



The Wood Beyond the World

William Morris

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"The Wood Beyond the World" was first published in 1894 and its author, William Morris is often considered one of the authors who aided in the growth of fantasy, utopian literature, and science fiction. C.S. Lewis cites William Morris as one of his favorite authors and J.R.R. Tolkein admits to being influenced greatly by Morris' fantasies. The hero of this romance is named Golden Walter, son of Bartholomew Golden, a great merchant in the town of Langton on Holm. Tired of his mundane life, Walter sets out on a sea voyage, anxious to see and learn more of the outside world, eventually winning for himself the kingdom of Stark-Wall and the love of a beautiful maiden.

The Wood Beyond the World Details

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From Reader Review The Wood Beyond the World for online ebook

David Mosley says

William Morris's *The Wood beyond the World* is an excellent example of the Faerie Romance. Walter of Langton, finds himself on foreign soil and stumbles his way into what can only be called Faerie. There he falls in love with what must be an Elf-maiden and must battle a dwarf, an enchantress, and an evil man before he can escape from that Perilous Realm. Even then, the lovers' woes are not over. Uncertainty amongst the Bears and the people of Stark-Wall must be overcome before any ending, happy or ill, can be seen for the twain. Read this book by an author who had a profound impact on G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Jaakko Ojala says

I read this book due to C.S. Lewis' comment about J.R.R. Tolkien. Lewis wrote to his friend about Tolkien that, "he had grown up on William Morris and George MacDonald." So, having respect for both Lewis and Tolkien, I wanted to find out what they had grown up on. The book was a romance and did give a good space and place to think over my own entangled romantic feelings and experiences. Fantasy literature in general has and especially this book had an effect of taking the dust out of my difficult feelings and thoughts and giving a chance to look at them as fresh and as new, not depressing but even intriguing. I knew the book to be a book of fantasy, but still, as the maid, the lady and the dwarf appeared I felt great joy and surprise. There is a longing in me of fantasy, or at least good and healthy fantasy, somehow the fantasy seems the most necessary and even realistic element of this book. It gives much needed expression to the feelings that are in the forefront of my existence but too really are given expression.

Fuchsia Groan says

Descatalogadísimo clásico de la fantasía del gran William Morris (artesano, impresor, poeta, escritor, activista político, pintor, diseñador y fundador del movimiento Arts and Crafts). La única edición en castellano es la de Miraguano y por lo que parece la traducción deja bastante que desear. Yo leí la de Urco editora (en gallego, *O bosque de alén do mundo*). Quien lea en inglés (aunque el autor utiliza un aquí un inglés que imita al medieval), lo mejor que puede hacer es adquirir la maravillosa edición de Kelmscott Press, hecha íntegra por el propio Morris imitando en todo a los manuscritos medievales.

El planteamiento es de cuento total, sencillo: el joven que parte en busca de una nueva vida, las tierras extrañas, el enano horripilante, la Señora bellísima y malvada, la Doncella esclava y hermosa... la trama avanza lentamente, y poco a poco van apareciendo todos los elementos, uno tras otro, de lo que es hoy en día la fantasía épica. Merece la pena por lo que tuvo de innovador en su momento.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog here in December 1999.

The earliest of Morris' fantasy stories, *The Wood Beyond the World* is short and simply told, in the style derived from medieval romance that is his trademark. The story is one which emphasises the psychological world at the expense of the plot, and has the curious feature of an ending which seems to forget about the beginning.

Driven from his home by an unhappy marriage, Walter Goldn is haunted by a recurring vision of a lady, an attendant maid wearing the iron ring of thralldom on her thigh, and a hideous dwarf. Attempting to return home for revenge when he hears news that his father has been killed by his wife's relatives, his ship is blown off course to a deserted region. He makes his way into a primeval forest, the wood beyond the world, where he meets the people from his vision.

It is easy to see Freudian ideas at work in this book, particularly in the scenes with the lady in the wood, hunting dangerous animals together, stalked by the dwarf. (As in many medieval authors including Thomas Malory and Chretien de Troyes, the dwarf stands for impurity and evil.) Yet Morris was writing before Freud's theories about dreams were published, and his images will have come from his medieval sources and his own imagination. They are still disturbing, particularly with the strange resolution in which Walter forgets his revenge totally, being crowned the king of an entirely different nation.

