Episode 7 Transcript

CROSSING NORTH 7: THE NORDIC LANGUAGES OF MIDDLE EARTH (PART 1)

Matt Boutilier: I meant to say this back towards the beginning when you were talking about how I came to the Lord of The Rings and what interested me about it...he didn't just invent this incredibly complex universe and mythology, but, just—the languages—the fact that he created Quenya, and Sindarin, and Khuzdul. I guess it was a revelation to me that one could do that. It was my first exposure to the idea of constructed languages—or con lang—to use that word again.

Colin Gioia Connors: JRR Tolkien is one of the most successful and influential fantasy writers of the 20th century. His most popular works, The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, and The Silmarillion all take place in a medieval fantasy universe called Middle Earth. Tolkien was a professor of Old and Middle English at Oxford, and his fantasy novels frequently drew on European folklore and medieval literature for inspiration. Tolkien was especially influenced by myths and folktales from the Nordic countries: In The Hobbit, he borrowed the names of Gandalf and the dwarves from The Prophecy of the Seeress, an Icelandic mythological poem; In the Lord of the Rings, he borrowed the theme of a cursed golden ring from The Saga of the Volsungs, an Icelandic story of Norse gods and heroes; and in the Silmarillion, he adapted character names and stories of magical song contests from the Kalevala, the Finnish national epic. But for all his interest in literature, Tolkien was primarily a linguist, and he constructed fantasy languages for his Middle Earth based on the real languages he studied. For example, he based one elvish language, Sindarin, on Welsh, and he based another, Quenya, on Finnish. Tolkien really loved Finnish. In one of his personal notes, he describes his first encounter with a Finnish grammar book, quote, “like discovering a complete wine cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind and flavor never tasted before.”

[Intro music starts]

Welcome to Crossing North: a podcast where we learn from Nordic and Baltic artists, scholars, and community members to better understand our world, our communities, and ourselves. Coming to you from the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I'm your host Colin Gioia Connors.

[Intro music ends]

I interviewed Dr. Matt Boutilier, a linguist and recent PhD graduate from the University of Wisconsin. Like Tolkien, Matt's research deals with the historical development of Indo-European languages and medieval European literature. Matt also co-hosts the Tolkien Heads podcast. Every week, the Tolkien Heads discuss a chapter of The Lord of the Rings. Each of the Heads brings a unique academic background to the discussion and they are frequently aided by special guests.
Matt: So my role on The Tolkien Heads is the language guy.

Colin: I sat down with Matt to talk about the languages of Middle Earth...

Matt: I like to think of The Lord of the Rings, and I guess, all of Middle Earth, but mostly The Lord of the Rings, as sort of Norse mythology fan fiction. He really respected this tradition of the sagas, like a prose saga, and he wanted to write his own, but almost, almost in the same world.

Colin: There are a lot of linguistic inside jokes, which I am only now starting to unlock, and one of the joys for me of listening to your podcast is getting to hear you guys talk about these things. If you remember, perhaps you could talk about the example of the “word vault” opening up. Is this ringing a bell?

Matt: Yes, the “wordhoard.”

Colin: The “wordhoard,” yeah!

Matt: So this is a really well-known phrase. I don’t know how many times it comes up in Old English literature, I’m pretty sure more than once. I know in Beowulf, at least. Anyway, someone opens up their wordhoard, in Old English wordhord—

Colin: What does that mean?

Matt: It means a treasury of words, basically. It basically means the words that you know. And so to open one’s wordhoard, or to unlock one’s wordhoard, to translate the Old English differently, means basically to speak, and to open you mouth and start speaking. It’s interesting, our word thesaurus, which is basically just a list of words—it’s more complicated than that—but the word thesaurus comes from the Greek word for treasure or a treasury. So I like to think of a wordhoard as a treasure of all the words that you know, and you can just spill them out at people. You can unleash the wordhoard. Tolkien uses, I forget where exactly, but in The Lord of the Rings for sure, wordhoard comes up in those exact words. It’s a shout out, I guess...

Colin: It’s a wink.

