

George MacDonald. The Golden Key [book review]

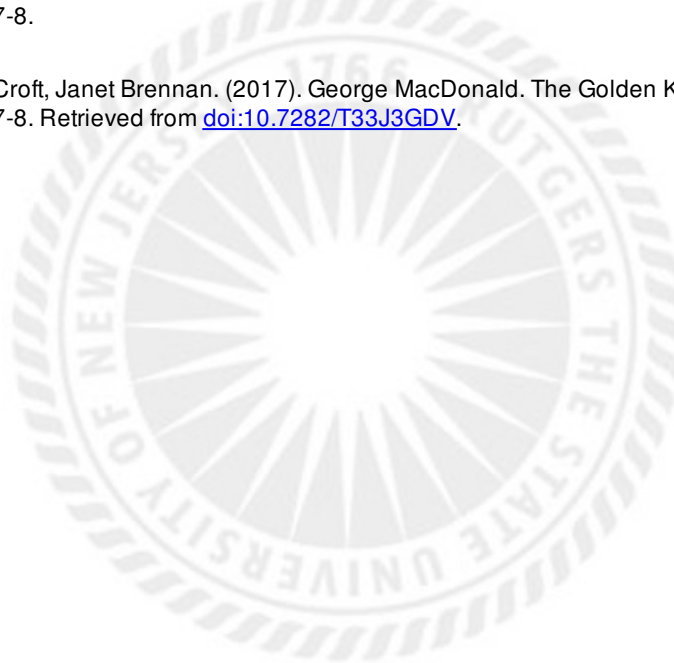
Rutgers University has made this article freely available. Please share how this access benefits you.
Your story matters. [\[https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/52093/story/\]](https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/52093/story/)

This work is the **VERSION OF RECORD (VoR)**

This is the fixed version of an article made available by an organization that acts as a publisher by formally and exclusively declaring the article "published". If it is an "early release" article (formally identified as being published even before the compilation of a volume issue and assignment of associated metadata), it is citable via some permanent identifier(s), and final copy-editing, proof corrections, layout, and typesetting have been applied.

Citation to Publisher Croft, Janet Brennan. (2017). George MacDonald. The Golden Key [book review]. *Mythprint* 54(1),
Version: 7-8.

Citation to *this* Version: Croft, Janet Brennan. (2017). George MacDonald. The Golden Key [book review]. *Mythprint* 54(1),
7-8. Retrieved from [doi:10.7282/T33J3GDV](https://doi.org/10.7282/T33J3GDV).



Terms of Use: Copyright for scholarly resources published in RUcore is retained by the copyright holder. By virtue of its appearance in this open access medium, you are free to use this resource, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. Other uses, such as reproduction or republication, may require the permission of the copyright holder.

Article begins on next page

ened Church), ending with the great Witchcraft scare (and delusion) of the days of James VI and later Cotton Mather and Justice Hathorne, on this side of the Atlantic. The story is clear and well-documented; the book is not a tract but a learned discussion, trustworthy (I believe) and for me useful in my endeavors—and I should think for the work (and learning) of others. Paperback needed.

George MacDonald. *The Golden Key: A Victorian Fairy Tale*. Illustrations by Ruth Sanderson, with an afterword by Jane Yolen. Um. B. Cerdmans, 2016. 136pp. \$16.00. Reviewed by Janet Brennan Croft.

