’

None of them knew that September had cancer. But within a year she was dead.

7

Part of what Ed Greenwood liked about *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* was the level of detail and specificity. The extensive rules explained precisely how things worked, making its imaginary world feel more substantial and tangible; more *real*. Above all, the rules defined the possibilities and limits of magic – a force which could otherwise quickly derail shared games of make-believe because *anything* was possible. The rules inspired Greenwood to transform his imaginary world – the Forgotten Realms – ‘from a nebulous place of pretty maps into an *AD&D* game world’.

Soon, Greenwood was ‘puzzling out economics, trade routes, currents, prevailing winds, floods and droughts, mineral wealth locations’, along with religions, cultures and histories. He began writing articles for *The Dragon* magazine and his ‘game world’ slowly built a reputation among *D&D* players until, in 1987, the first Forgotten Realms campaign setting guide was published by TSR. Novels, comics, game supplements, miniatures and video games followed, until today the Forgotten Realms is one of the world’s most successful fantasy settings. Countless gamers have lived imaginary lives in the world Greenwood began imagining in 1965, becoming heroes and heroines, wizards and warriors, prophets, leaders, lovers and parents. The intensity of those experiences have led many players to feel a powerful connection with these imaginary places and their creator. Greenwood has been asked to officiate at weddings, to name babies, and even, on occasion, to father them.

‘It didn’t make me rich . . .’ Greenwood told an interviewer in 1998, ‘but I’ve never regretted it for a moment.’ And he once wrote: ‘It’s an honor to share “my” world and dreams with gamers everywhere. . . . And if I sometimes get tears in my eyes when I’m running yet another Realmsplay session, it’s because something has sent me back to that sun-dappled fern bower under the trees, and September’s clear voice calling, “Swords bright!” in farewell, as she started her walk back to the bus.’

‘Love’, Greenwood has said, ‘is what the Realms has always been about.’

8

Ed Greenwood imagined the Forgotten Realms as part of a vast multiverse of interconnected worlds, including Earth. Long ago, people knew how to travel between these worlds, but now that knowledge is lost and forgotten. All that remains



Gary Gygax, Ed Greenwood

are the many tales in every culture of an enchanted realm filled with magic and wonder, the source of all our fantastic myths, legends and daydreams: the Forgotten Realms.

When TSR began publishing Forgotten Realms products, they downplayed this aspect of Greenwood's creation, concerned over 'possible lawsuits (kids getting hurt while trying to find a gate)'.

9

During the 1980s, as *Dungeons & Dragons* grew to fully fledged cultural phenomenon status, many people became concerned that young role-playing gamers would lose their ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. The game was blamed for suicides, rapes and murders. Some religious figures identified *D&D* as part of a Satanic conspiracy to lure young people into the occult. Books, magazine articles, TV shows and sermons repeated and amplified the fear of role-playing games. In 1984, Jack T. Chick published an evangelical comic book, *Dark Dungeons*, in which a girl is recruited into a witch's coven by her dungeon master.

Chick also published an article by William Schnoebelen, a former Satanist and Wiccan, who claims that *Dungeons & Dragons* writers sought his advice in the late 1970s to ‘make certain the rituals were authentic’ and lists more than a dozen deaths caused by the game. ‘*D&D* is not like chess or Monopoly’, Schnoebelen writes. ‘It is a game that engages the whole person at deep levels, and it can last months if well-played. How can a person, Christian or not, immerse themselves in a reality view so deeply and not have it impact the rest of their lives?’

10

When I was fourteen, a member of my gaming group took his own life. Some of the adults around us wondered if *Dungeons & Dragons* may have been a factor. Our English teacher asked if he could join us for a game. I don’t remember anything about the session itself, apart from the strangeness of playing at a friend’s house on a Saturday night with a teacher. But he must have spread the word that *D&D* was safe, because after that no one bothered us about our gaming and we were left to grieve in peace.

11

I have known two people who gave up role-playing games after becoming religious. One burned all his *D&D* books, along with an impressive collection of first edition fantasy novels. He is now involved in a conservative Catholic movement, who celebrate mass in Latin and consider Halloween the work of the Devil.

My other friend eventually drifted away from religion. His church group had increasingly come under the influence of the charismatic movement, using prayer in pursuit of miracles.

