

'I need a hero! **by Dr Roy Clements**

It was Tina Turner who sang the song, as I recall, but I guess we can all share the sentiment. We all need someone to admire. That's why, of course, heroes figure so prominently in the stories we tell.

In fact, 2004 has been a particularly good year for such stories, at least on the cinema screen. There was Brad Pitt's Achilles in the film *Troy* — those of us who've read our Homer had to forgive the liberties Hollywood took with the story, not least the suppression of homoerotic dimension of this particular hero's relationship with his best friend. I'm relieved to hear that no such homophobic revisionism mars the latest adaptation of Greek history to hit the silver screen. The fact that Alexander the Great loved men is apparently going to be fully chronicled in the recently released film of his amazing life.

There have been loads of other movie heroes in the last twelve months that we could mention, of course. There was even a better than average Jet Li martial arts spectacular that took the single word 'Hero' as its title. But one of the things that has interested me this year is the huge popularity of films whose heroes seem to break the conventional mould.

Take Harry Potter, for instance — I'm quite a fan of those films; I find them strangely uplifting. And when I try to work out why, the answer seems to be, rather paradoxically, because, hero though he is, Harry Potter looks so ordinary. The unique, even supernatural, things about him are hidden behind a pair of old-fashioned NHS spectacles. His true identity, and the greatness that goes with it, is concealed.

There is something reassuring and encouraging about that idea. It suggests that we may all be much closer to the unseen world of myth and magic than our prosaic daily lives seem to indicate. That just below the surface of our mundane existence there could be a wholly different world of imaginative richness for us to explore. I think we need to believe that — indeed, I think deep down all but the most inveterate cynics among us do believe it. It's why we love fairy-stories, it's why we love Santa Claus — it's why we love Christmas. We seem more open somehow at this time of year to that mystical, wondering, childlike — dare I say it — 'spiritual' aspect of our human experience.

In fact, it was last Christmas that I watched the film which for me epitomises that 'spiritual' need for a hero more completely than any other. If I was allowed to take one DVD to that Radio 4 'desert island' with me, along with the music, this would have to be it — *The Lord of the Rings*!

Now there's a heroic tale if ever there was one. Heroic men, like Aragorn, who win military victories against formidable odds. With heroic women at their side; women who shatter the simperingly pathetic Brigid Jones stereotype by their prowess on the battlefield. There is Gandalf, the elderly wizard, whose genius gives hope to senior citizens everywhere. There is Legolas, the beautiful elf, who proves that a man can have long blonde hair and still fight like a tiger. And there is Gimli the dwarf: a towering inspiration to all the vertically-challenged among us.

But the thing that touches me most deeply about The Lord of the Rings is that, once again, the ultimate hero of the story is none of these. He breaks the conventional heroic mould. He's not a warrior, he's not a wizard; he has no special rank, no special knowledge, no conspicuously heroic credentials at all. He's not even, like Harry Potter, secretly empowered. The one supernatural advantage he has, that famous ring, is not really his and he must never use it or all will be lost.

No, Frodo is just a hobbit. The most inconsequential and insignificant of all the creatures that inhabit Tolkien's Middle-Earth. But, by a cruel and extraordinary stroke of fate, it is he, and he alone, who can save the world. And in that stunning final episode of the trilogy that was released last Christmas, of course, he does.

That's the kind of hero I need. Someone who achieves great things, not because they have unique skills or magical advantages, but simply by virtue of 'ordinary' qualities like courage, integrity and self-sacrifice. Someone like that can bring out the best in me because they are able to convince me, against my natural inclination towards cynicism, that such ordinary qualities of human goodness really do matter, really do make a difference.

I know The Lord of the Rings isn't everybody's cup of tea, but I could watch it again and again — and no doubt I will.

The trouble is, of course, it's fiction, isn't it. Brilliant in its execution, epic in its scale, profoundly moving in its impact — but when you step out of the cinema into a cold December evening you have to face the fact that it was all a magnificent work of dramatic art — as imaginary as the tooth fairy and Rudolph the Reindeer's red nose.

That's not good enough for me. Sadly, I've seen evil triumph too often in this morally ambiguous world to be fobbed off with the reassurances of a make-believe hero. Great movie though it is, it will take someone more impressive even than Frodo to silence my cynicism. I need a real hero — not an imaginary one! For I'm not a child anymore to be hoodwinked by the saccharine platitudes of Walt Disney. I need a hero for adults.

And fortunately I've found one!

I found him initially, not on the cinema screen, but in a book. No, not a book of Greek myths or Grimm's fairytales. Though the story this book tells undoubtedly takes a bit of believing, it is nevertheless a story millions of thoughtful, intelligent adults do believe, and believe passionately.

Why? Because in some strange and almost indefinable way, this hero stays with you when you put the book down. No December night, no matter how cold, can shatter the spiritual fire this book kindles, because unlike Harry Potter or Frodo the hobbit, this hero isn't imaginary — he's real.

Oh, there are undoubted points of similarity to these other heroes we've been talking about. Like Harry Potter, this hero was supernaturally endowed from birth. And as a result, even from infancy, dark forces sought to kill him too. But his destiny was in the hands of a higher power — demonic hatred tried to thwart what the prophecies had said about him, but they would always fail. For like Frodo the hobbit, this hero had a unique mission — one which only he could fulfil, one that would demand of him the highest levels of courage, integrity and self-sacrifice. And the salvation of the entire world depended upon its

success. Like Harry, his path to fame lay via obscurity and anonymity. Like Frodo, his victory would be won not by the exercise of supernatural power but by its renunciation. For like both of them, he broke the mould of classic heroes. Achilles and Alexander sought to win glory for themselves, but he abdicated it when it was already his. In a manner quite unprecedented in the ancient world, this hero made a virtue of humility.

The scholar and author C.S. Lewis used to say that the reason myths and legends have exercised so much influence over people throughout history is because, at the deepest levels of our human awareness, we feel intuitively that the themes which those ancient stories explore are all actually part of a real story — a story which isn't fiction even though we know they are — a story that is able to make sense of our human experience and that satisfies our profound need for meaning and purpose. A story which is objectively 'true', in a way that myths and legends and fairytales can only pretend to be.

I'm sure Lewis was right about that. Fictional heroes exert the emotional power over us that they do because they are all echoes of a real hero — a hero who isn't the figment of someone's fertile imagination, but who's really alive — whose story isn't one you just watch on a big screen, but one in which you can personally become involved in real life.

You know his name, of course.

He wasn't born in a pretend place called The Shire — but in a very real one called Bethlehem. You can still visit it today.

His friends were not whimsical romanticised characters called Sam Gamgee and Peregrine Took — but real-life fishermen called Peter and John. Their eye-witness testimony comprises much of that book in which I first found out about him.

His mission did not lead him to a mythical mountain of doom in some make-believe land of Mordor — but to a very real hill, called Calvary, and a very real cross — one made of wood and nails, not fantasies.

And the battle against the powers of evil which he fought there was not merely a histrionic gesture in some rather extreme form of street theatre. It was a real contest for the hearts and souls of men and women and for their eternal destiny.

Yes, you know his name.

What was it the angel told his father?

'You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

Do you need a hero this Christmas?

Let me recommend mine.