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Middle Ages, Middle America

When most people think of the Middle Ages the image they conjure comes from fantasy: knights errant, damsels in distress, and fire-breathing dragons. Disney has done much to add to this image. *Sleeping Beauty* is a story most of us learn very young thanks to Disney's movie magic. The majority of America is also exposed to the Middle Ages through a more circumspect route. Many of Americans have read C.S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia, and an even larger number have been exposed to Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, either through the books or the movie. These books create worlds with the same values as the Middle Ages.

It is not immediately apparent that either The Lord of the Rings or The Chronicles of Narnia are stories from the Middle Ages. As soon as one realizes this, however, it becomes obvious. Much of the appeal of The Lord of the Rings especially is the same as the appeal of the King Arthur legend, which finds its roots in the Middle Ages. Both have characters on an epic and almost impossible quest. In both cases the hero is flawed. Both heroes find their dream, only to discover the dream is not what each imagined it to be. Their victories, like the stories themselves, are bittersweet.

Americans' visions of the Middle Ages are influenced by the works of Lewis and Tolkien. Their books present medieval themes and values. Lewis and Tolkien brought the Middle Ages to middle America, even if most Americans do not realize that fact.