When one member was sick in hospital, the rest of the group ritualistically prayed over her handkerchief in an attempt to heal her, as though they were casting a Cure Disease spell. After that, my friend found it difficult to take it seriously. He left the church and returned to role-playing games.

12

In the 1990s, my role-playing was sporadic. Most of my gaming group had drifted around the world: to the UK, Canada, Australia. I still worked on my main campaign world, fleshing out its history and politics, and occasionally I'd run a short game when enough of us were in the same place. Now and then, I'd start a new campaign but these inevitably petered out after a session or two. RPGs became a solitary pursuit: a private world-building, like an extended secret daydream that no one else will ever see.

To be honest, this is my favorite part of role-playing games. Creating and detailing an imaginary world, from sunlit fields and lonely beaches to ruined cities, thriving villages and sacred shrines. I suspect there's a similar pleasure in building model railways or fully furnished dollhouses: the construction of a private miniature world that feels simultaneously infinite and contained, alive and yet safe from all the unpredictable complications of life.

Above all, I love to invent my worlds' customs and religious beliefs, pantheons of gods and systems of spiritual practice. This is despite my being a lifelong atheist who has never managed to believe in God or supernatural forces of any kind, even when I wanted to.

At various times in my life, I've felt a powerful yearning for the presence of something spiritual or supernatural. When I was ten or eleven, I became obsessed with the paranormal,

devouring books on UFOs, ESP, ghosts, monsters and mythical beings. I remember standing in the bush behind the Huia Water Filter Station on the way home from school, silently – desperately – calling on the fairies to reveal themselves.

Around that time, I first read *The Lord of the Rings*. It felt like finding my religion. And *Dungeons & Dragons* soon became my church.

13

My friend David Larsen once asked New Zealand science fiction writer Phillip Mann why he never wrote fantasy. '[Mann] answered that real fantasy was always in some way religious, and he did not think of himself as a religious man.'

'*The Lord of the Rings*', Tolkien wrote, 'is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.' For Tolkien, the creation of Middle Earth was an act of 'sub-creation', a small act of tribute to the ultimate creator, God. It was, as Richard Mathews wrote, 'a religious act undertaken in reverence'. In *Mythopoeia* ('Myth-creation'), a poem written in response to C. S. Lewis' description of myths as 'lies breathed through silver,' Tolkien described the sub-creator as a prism through which the light of God passes:

Man, Sub-creator, the refracted light
 through whom is splintered from a single White
 to many hues, and endlessly combined
 in living shapes that move from mind to mind.

The creation of imaginary supernatural worlds and beings – whether ancient myths or modern fantasies – is a human capacity granted us by God, in honour of our own creation:

Though all the crannies of the world we filled
 with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
 Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
 and sowed the seed of dragons, 'twas our right
 (used or misused). The right has not decayed.
 We make still by the law in which we're made.

Mythopoeia was written in 1931. Soon after, Lewis converted to Christianity, the culmination of a slow journey from atheism to theism to Anglicanism that was partly influenced by his passionate devotion to the fantastic novels of George MacDonald (*Phantastes*, *The Princess and the Goblin*). Narnia is, in part, Lewis' own attempt to express his religious feelings through a modern fairy tale.

Tolkien never liked Narnia, which he considered an unconvincing, frivolous allegory, rather than a consistent, believable secondary world. For Tolkien, sub-creation was a serious business. 'Blessed are the legend makers', he wrote, who add to God's creation 'things not found within recorded time', thus offering an experience of the mysterious and divine.

14

There is a thread running through social theory since Max Weber which argues that we now live in a 'disenchanted' world. Industrialisation, secularisation and rationalism have devalued mysticism and the sacred, leaving us bereft of mystery and wonder, 'haunted by the ghosts of dead religious beliefs' (Habermas).

More recently, a number of writers have identified a parallel push for 're-enchantment' – in popular culture, new and revived religions, social movements, theory, art and even leisure activities. The counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s

sought ‘re-enchantment’ in eastern mysticism, neo-paganism, the occult, self-development and, of course, fantasy. In the mid-1960s *The Lord of the Rings* was ‘discovered’ by the hippies, becoming a bestseller and transforming Tolkien from obscure English academic to counter-culture superstar (much to his considerable discomfort).

