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 ***The Children of Húrin, Narn i Chîn Húrin: The Tale of the
Children of Húrin (review)***

Nicholas Birns

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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[cover title:] *The Children of Húrin* [title as on title page:] *Narn i Chîn Húrin: The Tale of the Children of Húrin* by J.R.R Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Illustrated by Alan Lee. London: HarperCollins, 2007. 315 pp., plus foldout map. £18.99 (trade hardcover) ISBN 9780007246229; £60.00 (deluxe slip-cased hardcover) ISBN 9780007252237. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007. 315 pp., plus foldout map \$26.00 (trade hardcover) ISBN 9780618894642; \$75.00 (deluxe slip-cased hardcover) ISBN 9780618904419.

Though little of the material contained in *The Children of Húrin* will be a revelation to longtime students of Tolkien, its publication is nonetheless a welcome event. The story of Túrin Turambar is one of Tolkien's strongest. It has languished for too long in incomplete versions in various installments or samples of the legendarium. Moreover, it has been overshadowed, even within the published "Silmarillion" tales, by the Lay of Leithian, the tale of the matchless love of Beren and Lúthien, because of that story's inherent nobility and grace as well as for its important role in the thematic backbone of *The Lord of the Rings*. But the story of Túrin, as Elrond makes clear in his acclamatory comments to Frodo after the council, is no less important among the tales of the Elder Days, or, as these days would be called after *The Lord of the Rings* was written, the First Age.

In *The Children of Húrin*, Christopher Tolkien has put together a full, orderly narrative account of the story of Túrin Turambar, based on the iteration of the "Narn i Chîn Húrin" provided in *Unfinished Tales*. Christopher (with the assistance of his son Adam, who seems an adept of Middle-earth studies in his father's tradition) has made this piercing and riveting tale available to a far wider audience. The book is compact, with large print, and copiously illustrated, with eight full-color, glossy pictures and numerous small black-and-white illustrations before and after chapters. Yet it is not a coffee-table book or an enhanced *livre de luxe*. Those interested in a deluxe edition have available for them such a work, offered by Houghton Mifflin in the US and HarperCollins in the UK. This comes with a slipcase and special binding, and color frontispiece (of the Alan Lee dust-wrapper image) and color illustrations. The UK trade edition is also of larger dimensions than the US trade version, and gives the reader less of a cramped sensation than the reader of the US edition

occasionally feels. (The deluxe UK and US editions are the same size.) The illustrations aside, the US trade edition looks and handles like any other **[End Page 189]** book on the bestseller list. This is perhaps an aesthetic detriment but a help to those who want to get Tolkien read as literature and not merely as a publishing and marketing phenomenon.

Advocates of Tolkien in literary terms have long had the problem that his writing about Middle-earth is really one giant work. But when described in publishing terms, Tolkien's Middle-earth writings consist of one complete work of narrative fiction, *The Lord of the Rings*, accompanied by a prequel written originally for children, *The Hobbit*, and supplemented by a vast array of posthumously published and heterogeneous background material possessing various degrees of narrative unity. *The Children of Húrin* solves the quandary of the casual reader who is interested in Tolkien's vision but who is, to put it bluntly, fatigued by hobbits, as no less an aficionado of Tolkien than the young Rayner Unwin once admitted to being. It gives the hobbit-averse somewhere to go. It also perhaps tells the hobbit-friendly just what their preferences as readers are. The readers who like the hobbits, find their absence lamentable, and find the Túrin story too depressing and the characters unlikable, are at least potentially more novel-readers than epic or tragedy-readers; their expectations of narrative situations are closer to *Middlemarch* or *David Copperfield* than the *Aeneid*, the Theban Plays, or for that matter *Beowulf*.

It is...

Book Reviews

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