Matt: It’s a wink! Exactly, it’s a wink to people who study these things that might go over people’s heads, of me, certainly, when I was in middle school—I wouldn’t have known what to make of that, but even your average adult reader—there are so many words that just aren’t going to mean anything to you, but it’s Tolkien’s way of winking to people in his community who are in the know.

Colin: Yeah, I think studying other languages has really increased my appreciation of Tolkien. You read something like that, and at least when I was fifteen that went over my head, and now to realize that it’s a call out to Beowulf, and to the old heroic ideal in medieval literature that men are supposed to be very stoic and quiet, and then when they open their mouths it’s really important and significant—and just to have a really meaningful word to express that...

Matt: Yeah, so speaking of languages, it is often said, and I think truly, that Tolkien invented Middle Earth, and invented the story of the ring, and the Silmarils, etc. as a universe to have his languages play out, rather than the other way around. I think the interest in language came first for him, and he was very interested in having this fictional language of a fictional group of people, and he not only gave them their own language, but their own language family. So Quenya is an older version of the Elvish language, or an Elvish language, than Sindarin. But in the world of Middle Earth, Quenya was spoken as a native language a long, long time ago. And then it went through some changes, and some languages related to Quenya went through some changes, and it yielded Sindarin, another
Elvish language, in much the same way, or I would say, exactly the same way as languages change in our world. So it's crazy. While he was writing Norse mythology fan fiction, as I like to call it, he was also writing language fan fiction, basically. He said, "What if there was a language that looked like this? What would happen?" And it's almost like the word roots are characters and you can watch them change and play out. You know, you can look at a novel and say "How would people act in this situation?" Well Tolkien is saying, "How would these sounds interact in this situation?" and he is basically applying his knowledge of historical linguistics and sound changes to Quenya, or something on the level of Quenya and evolving it into Sindarin, using systematic sound changes, which is a really important tenant of comparative linguistics.

Colin: What language do the Hobbits speak, and how many languages do they know?

Matt: That's a great question. Most of the Hobbits certainly speak one language. I think the Hobbits, the Shire, is mostly a monolingual community. They speak a language called Westron. We are never told much about what it is or how it is related—I don't think it is related to the Elvish languages—but Westron is basically Tolkien's way of saying, "I'm going to write The Lord of the Rings in English, bear with me, pretend it's in this hypothetical language because the Hobbits wouldn't really speak English because that wouldn't make sense." I guess Westron is really the lingua franca of the world. Even the Orcs speak it. So the Orcs have their native languages which is Orcish, which is very similar to, if not the same thing, as the language of Mordor, which I believe historically is a form of Elvish, which is corrupted and everything. But the Orcs, somehow must learn Westron, too, because in that chapter toward the beginning of the Two Towers when Merry and Pippin are in the Orcish camp, they are overhearing some things said in Orcish and we get this view of the Orcish language. But then the Orcs speak to Merry and Pippin in Westron, the language that they understand. So, you know, I don't know if Westron is a commonly taught second language in Mordor or how exactly that works, but everyone seems to be proficient enough in Westron.

Colin: That is really funny to think about...

Matt: Because they had to learn it somehow, right?

Colin: If I were to look for a real world parallel I would actually look to the Scandinavian countries—Swedish, Norwegian, Danish are all more or less mutually intelligible but it is not uncommon to find people from different countries who will use English to speak to one another because maybe where they come from has a really thick dialect that is pretty different from what the person in Sweden in their dialect is like, and so they will use English as a common language. But that is kind of a funny thing to think about because of the way that the Orcs are portrayed, and so in that sense they are more culturally educated than the Hobbits.

Matt: Right, exactly! It's really funny to think about, but it's true! It has to be true if you take the text at face value, the Orcs are fairly bilingual. Many of the Hobbits are not. Many of the Hobbits—you know, you can think of it like most of America nowadays where there is no real, or they don't think there is a reason to pressure their children into learning a foreign language and so they don't. Frodo and Bilbo are rare exceptions, and I'm sure there are plenty of others, but most people, Hobbits like Sam, good salt of the earth people, probably only speak one language.