For traditional, pre-modern people, Weber argued, ‘the world remains a great enchanted garden’. Conceived in the dark crucible of the First World War, Middle Earth is Tolkien’s imaginary vision of that long-forgotten Eden: the paradise lost in the fall from grace of industrialisation and rational Enlightenment thinking. Tolkien sought a kind of literary redemption from that fall, an echo of our spiritual redemption by Christ.

15

In the early 1970s, two women who called themselves Arwen and Elenor founded ‘The Elf Queen’s Daughters’, a neo-pagan community in San Francisco. Today, this small group of self-proclaimed ‘elves’ are seen as an early manifestation of the otherkin movement: people who identify as a non-human (usually mythological or supernatural) being, such as elves, dragons or fairies.

I once met someone who claimed to be an otherkin. I think it was at a bar named Shadows, but I also have a sense of it being at a LARP – although I’ve never really got into LARPs, so I’m doubtful about that. I’m not sure now whether they told me they were a vampire or a fairy. Or possibly something else. And were they male or female, or non-binary gendered? I think it was in the 1990s. Or the early 2000s. But my wife remembers me telling her about it, and is quite sure it was in the last year or so.

I can't account for my inability to recall this incident more clearly, given how strange and fascinating I found it at the time (and since). Unless, of course, I have been enchanted?

16

Two years ago, I decided to spend a year exploring spiritual belief and practice. I read about theology and paganism, went to church, took up Zen meditation and joined a Druidic study group. The first time I went to a druid meeting, I was nervous about mentioning *Dungeons & Dragons* or Tolkien. I thought they might be offended. But then I noticed our host's bookshelf full of fantasy novels, and it soon became clear that fantasy fiction (and even gaming) has played an important part in the emergence of modern neo-paganism.

Druidry, in particular, celebrates the importance of stories and the imagination. Each gathering would end with an informal Eisteddfod, in which each of us would share a poem, song or tale. We were storytellers, collectively improvising a religion from scratch, piecing together fragments of custom and folklore, traditional and made-up. It was creative, imaginative, serious and playful. In short, it was a lot like role-playing games.

17

The Lord of the Rings is above all an elegy. The Third Age is ending. Middle Earth, the 'great enchanted garden', has begun its transformation into the modern world we inhabit today: a landscape of factories and motorways, irrevocably disenchanted. Magic and wonder are dismissed as fairy tales for children. Myth becomes fiction, poems become prose, the romance becomes the novel. Stories have lost the power they once had: as spells, doorways, windows on another reality that was even more real – *more true* – than this one.

In his essay ‘On Fairy Stories’, Tolkien defends the escapism of fantasy by distinguishing between the cowardly ‘Flight of the Deserter’ and the noble ‘Escape of the Prisoner’.

‘Why should a man be scorned’, Tolkien wrote, ‘if, finding himself in a prison, he tries to get out and go home?’

But what if you don’t believe in the enchanted world outside the prison walls? What if the stories are all just make-believe and magic isn’t real? What if the prison *is* home?

18

In 2003 I was asked to present a paper at a conference on the future of New Zealand literature, at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. Burnt out on comics and writing, I decided to talk about role-playing games instead.

After the talk, a man in the audience put up his hand to speak. He told us he had been an enthusiastic player of RPGs when he was a teenager, but then, while at university, something had abruptly changed. He found himself unable to suspend disbelief and embrace the imaginary reality of the game; suddenly it all just seemed childish and silly.

‘I wondered if I’d become too post-modern,’ he said. ‘It’s like I knew too much and now I couldn’t un-know it.’

My talk had reminded him of how much he had once loved the immersion of a role-playing game. ‘I wish we had a switch that turned the post-modern condition off when we needed to. If I could just flick the switch and *believe* . . .’

19

As a child in the 1970s (I was born in 1966), I felt as though I was growing up in the fading afterglow of an extraordinary event that had changed the world forever. The counter-culture of the 1960s, with its hippies and yuppies, psychedelic spirit journeys

and courageous quests for peace and love in the face of tyranny and violence, seemed wondrous and heroic – something like the Fellowship’s quest to Rivendell and Lothlorien, Gondor and Mordor. The hippies were bright, colourful, exotic and beautiful. They seemed to eroticise the everyday, freeing it from repression and mundanity. Re-enchanting the world.