Sylvester says

If you like interesting old-fashioned words. If you like *Beowulf* for it's style. Read this.

I had mistakenly added this instead of the second volume of *The Well At the World's End* - only realizing my mistake now that I have listened to the Librivox version. What's my problem? Confoozled. Anyway, although I didn't like this one as much as aforementioned WATWE, it still had all the lovely language and the straight-out-of-a-tapestry style story. Morris really does create a world unto itself in each of his fantasies - and they have an enchanted, dreamlike atmosphere such as I've not found anywhere else. That being said, this is not the best representative of Morris's skill.

Holly says

Even though it is not really deserving of five stars, I'm feeling generous today, so there.

I confess to being a fan-girl of William Morris, and as far as I am concerned everything he has ever created deserves eleven out of ten stars. Those wallpaper designs.....the man is a god.....Red House, do you need more proof than that?

To me this fantasy is an exercise in wish fulfillment. Golden Walter is clearly an autobiographical character. Jane Morris is the lady.....as to the true identity of the maid.....? any theories?

Oh, and yeah, I know that this book is unacceptable to politically correct literary deconstructivists.....they kinda hate this book a lot. Another motive for the five star rating, and just because I can.

Debbie Zapata says

This is around the third time I have read this book, and I still enjoyed it, but I need to remember to let more than just a few years go by before the next reading. I was fuzzy enough on details this time to not remember exactly what would happen. Until I got to various dramatic scenes, and then the consequences of them would scroll through my brain like a movie trailer. This did not exactly spoil the book for me, but it would certainly have been more fun if I had not been able to remember anything at all about the unfolding of the plot.

And I might not have noticed the unusual items that caught my attention this time around. I'll mention those as I go along, but meanwhile, this is the story of Golden Walter and his quest for love, which he began after leaving his cheating wife. William Morris wrote in a style that would verily drive some readers to the brink, but I don't mind the thees, thous, forsooths, hithers and such. This type of language can be very entertaining. I tend to imagine some poor actress trying to be in character in a dramatic moment, hoping to remember to say her lines, which would be what The Maid told our Walter when they met in The Wood Beyond The World (naturally, a lost and magical realm far out to sea). Anyway, The Maid is trying to explain what Walter will need to do to survive, and at one point she says:

". . .but next I must needs tell thee of things whereof I wot, and thou wottest not."

It took me a couple of readings to wot what was meant there. LOL

As I said, I noticed things this time that I might not have if I had been more lost in the story. For example, The Lady is described at one point as being dressed *"...in nought else but what God had given her of long, crispy yellow hair."* Crispy hair? This is supposed to be a woman who is more beautiful than any Golden Walter could ever imagine and she has *crispy* hair? I thought crispy meant brittle. The word makes me think of cookies and potato chips. So just for the sake of a clear mental picture I looked it up. Turns out crispy can also mean curly or wavy. Well, who knew?

And I got a kick out of another scene where Walter smiled and *louted* to The Lady. I've only ever understood lout to mean a clumsy, ill-tempered boorish kind of guy. I was imagining all kinds of odd things until I got me to the dictionary and found that when lout is a verb, it means *to bend, stoop, or bow, especially in respect or courtesy*. So if a lout louted would he still be considered a lout? The idea leaves me dumbfounded (another fun real word I learned thanks to Mr. Morris.)

I am kind of making fun of the style and that is not really fair. I enjoyed the book very much, it is a classic quest with magic, castles, bear-people, and true love as the goal. Does Golden Walter succeed? Verily and forsooth, I wot but thou wottest not, and won't unless thou readest the book for thyself.

Kimberley doruyter says

what the hell did i just read

Simon says

Although a continuous narrative, this was a book of three distinct phases for me.

Firstly was the set up, how Walter came to be in the "Woods beyond the World". During this part I was still getting use to the antiquated prose and narrative style, finding my rhythm while not much interesting happened plot wise.

Then I got to the central part of the story, in which Walter becomes embroiled in a strange love square. While Walter sits back and passively waits for events to unfold, the others conspire and plot against each other. For me, this was the most fascinating part of the story, in which I had found my stride with the prose and was enrapt by the characters and their machinations.

And then, when Walter and the maid flee and eventually make their way back to the "normal" world, the story began to peter out and my interest waned towards the end. I guess I was expecting more of an intricate plot and a twist in the tail of the story which did not happen.