Colin: So what I remember from reading The Lord of the Rings, or listening to it, I should say, and this is part of my experience of listening to the audiobook, is that the reader, Robert Ingles, does a lot of different voices uses a lot of different accents—

Matt: [*Inhales sharply*] Oh boy.

Colin: —and I remember from The Hobbit that that is part of Tolkien's writing and so it is not just part of Robert Ingles' interpretation. In The Hobbit, the Trolls are speaking some kind of cockney British—
Colin: —a lower class British, and in the reading that I listened to, there is definitely a connection between class and who is speaking. The Orcs often have a very cockney accent, maybe some of them will sound a little Irish, whereas Frodo speaks in a very clean, proper British accent.

Matt: Yes, and especially Gandalf and Elrond and characters like that. Yes, that's true, and Sam, I would say, is sort of the quintessential example of a Hobbit, a definite “good guy,” to put that in quotes, who speak with what is definitely supposed to be perceived as a very low register, or lower class register accent. Sam has a lot of colloquialisms that he uses that the other Hobbits don't use—maybe Merry and Pippin sometimes but mostly not, mostly it's a Sam thing—and you get that in the actual prose of the text. So it's what linguists tend to call “eye dialect,” which is eye like E-Y-E. It's what your eye can see the dialect and some of these things like to abbreviate “him” as “im.” That is how many native speakers of English already talk, but to draw attention to it, to draw attention to that a speaker is doing that, without passing judgment on it, is to imply that this speaker is speaking some sort of non-standard or lower than standard way. That certainly characterizes Sam's speech, and the Trolls in The Hobbit, but the Trolls are really more objectively cockney, I would say. Sam, I'm sure has some kind of dialect that at least in Tolkien's day would have been perceived as rural, kind of country bumpkin speech.

Colin: Yeah, there seems to be a lot of value attached to the way that people speak and what their languages are.

Matt: Yes. So beyond how quote-unquote “English,” or “Westeron,” if we want to call it that, there are also some strong opinions about the Elvish language in the text. And it's funny: So Sindarin and Quenya are related languages, but Quenya itself is sometimes referred to outside of the text as Elf Latin, because basically it is this—I don't know if liturgical language is the right term, but it serves this purpose that Latin used to serve until recently for the Catholic Church, or that classical Arabic still serves for Islam, or certainly biblical Hebrew serves for Judaism—not to necessarily pin it to a religion but it is this kind of language of, I don't know, honor and respect, and has a sacred quality to it, and Quenya or something related to it evolves into Sindarin which is a spoken language, a modern language when the action of The Lord of the Rings takes place. And even though these two languages sound pretty different and their sound systems work in different ways, there are some similarities there. And characters have some opinions about Elvish, namely that is sounds very beautiful and melodic, and we are often told this. And this is contrasted, for example, with the Orcish language, which is really pretty obvious. We get some examples of Orcish attested in the text, and even without knowing much about Sindarin, or Quenya, or Orcish, you'd be able to differentiate between them pretty easily just because of how they sound. So this is from the chapter I mentioned where Merry and Pippin are in the Orcish camp before the Orcs start talking to them in Westeron. We hear this sentence: Uglúk u bagronk sha pushdug Saruman-glob búbhosh skai'. It is hard to pinpoint, but so many phonological aspects of just this phrase alone you would not find in the Elvish languages. For example: the sounds /sh/ and /d/ coming up against each other; the /nk/ at the end of a word, a word like “glob”—that's not a very good Elvish word. So we get this impression, and this is us, outside of the text, that the Elvish languages have this kind of airy, melodic, almost like Italian because people always say that Italian sounds musical, or romantic, or at least has a European flair to it, and Orcish, if we are going to stick within Europe, sounds like, I don't know, German or Hungarian or something, but it sounds like the opposite of what we expect a typical flowingly beautiful European language sounds like.

Colin: Right, because we have certain stereotypes about the way that languages sound.

Matt: Absolutely, and I think Tolkien had those same stereotypes, and I think that those stereotypes manifest themselves quite clearly in The Lord of the Rings.