By the time I was old enough to become aware of all this, however, I could also see that their age had ended. Their magic was passing out of the world, as surely as the elves sailing for the West. Communes were abandoned (or descended into feuds and scandals), musicians and artists ODeD, flower children burned out. By the time I was a teenager, Jerry Rubin was a yuppie and Reagan was in the White House.

Of course, I know this is a simplistic story: a personal myth that doesn’t really describe reality. But I think it partly explains the intensity of my response to *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dungeons & Dragons*. Not that I ever wanted to be a hippy. I’d visited communes with my parents; they were usually dirty and cold and a little bit scary. I’d hide in a corner trying to read my book, while the adults got stoned and drank and partied late into the night. Truth is, I was always more a hobbit than an elf. Adventures, the wilderness, wonder and magic were all very wonderful, but at the end of the day I felt most at home in a nice cosy cottage in the side of a hill.

Those twin poles have always defined Tolkien, fantasy and *D&D* for me: the wild and the cosy. The lyrical and the prosaic. The romance and the novel.

20

For a few years in the early 2000s, I wrote monthly comics for DC. I had a three-year run on a fantasy series for Vertigo and then a year and a half on *Batgirl*. It should have been a dream

job, but after a while, I felt miserable and stressed. Reading comics became a chore; even novels and movies felt unconvincing. I had worked hard at learning how to tell a particular kind of story, and now all I could see was the craft. Watching a TV show was like studying a blueprint: the nuts and bolts were all clearly visible, but my imagination could no longer see past them. It was all construction, craft, artifice. Everything felt fake. Ridiculous and silly.

My own writing grew more and more difficult. I couldn't tell what was good anymore. Nothing seemed worthwhile. I became depressed. When I told one friend about it, he nodded and said: 'You're having a crisis of faith.'

He was right. I had lost my faith: my belief in stories. And he should know; he'd been through it all before. But in his case, it was his belief in God that had left him, praying over a handkerchief and remembering Cure Disease.

Shut off from the solace of stories, I returned to role-playing games. I bought the new *Dungeons & Dragons* (third edition) and then, on a whim, picked up the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* book. Reading through, I was immediately fascinated by Greenwood's world: a sprawling mix of familiar clichés and rich lyricism. A detailed calendar, beautiful maps, local customs, folklore and figures of speech, monetary systems, flora and fauna and, of course, gods. Dozens and dozens of Greater and Lesser Deities. Religious orders. Cults. Rituals and faiths.

At first I thought that running a campaign in a pre-published world would save time and ease the pressure of having to create everything myself. But instead I found that it required a huge amount of research. The *Forgotten Realms* product line had generated hundreds of books over the previous decade and a half: regional guides, novels, adventures. There was a complex history to untangle, much of it as convoluted and overwrought