As is so often the case, it comes down to one's expectations and how far they are exceeded or fallen short of. I picked up the book without particularly high expectations as I suspected that it might be overly antiquated and quaint but these expectations were surpassed by the middle of the book. Then, finding my self really enjoying the book, I felt somewhat let down by the end as the story failed, in my opinion, to realise its full potential.

Still, an interesting and enjoyable experience of one of the key novels that helped shape modern fantasy as we know it. A must read for a anyone interested in the origins of the genre.

Miriam Cihodariu says

It's easy to understand why William Morris (and this book of his in particular) inspired both Tolkien and Lewis so much. It talks of strange and almost-human races, of high fantasy themes and enchanted forests, and reminds you of common images from both the works of Tolkien and Lewis (but mostly the former).

The language is old English and you shouldn't expect to read this book with your usual speed, but it's worth it. The Bear-men reminded me of Beorn and his family, the Maid and her wedding (coming as the Queen of the men in Stark-wall) are very reminiscent of Arwen (including the way her wizardry fails her after settling down in marriage), the Lady is clearly the inspiration behind Tolkien's elves (besides the actual lore than depicted them more like little fairies), the dwarves are also present and so on.

Overall, it's cute and dreamy but not something you'd enjoy if it was written today (most probably). As long as it's read bearing in mind its times, *The Wood Beyond the World* is wonderful and whimsical. :)

Werner says

For Morris (who was not only a writer, but an artist, scholar, and handicraft enthusiast as well), medieval Europe was a still --relevant social and economic model for the regeneration of modern society. It also

profoundly influenced his creativity. His fantasies, which are (along with those of Lord Dunsany and George MacDonald) among the most influential works in the genre before Tolkien, are set in a medieval environment that serves as an invented fantasy world. They're also written in a deliberately archaic, medieval-sounding style similar to that of his translations of the Icelandic sagas into English (which won't be to all readers' taste).

His plot here has a strong erotic undercurrent (and "erotic" is not a synonym for "dirty") and often considerable sexual tension, and it obliquely raises the issue, usually taboo in Victorian literature, of divorce and remarriage. But he treats this with 19th-century delicacy, and within the framework of an essentially chaste moral vision, so it does not come across as at all offensive. The story itself is an exciting, involving and appealing one, drawing elements from his study of medieval folklore and bringing them to life in imaginative ways. A masterful work, from a master of the genre!

Tim says

This wasn't actually half-bad, for a late Victorian-era tale of faerie. Some predictably problematic things -- like the Maid's magic being dependent on her virginity -- but also some sort of interesting aspects, like the fact that the protagonist ends up being little more than a witness (well, part witness and part tool used by either side) in the central battle of magic and deception between two powerful women.

Paul Christensen says

Walter leaves his homeland after a series of waking dreams
In which he sees a loathsome dwarf, a maiden and a queen.

In a strange erratic wilderness he is drawn into intrigues
And must win through to victory, or, as the Germans say: *Sieg*.

Perhaps it's an homage to Chrétien de Troyes, this lovely chivalraic tale
Whose pseudo-archaic style will cause some readers to gnash or wail;

Well, I found his stylings a great delight, no need whatever to dodge them;
But then one of my favourite books, you see, is *The Night Land* by William Hope Hodgson...

Dave Maddock says

I am convinced that all ratings of this book are inflated by at least one star because people know going in that Morris was a key figure in the development of modern fantasy and an important influence on Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

Granted, there are several of good ideas here which are utilized much more effectively by Morris' intellectual

heirs--archaism, medieval revival, appropriation of myth, etc. However, these are not deftly applied here. This book simply cannot stand on its own without the post-hoc crutch of superior derivative art. The plot is plodding and disjointed--rampant with loose ends, coincidence, and characters devoid of plausible motivation.

(view spoiler)

One redeeming feature is that my copy is a facsimile of the Kelmscott Press edition. Kelmscott Press was a Morris venture for reviving old-school bookmaking. Originals must be truly gorgeous works of art. This certainly adds to the effect Morris is going for in the narrative.

The Wood Beyond the World is only worth reading today as a scholarly exercise. If you want medieval romance, read actual medieval romances. If you want quality fantasy, read the authors he inspired.