Colin: How do they manifest themselves with the Orcish language, and the Dwarvish language, and the Elvish language?
Matt: Well, it's funny because Dwarvish, Khuzdul, actually has the same phonological idiosyncrasies that Orcish has. So they both sound, I don't know, kind of clunky. To put it in linguistic terms, Dwarvish and Orcish have in common a lot of consonant clusters, or consonants that can abutt on each other that would be illegal or impossible in the Elvish languages. There is something in particular—so I said that it would be easy to tell apart Elvish from Orcish even if you didn't know very much about them. It would be harder to tease apart Orcish and Dwarvish for the reasons that I just gave. However, there is something really interesting about Dwarvish once you start poking a little deeper. Something that wouldn't really be obvious to someone reading the Lord of the Rings without a linguistic background unless you are looking really closely, is that the way that Dwarvish words are formed, and the way that Dwarvish morphology, or word-building or sentence-building works, is basically identical to the way that the Semitic, the real life Semitic family of languages does things. So Semitic is a language family that includes Hebrew, and Arabic, and Amharic in Ethiopia, and Aramaic, and some extinct languages: Babylonian, Assyrian, etc. The Dwarvish language is not a Semitic language because the individual roots are different, but the system of roots in Dwarvish works in the exact same way as they do in the Semitic languages, which is different from how they do in another major language family called the Indo-European languages, which contains English, and actually all of the Germanic languages, the Baltic and Slavic and Celtic and Greek and Italic—you know, Romance languages—many of the familiar languages of Europe are from this family that is different from Semitic. And what is notable about Semitic is that it includes Hebrew, and Arabic I guess, and this is where, back in the day, Jewish people and maybe also Arab people were referred to as Semites, and that is where we get the term anti-Semitic, which today mostly means anti-Jewish. And just to distill it down to one major point: the Dwarvish language that Tolkein created—he didn't really expound upon quite as much as he did the Elvish languages—but Dwarvish is based on three roots with three sounds, roots with three consonants, or triconsonantal roots, as they're actually called in Semitic grammar. So basically that means that you can take three consonants, for example, the /k/ sound, the /z/ sound, and the /d/ sound—/k/ /z/ /d/—that in and of itself in a European language wouldn't make much sense, that's just three sounds, but in a Semitic language or a Semitic-like language, or in Dwarvish, it means “Dwarf,” actually, that root. So “Khuzdul” is the word for Dwarvish, and if you look closely you see “Khu,” which is the “k” sound with a “u”-vowel in there, then /z/ /d/, and then the suffix “-ul,” which means, I don't know, it's some sort of adjective form, or it means, like, the languages of the Dwarves. But we see that same /k/ /z/ /d/ in, for example, the word “Khažâd-dûm.” “Khažâd-dûm,” which is— So, “dum” comes from the word meaning “to dig” or “a dugout area,” and so “Khažâd-dûm” is the, the, the delved area of the Dwarves, or the Dwero-delf, or the dugout area of the Dwarves is what “Khažâd-dûm” means. So “Khažâd-dûm,” Dwero-delf. Dweroes, is, well, “dwero-” and “-delf” is one of those words that he got from Old English, but sort of extended forward: “What if? What if this word still existed?” kind of thing, but, anyway... So what's interesting, I guess, is that Tolkein, and I learned this, I guess, I had I had no idea that this was—I knew about the Semitic connection, but I didn't really know what I'm about to say, until The Tolkien Heads episode where we interviewed this guy, who calls himself “the Dwero-scholar,” who is a fantastic and friendly Belgian man named Roy who has this really fleshed out website of what he calls Neo-Khuzdul, and basically he took the Tolkein version of Khuzdul and expanded it into a workable language with all, basically, the resources that you can find for Sindarin or Quenya, because he's really passionate about Tolkein's dwarves. And when we were interviewing him, on one of our episodes, I asked him, “Roy, why do you think Tolkein made Khuzdul, basically modelled it after Semitic?” or “Why do you think he got such strong inspiration from the Semitic languages for Dwarvish?” And Roy said, “Oh, well, that's because Tolkein saw the Dwarves as, kind of, the Jews of this universe.” And I was like, [*uncomfortably*] “Oh boy.” But you can actually confirm that this is—Tolkein said as much in a BBC interview with him in nineteen seventy-something. So he gets asked this great question: “Did you intend in The Lord of the Rings that certain races should embody certain principles? The Elves wisdom, the Dwarves craftsmanship, Men husbandry and battle and so-forth?” And then he said, “Well, I didn't intend it”— [*skeptically*] I don't know about that—“I didn't intend it, but when you've got these people on your hands, you've got to make them different, haven't you?” which is an answer that I love, and then he talks about the Elves are kind of a thought experiment about, “What if people just lived forever, what would they be like? What if there was no—what if death wasn't an issue, basically?” and that's kind of what the Elves were like. And then he says, “And the Dwarves,” — and this is Tolkein himself—“of course, quite obviously, wouldn't you say in many ways they remind you of the Jews? All their words
are Semitic,” —obviously, constructed to be Semitic for the reasons I just gave. So he’s—it’s almost like he’s as surprised as we are. It’s like, “Wow, they just sort of turned out that way.”