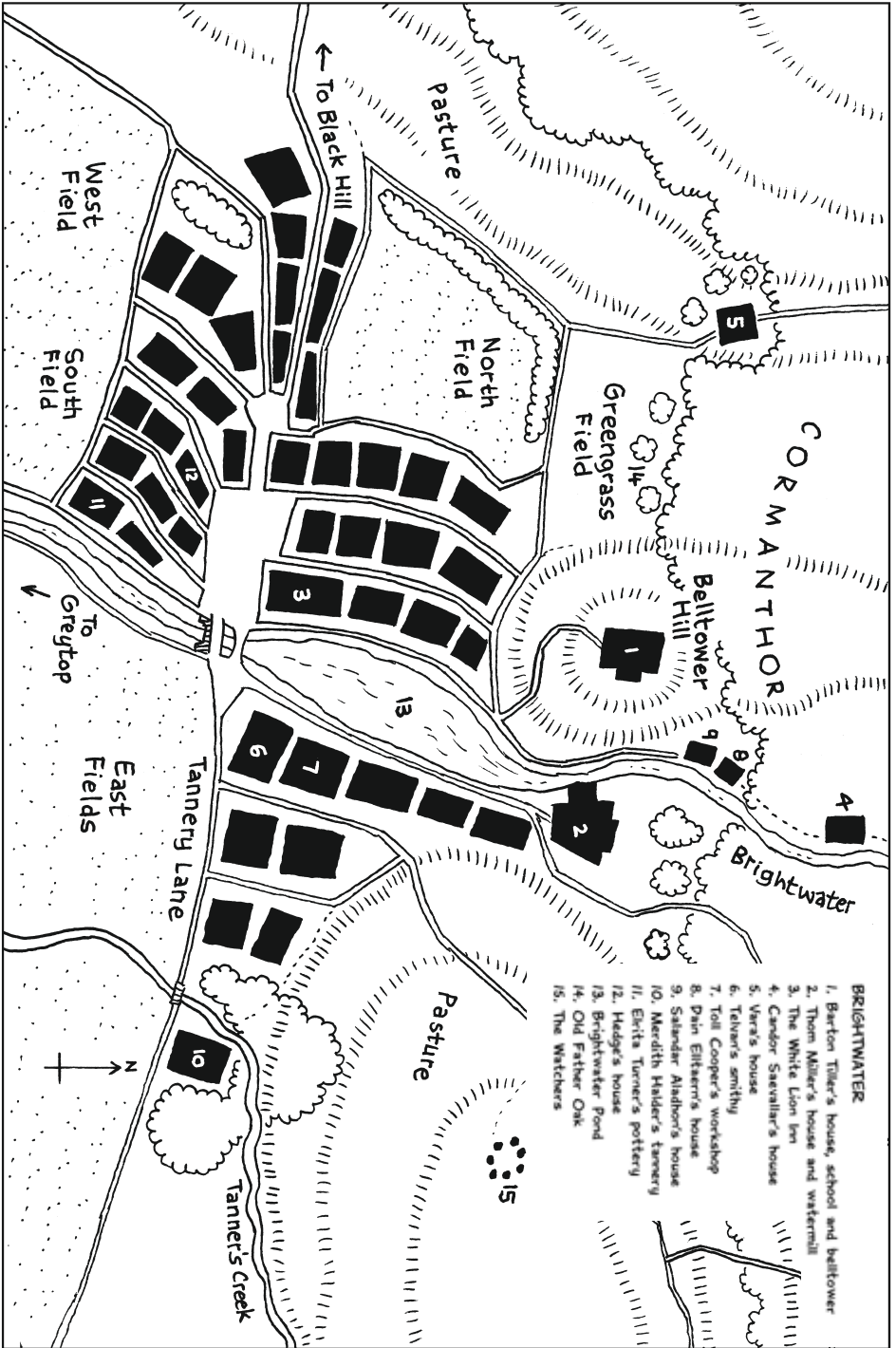
as the continuities of DC and Marvel. It became clear that Greenwood's world had accumulated layers of corporate-driven detritus since TSR had taken possession of it. I found a few interviews with the man himself, in which he seemed quietly disapproving of certain recent events in the Realms' history. I wondered what that would feel like: to spend years creating a personal fantasy world and then to lose control, as it grew into a huge commercial franchise.

On a grey winter morning, sitting in a shopping mall food court, I spread out a map of the Forgotten Realms. On an empty space in Mistedale, I pencil in a tiny village called Brightwater. There will be houses and fields and the clear, cool stream that gave the town its name. A warm, cosy tavern run by two retired heroes, whose daughter impatiently yearns for adventures of her own. An elderly wizard, with a vegetable patch outside his cottage, and a wise woman who lives at the edge of the forest. A kindly priest of the Earth Mother Chauntea, who lives on Belltower Hill and teaches the local children to read and write. There's a blacksmith, a cooper and carpenter, whose elf-born wife followed the call of the Retreat some years before. A water-mill sits at one end of Brightwater Pond, near Greengrass Field, where the village sometimes gathers for festivals and dances beneath the branches of Old Father Oak. To the north lie Eldath's Spring and the ruins of the Shining Tower, with rumors of sinister creatures and ancient treasure.

I recruit my wife and a few old friends, who roll up their characters: the blacksmith's son, an orphaned elf, a young ranger and the wizard's apprentice. We put the kids to bed and settle down at the table: character sheets, rule books, pencils and dice.

After the usual chatter and joking around, I clear my throat and an expectant silence falls.

'You have gathered together at the White Lion Inn . . .'



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An essay based on the talk I gave in Christchurch (see 18) was later published as

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