Ann says

This is a true myth. I loved this book partly because I can see forshadows of Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Peake, Charles Williams and many other great writers of fantasy. What is the real world? And what must one do to find it? I make all things new, our Lord said. Write it down. That is humankind's hope, Christian or not. This myth leads one on a journey toward that new heaven and earth might begin to look like. The edition I have is a facsimile of the Kelmscott Press Edition-Gothic letters and Morris embellishments. A beautiful book.

verbava says

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Angela Brown says

I thought this was a beautifully written and memorable as a very early example of faerie romance/fantasy. If you do start reading Morris because of the trail of influence on Tolkien, you can find examples of what might have lit Tolkien's luminous flame in these pages, but it depends on the aspect of Tolkien's writing that you focus on. For me, one of the aspects of Tolkien's word-weaving, is as a wonderfully gifted nature writer in a fantasy context. Tolkien had an incredible ability to draw landscapes in imagination, and to empower

you as a reader to journey with characters and creatures through those landscapes in your head. I absolutely found a similar enchantment in *The Wood Beyond the World*. Morris explores the relationship of nature and how it interplays with his characters in the story. The wood, the valley, the streams, mountain passes, the wilderness, the city - are some of the strongest characters in this book. They are threat and refuge when traversed, and the environment has a direct impact on the relationship of Golden Walter and his love. If you only seek strong human characters, you could easily miss the enchantment of this story, but if you instead, just walk into the wood, it's a beautiful read.

Quiver says

I was drawn to this book because of its unusual title (you'd expect it to be *The World Beyond the Wood*) and because of Morris's influence on the development of the high-fantasy genre.

With only later works e.g. Tolkien under my belt, I hadn't much of an idea what to expect from Morris. Two things were apparent after the first few pages:

- (1) The archaic language was off-putting and greatly diminished my enjoyment.
- (2) The plot was slow and scant (and opaque due to the language).

To be clear: it's not only the vocabulary that's archaic—

(be prepared for fluency in the like of: anigh, apaid, bemock, bewray, carle, chaffer, chancel, clomb, dight, drave, durst, hansel hight, howbeit, meseemeth, mickle, quoth, runagate, scatter-meal, scrip, sithence, somedeal, stead, thereto, trow, unshipped, well-favouredly, withal, wyte, etc.)

—it's the sentence structure as well. If you have a predilection for tight, well-plotted prose you'll struggle through the book.

What is called long-winded could also be considered beautifully lush when it comes to certain descriptions.

"Now he entered it by the porch, and came into a hall many-pillared, and vaulted over, the walls painted with gold and ultramarine, the floor dark, and spangled with many colours, and the windows glazed with knots and pictures. Midmost thereof was a fountain of gold, whence the water ran two ways in gold-lined runnels, spanned twice with little bridges of silver. Long was that hall, and now not very light, so that Walter was come past the fountain before he saw any folk therein: then he looked up toward the high-seat, and himseemed that a great light shone thence, and dazzled his eyes; and he went on a little way, and then fell on his knees; for there before him on the high-seat sat that wondrous Lady, whose lively image had been shown to him thrice before; and she was clad in gold and jewels, as he had erst seen her.

I now appreciate Tolkein's writing style in *Lord of the Rings*: it sings and snaps in comparison to Morris's.

That said, if you're looking to understand the origins of high-fantasy, this is a good place to start. Likewise, if you're looking to bridge the gap between medieval chivalrous romances and modern day fantasy.

The title of *The Well at the World's End* sounds equally enticing, but I'm not sure I'll be able to stomach 500

pages of similar writing. I'll think about it.

Danielle Parker says

Book Review: "The Wood Beyond the World", by William Morris
Ballantine, 1974
ISBN 345-23730-7-125
Paperback, \$12.99
237 pages
Reviewed by D. L. Parker

One of my recent non-New Year resolutions is to go back and revisit, or read for the first time, all the ground-breaking early originals in fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Now, I'm not good at keeping resolutions, especially if they involve dieting, crushing impure thoughts or keeping my temper when some little zipper snitches my parking space, but this resolution involves books, so I think I have a good chance. Accordingly, when I attended SPOCON, I picked up a few hoary paperbacks from one of the booksellers. *The Wood Beyond the World* had such a colorful fairy tale color. I wanted an early version of *The Moon Pool* too, which had an equally lovely cover, but the bookseller knew to the penny how much that original paperback was worth. I was forced to settle for a much later edition featuring a naked lady (humongous rear view) in front of, naturally, a pool. In the old days, I see I could have gone without my occasional dieting resolutions.