Colin: I’m totally surprised.

Matt: Yeah! Yeah, well, and it is a surprising thing, especially if you consider some of the, I guess, aspects of Dwarvish society or, or the few things that we really know about Dwarves, because they’re sort of a mysterious people—I mean, so are Elves. I think there are some unfortunate areas of overlap with typical European perceptions of Jews, especially from the last hundred years or so.

Colin: I mean, that really changes the way that I think about the stories, and the way that I’ve read them, because now I can read in a lot of different ideas about the Dwarves by connecting them to stereotypes of Jewish people or parts of Jewish history. In The Hobbit, wanting to return to a homeland, but then also the stereotype of being obsessed with money, because the Dwarves are obsessed with gold and treasure... It's really important to distinguish between the text itself, being its own thing, and then what an author says about their own work, because of course those are different ideas—just because Tolkien said that he had an idea in mind doesn't mean that that is what the text itself means.

Matt: Sure. But you have to be aware of what effect that might have on any reader. This was news to me, even though I knew about the Semitic language connection. So, you know, it didn’t really have an effect on this particular reader, me, but I think that maybe there are people in the audience or in the readership of Lord of the Rings who might guess more easily or be predisposed to look for connections like that or—

Colin: I mean there absolutely are people like that. The Lord of the Rings has been something that a lot of White Nationalists have really latched on to.

Matt: Yes.

Colin: —because the different races of Elves and Men and Hobbits band together in order to expel the evil of Orcs, so one way of reading the story is as a race war.

Matt: Yes. That’s absolutely true. What I argued in my talk, or what I at least tried to provide some evidence for is that there are two readings that will be equally obvious to different kinds of readers in terms of race in particular. One is: you can look at the Humans and the Elves and the Dwarves who, whether they represent Jews or not, the Dwarves are not evil. They’re not Orcs. So Men and Elves and Dwarves and Ents as—you can look at those races—because that’s what they’re called—as representing a kind of unified battle against intolerance, because Sauron and Mordor are unable to tolerate all this sort of freedom and happiness in society that’s going on outside of Mordor. I mean, there’s more to it than that, obviously. It has a lot to do with power, and that’s one valid, valid reason I think where a bunch of races teaming together and sort of transcending what might logically divide them. But the other reading is, sort of, yeah, you have these quote-unquote good races teaming up against evil races, too, and the problem is, I think that it’s too easy to read, for example, Orcs or any of the evil races as people of color. And like you said... So there are a couple incidences where it’s just, [*groans*] it’s just, I wish that Tolkien had gotten, like, had appointed an editor who could have made like a 2018 version to know that like when they were in Bree, I think, to call the Black Riders, the “black men” is not gonna sound great, just—that’s not gonna sound good to, you know, modern readership. But beyond that, there is stuff that he probably should have been able to foresee. So for example, if I could mention one of his notes—this is kind of obvious from the text I think—but in one of Tolkien’s notes he actually states explicitly, “The Orcs are definitely stated to be corruptions of the ‘human’ form seen in Elves and Men... They are—or were—squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes, in fact, degraded and repulsive version of the—to Europeans—least- lovely Mongol-types.”
Colin: Woah.

Matt: [*uncomfortably*] Yes.

Colin: [*dissatisfied*] Yeah.

Matt: So he's basically saying that Elves and Men possess a more-or-less “human” form, and Orcs, with their, you know, flat noses and slant eyes, exemplify something else, something less than human or non-human. So, [*dissatisfied*] yeah.

Colin: Yeah, it sounds like he is just dehumanizing Asian people.

Matt: I mean, what if you're a reader who is, you know, not white, and you have some of these features, genetically, that he's describing. Where are you gonna feel like you fit into the universe of Middle Earth, you know? He's basically saying, like, "Oh, people would confuse you for an Orc or something!"

Colin: Yeah.

Matt: I mean, not in so many words, but yeah!

Colin: Yeah that's, that's really harsh. I think maybe we could just back up for a second to the last quote that you just read, where he says that "you have to make the different people different." The idea of race is so fundamental to the world that he creates, and that you have different groups of people who have different moral characteristics along with their appearances, and just that you can divide different humanoid beings into separate groups really has an inheritance from racial biology of early 20th century.

Matt: It absolutely does, yes! Say what you will about the frequent friendships between Elves and Dwarves and Men, but he's basically created these three different—yeah!—races that, for the most part, don't get along. They live in their own communities, they don't, you know, they're not riding the same bus as each other, they're not drinking from the same water fountain—for the most part. Of course he does have some examples like Gimli and Legolas and their amazing friendship, which I think [*sighs*] must serve some purpose insofar as, you know, showing that— He's not saying it's inevitable, for, you know— The differences between them really are stupid, and Legolas and Gimli realize that, and they're sort of this model friendship between races, I guess, and I think that's a nice thing.

Colin: Yeah, that's also a wonderful part of the stories is that you can read a very anti-racist idea in them—

Matt: You can, you absolutely can.

Colin: —of the Elves and Dwarves overcoming their prejudices and realizing that those prejudices are based on stereotypes.

Matt: Yes. I'm not going to argue at all, at any point, that The Lord of the Rings is irreconcilably problematic or racist or something, but I — Some of this stuff goes really deep! Like the Orcish stuff. I guess my problem with it is, if you're a reader and you're not white, what are you supposed to think? Or how are you supposed to feel when you read descriptions like that? So in addition to the Orcs being described as quote “Mongol”-types, the Men of the South come from some area that is south of the main action of Middle Earth, and basically we're told that they have dark skin, they wear a lot of gold, they i think paint themselves red or something, and they come from the desert or hot areas, and they fight with elephants. So I guess the only thing I can make of that is that their land is supposed to be the Africa of the Middle Earth world even though, you know, it's not named as such. And we hardly hear anything about them, except that they are allied with Sauron, and [*sighs*] there's one chapter where one of them—there's some battle going on between them and, I think, the Men of Gondor—and one of these Southern men, like a man with black skin or dark skin falls dead and Sam
finds him. And Sam is just contemplating the body of this fallen warrior, and he has this moment of insight and empathy where he's like, “Huh.” Well, I don't know if empathy is the right word, but he—Sam's thinking, “I wonder what persuaded this man to join this battle and to fight us, and to, you know— Like, I wonder what threats there were that encouraged him to join the war, like, for the evil side.” So even though Sam is admitting that this guy fought for the wrong side, he still views him as a human. I think it's unfortunate that Sam only has this thought when he's confronting a dead Southron man. Why he couldn't be thinking these things while they're still alive? And it reminded me of how whenever we hear in the news that another unarmed Black man was shot by police because they thought he had a weapon, all this sympathy goes out and it's like, oh my god how could this happen, we have this systemic problem in the police force. And yet we can never seem to preempt these things, or at least, these very real systemic problems never catch themselves ahead of time. And I actually think, unfortunately, that what happens with Sam is a really good depiction of that. Sam doesn't have any thoughts of empathy—to be fair, he is running for his life from these people—but then when he is in a state of total safety and there is no threat, then finally he says, “Huh, I wonder why he was doing this. I wonder what drove this man to fight on the wrong side.”