The Golden Key, setting aside its own merits as a fairy-tale, is important in Inklings studies as a positive influence on C.S. Lewis, who said it “shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives” (qtd. 130) and called it “absolute heaven” in a letter to Arthur Greeves (*Letters* I.254). On the other hand, it was somewhat of a negative influence on J.R.R. Tolkien, who appreciated MacDonald when younger but whose attempt to write a preface to a new edition from Pantheon Books in 1964 drove him to write the “anti-G.M. tract” *Smith of Wootton Major* (“Genesis” 70) in response to what he found lacking in MacDonald’s vision of Faerie (see Fisher for a survey of Tolkien’s history of enjoying and recommending MacDonald prior to 1964). Tolkien specifically objected to MacDonald’s obvious moral allegory, for which he had a strong distaste, but on re-reading *The Golden Key* myself, I feel he might also have found MacDonald’s story-telling technique sloppy from time to time; there are indeed some barbed comments in his draft introduction about stories “good enough ‘for children’” and “silly tale[s]” through which the reader may in spite of it all catch a “glimpse of Fairy” (74). For example, on page 56 of the edition being reviewed, we are told that Mossy was given his nickname by his companions for his habit of sitting on a favorite moss-covered stone and reading for days on end. But there is no men-

tion of companions or books when we are first introduced to him in chapter one, where he appears to live alone with his great-aunt in their “little house [...] on the borders of Fairyland” (10), and his bookishness plays no further part in the story. This is the sort of niggling

detail that would undoubtedly have driven Tolkien back to revision in one of his own stories. Still, imagery from the tale stayed with Tolkien; for example, he may well have borrowed and inverted MacDonald’s plain of shadows for his glass lake filled with shapes and creatures of fire in *Smith* (28-29 in *Smith*, and mentioned as an image he remembered in his draft introduction, 72).

So while *The Golden Key* as a story may be more to the taste of some readers than others, perhaps depending on their affinity for Lewis or Tolkien, it is certainly something with which students of the Inklings should be familiar. This handsome edition is lavishly illustrated with scratchboard drawings by Ruth Sanderson that emphasize the imagery of light and dark in the story, and evoke the 1860 date of its first publication. The faces are full of expression and the fantastic elements finely rendered, especially the fairy and key motif (8-9 and 122-125). I see hints of Tenniel’s Alice and mid-century adventure novels in some drawings, and the visions Mossy and Tangle have travelling under the land from which the shadows come are appropriately misty and cloud-like (68-71).

Eventually, the agent who proposed the *Golden Key* project to Tolkien moved to Farrer, Straus and Giroux, where it was published with illustrations by Maurice Sendak and an afterword by Tolkien’s friend W.H. Auden in 1967, the same year as *Smith of Wootton Major*. A dust-jacket blurb was taken from Tolkien’s “On Fairy-Stories” (Flieger 139), which Auden also quotes in his Afterword. Sendak’s pen-and-ink drawings, heavy with cross-hatching, in many



cases illustrate the same scenes Sanderson does. They are also black and white, but are dreamier, enclosed in clearly-defined frames; the faces are less distinct and expressive, and sometimes even turned away from the reader (perhaps allowing the reader to project him or herself into the story better). Auden's afterword also quotes Lewis, and suggest that hunting for the meaning of the symbolism in this tale would be a mistake; the reader must immerse himself in MacDonald's world without an attempt to consciously interpret it.

For the scholar, an annotated or critical edition would of course be ideal, but I have not been able to locate one; perhaps here is a gap for a future scholar to fill. For general reading purposes, including gift-giving and reading aloud to children, this is a fine edition. Jane Yolen's Afterword is a useful addendum, providing a short sketch of MacDonald's life and an explanation of a few of the references. Most interesting are her three ways of reading the story: as an engrossing fairy-tale with hints of Victorian realism, as a "metaphysical Christian fairy tale" (129) with strong Romantic overtones, and as a metaphor of life as a continuous journey, one where "You must throw yourself in. There is no other way" (95).

- Fisher, Jason. "Reluctantly Inspired: George Macdonald and the Genesis of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Smith of Wootton Major*." *North Wind*, vol. 25, 2006, pp. 113-120.
- Flieger, Verlyn. "Notes." In *Smith of Wootton Major*. By J.R.R. Tolkien; ed. Verlyn Flieger. Extended ed. London: HarperCollins, 2005. 134-149.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950-1963*. HarperOne, 2007.
- MacDonald, George. *The Golden Key*. With pictures by Maurice Sendak and an Afterword by W.H. