

ILLUSTRATING HIS VISION

Artist Alan Lee has been bringing Tolkien's words to life for more than 20 years and has once again taken up the task of drawing Middle-earth for *Beren and Lúthien*.

LSILDUR SQUARING OFF against Sauron on the slopes of Mount Doom. Frodo peering into the Mirror of Galadriel in Lóthlórien. Smaug coiled around a hoard of riches in his lair. Chances are, fantastic visions of otherworldly creatures are dancing in your head after reading these phrases. And it would be a safe bet to assume what you're seeing bears a striking resemblance to the vision of Alan Lee, who has sketched, painted and otherwise illustrated Tolkien's universe for more than two decades. "I'm trying to create something that hopefully matches with what other people are imagining when they read the book," the artist said over the phone from his home in England.

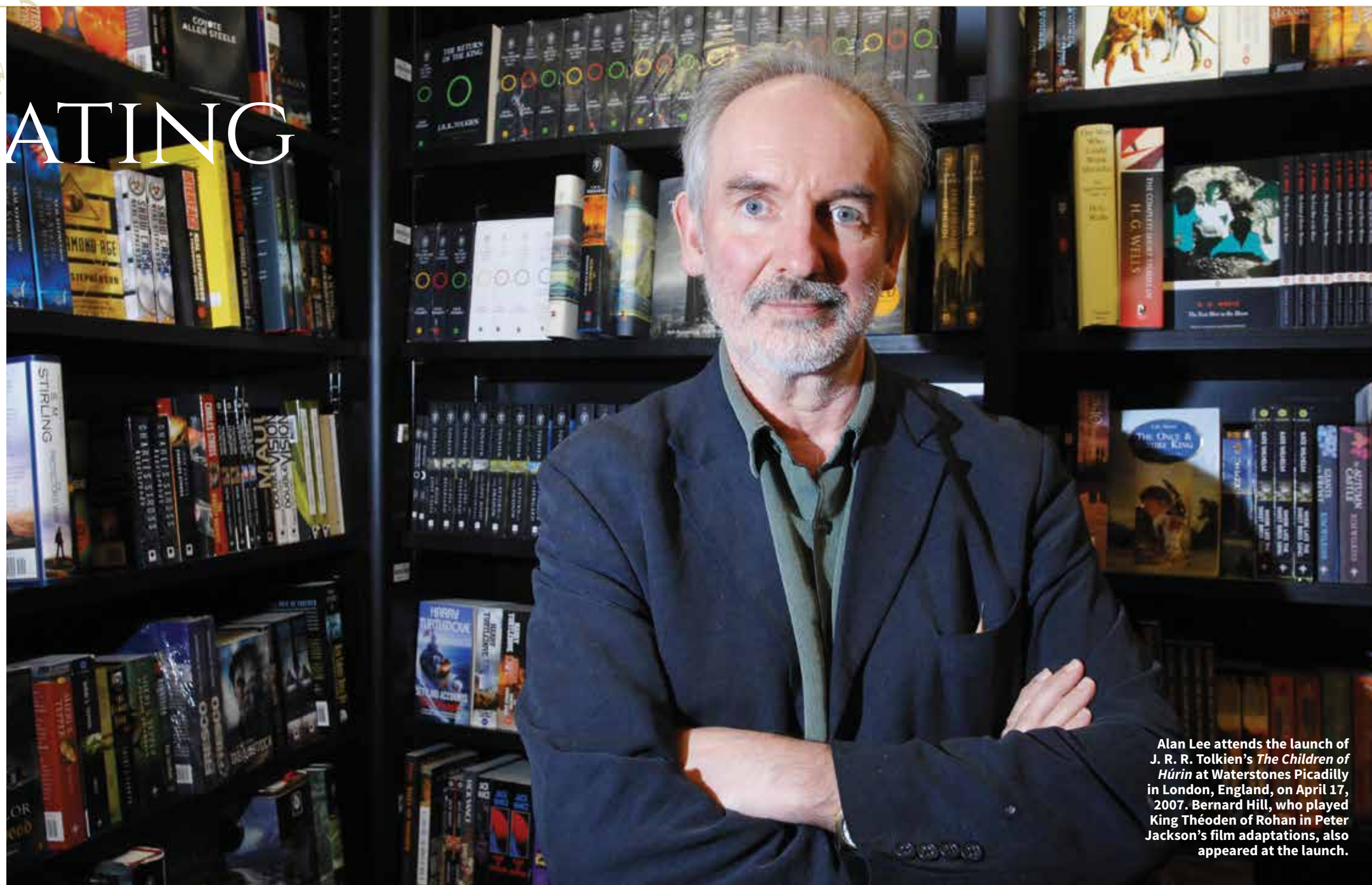
Lee first became enthralled with Middle-earth at the age of 17, when he first read *The Lord of the Rings*. But it wasn't until 1992 that the world of Elves, Orcs and Hobbits became a professional concern. That was the year publisher HarperCollins approached him with an offer to illustrate the centenary edition of Tolkien's epic account of The War of the Ring. While the task must have been