Colin: I think critical race theory is a really valuable tool when looking through Tolkien's work and other literatures because it allows you to look at a set of symbols that are in the literature and how different people will project what they want onto those symbols.

Matt: Absolutely, and Tolkien's symbols—Elves and Dwarves and Orcs—Tolkien contributed hugely to the codification or canonization of what exactly a fantasy Elf is and what a fantasy Dwarf is because he took them from this long Germanic tradition, and since Tolkien, so many fantasy authors have really co-opted Tolkien style Elves and Dwarves, and even Orcs, you know—what an Elf or a Dwarf looks like, how they talk, what color their hair is, whether they have beards or not, etc.

Colin: How has your relationship to The Lord of the Rings changed after working on this podcast?

Matt: Honestly I have a much shorter patience with Tolkien. It really does frustrate me to read things like “these black men that were here.” Like, c'mon! C'mon Tolkien! Why did you have to use that phrase? There are so many better ways. Why do they have to be the Black Riders? Why does everything have to be “the dark this” or “the black that?” [*beleaguered sigh*] I don't know. And I know that it is so entrenched in the English language, and most languages probably, and certainly medieval European culture is awash in this notion of light versus dark being good versus evil, but I lose my patience with it sometimes now, certainly more than I did in middle school—used to think it was cooler back then—but I lose my patience with it now and I think it bores me sometimes. It's like: so the evil land is the black land. [*sighs*] Of course. Couldn't you have thought of something, I don't know, a little more original? There are countries in the real world—so Niger, Nigeria, both names basically mean “the country of Black people” from the Latin word for “black.” The name Sudan comes from the Arabic word for “Black people.” There are real countries, real places in our world, so maybe let's not call Mordor—Mordor means “the black land,” too— Why does that have to be your name for the evil kingdom? C'mon! ...I don't know... So I guess I lose my patience more quickly with things like that, but because of the podcast I'm sticking with it, and it is worth it. I'm learning a lot about the text and about Tolkien's mythology, which I really do admire and respect even though sometimes it's tiresome to hear about what happened with the Númenóreans and the Silmarils and all that. I do really admire and respect all the work that he did in creating that world, and that really does get to me. I enjoy that. Honestly, learning to not read past the problematic stuff, but to put it on the table and consider it, and realize that problematic stuff is problematic, of course, and learning to distinguish that from the stuff that really does attract me to his writing. And there is plenty of that. It really is a skill that I have honed, that I have been subconsciously honing over the course of the podcast. So yeah, I guess that is what I would answer.

[Outro music starts]

Colin: If you enjoyed our discussion, you should definitely go listen to The Tolkien Heads. They occasionally have guests on the show, like on
episode 62, when I joined the Heads to close-read the Ride of the Rohirrim and delve into the Indigenous stereotypes that manifest in Tolkien's description of the Wildmen of the Woses. Go to thetolkienheads.com or subscribe wherever you get your podcasts from. Links to The Tolkien Heads can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website.

Crossing North is a production of the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Today's episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby. Today's music was used with permission by Kristján Hrannar Pálsson. Links to his music can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website. Visit scandinavian.washington.edu for a full transcript of this episode and to learn more about the Scandinavian Studies Department. If you are a current or prospective student, consider taking a class or declaring a major. Want to learn the languages that inspired Tolkien? Sign up for Finnish or Old Norse, or consider taking Scandinavian Mythology or the Kalevala and the Epic Tradition. You can find complete course listings for the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at scandinavian.washington.edu. Once again, that's scandinavian.washington.edu.

[Outro music ends]

SHOW NOTES

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This episode was written, edited, and produced by Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Kristian Næsby.

Listen to more of Dr. Matt Boutilier on The Tolkien Heads podcast.

Colin is a guest on Episode 62, "The Ride of the Rohirrim."

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