My goal in re-reading these old gems is, first, to ingest the ones I've managed to miss in my omnivorous reading career, and second, to see whether the book still has something to offer modern readers. We all know how cool *The Last Days of Pompeii* sounded in the days when Jolly good old boy, watch out for that lava rock! wasn't a comical line to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's readers. Some books ought to be given their line in the history books, as pertaining to their time, and left to mould there ever after.

The good news is that *The Wood Beyond the World* is still readable. The language is an archaic fairy-tale thee and thou, and suffers a lack of paragraph breaks to modern readers. *The Wood Beyond the World* was written in 1895, so Morris' language wasn't naturalistic to his contemporary readers, either.

But after a while I settled down to it, and the language suits the fairy tale themes perfectly. At least Morris?yes, he is that Morris, the multi-talented 19th century designer and artist?does not belong to the wearisome yea, verily! school of King James Bible imitators (like Tolkien at his very, very worst).

And we're all familiar with fairy tales. In this one, a young man of a good house makes a bad marriage. We're never told why his new wife loathes this handsome, charming, well-to-do fellow (typical: he's oblivious to his faults). But happily ever after they're not, and being a noble fellow, young Walter mopes and pines for a change rather than setting her out on the street, divorcing her, or busting her chops. Rich Daddy owns a merchant fleet, and Walter determines to sail away from his misery on one instead.

But strangely he sees repeated visions of a beautiful woman, her sweet-faced maid, and a hideous dwarf servant. The three apparitions vanish almost as soon as glimpsed. Walter takes sail, and a dreadful storm blows his merchant's ship to an unknown shore. There a hermit with a guilty conscience and evasive answers points out a mysterious pass through the mountains. Walter, afire with his visions, can't resist.

His adventure takes him into a strange wood where he first finds the sweet and lovely maid. She is under a mysterious enthrallment, of course, by her jealous mistress. Her beauteous mistress already has a princely boy-toy in attendance, but when Walter appears, she casts her eye on him (and pretty soon, her clothes get cast aside, too).

Things get complicated, for though Walter has (in the best tradition of courtly love) pledged his troth to the sweet maid, he's got an eye for her mistress, too. The boy-toy Prince is suffering the same urge to try greener

grasses. All the while, around go the ugly dwarves, yelling mysterious warnings and threats against maid and suitor both.

Both the mistress and her maid are enchanters, and I was sure this book was going to turn into some kind of Triple Goddess deal (maybe missing the crone), where the maid was actually the mistress, and the mistress the maid, somehow. The roaring dwarfs I assumed to be Circe-like victims and former boy-toys in real bad humors.

But no: all the elements are there, dragging the reader on in real fascination, and then it's as if Morris lost his nerve. He tacks on a familiar fairy-tale happy-ever-after ending, and leaves me scratching my head on what the relationship between maid and mistress ever really was. And how about the bad wife left behind? Walter takes up with his sweet maid, and Morris forgets about the bigamy problem. Guess divorce was a problem in those days.

The last book I reviewed (Consider Phlebus) had a sudden bad end, and this one had a sudden good end.

They should have swapped. I had fantasies of re-writing this fairy tale with the story I was sure Morris really had in mind. You might find it a fun exercise, too. Have fun! And you can find the entire text free on Project Gutenberg. Even better.

Scott says

The works of William Morris were hugely influential in the development of the fantasy genre. It's necessary to note that, because some of the characteristics of this book, while groundbreaking at the time, have since passed into overuse, cliché, and scorn. Notably, it's written in faux-archaic language in mimicry of medieval romances, and the plot has more than a hint of adolescent wish-fulfillment. A book like this written today would probably be considered garbage (at least to publishers and literary critics), but at the time it was written it was really something new and special.

The biggest flaw, I found, was that the fantasy setting never quite *enchanted* me, never drew me in or seemed to come to life the way the worlds of Tolkien, Dunsany, and Lewis do. And the characters didn't seem fully real, either...there was perhaps too much of the archetype in them for them to seem like living, breathing individuals.

Still, I did like it. Reading it felt like uncovering something old, precious, and powerful: a relic from a bygone era. And I think that if I had read it earlier in life, I might have liked it even more.