daunting and exhilarating in equal measure, Lee's creative back-and-forth with the Tolkien Estate (particularly with Christopher Tolkien) helped craft a new vision of the characters and places readers had been imagining for so long. "When I first did *The Lord of the Rings*, [Christopher Tolkien] was very keen to see some sketches of how I drew up some of the characters," Lee says. "He was probably

more worried about the Hobbits than anything else. I think that in the past, when book covers had been done, that was the one weak area. The Hobbits tended to be a little bit grotesque, or a little bit too comical or a bit too muscle-bound."

Lee's ability to nail both the look of the characters while also evoking with his illustrations the sense of epic grandeur Tolkien created on

the page delighted Middle-earth fans across the globe—including Peter Jackson. When assembling the creative team that would tackle a task even the staunchest of Hobbits might blanch at—filming a live-action adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*—Jackson knew he needed Lee by his side. The illustrator took on the role of lead concept artist (along with fellow Middle-earth artist John



Alan Lee attends the launch of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Children of Húrin* at Waterstones Piccadilly in London, England, on April 17, 2007. Bernard Hill, who played King Théoden of Rohan in Peter Jackson's film adaptations, also appeared at the launch.

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EXPLORING MIDDLE-EARTH

Howe) for Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films. This not only earned him an Oscar for Art Direction for 2003's *The Return of the King*, but it also made his personal vision of Middle-earth the definitive one for generations to come. It's something of a paradox for Lee, who credits much of the power of his artwork as stemming from his trust in the observer to fill in their own details while he sets the overall mood. "You're trying to make the experience of the person reading the book a little clearer, more enjoyable and atmospheric," Lee says. "You're trying not to compete with the author, but to provide some sort of movement, almost, that supports the text and is not too assertive." When asked to compare his work to the many other talents who have presented their own vision of Tolkien's universe, Lee describes his output as having more subtlety. "I try to concentrate more on creating an atmosphere and not going for the big dramatic moments," he says. "I try to create a scene right before a big dramatic moment or after. That tends to add a little bit of extra energy and atmosphere to the climax when it does come."

It's that ability to remain reverent to Tolkien's work while also putting his own stamp on a beloved fictional universe that made Lee the natural choice to illustrate the story that was perhaps closest to the author's heart—the tale of Beren and Lúthien. Lee continues the style he deployed for 2007's *The Children of Húrin*. "I think of [*Beren and Lúthien*] as almost a companion to that book," Lee says. Given Beren and Lúthien's mythological status in Tolkien's universe, Lee has drawn influence from fairy tales when illustrating the pair's adventures. "It's a real fairy tale, I think, even more so than a lot of his other work," Lee says. "There [are] talking animals and impossible quests—and a real love story." It's a fascinating tale, made all the richer thanks to Lee's masterful touch.

Clockwise from top left: Tolkien's books *The Children of Húrin*, *Beren and Lúthien* and *The Hobbit*. *The Children of Húrin* was pieced together by Christopher Tolkien from his father's manuscripts.

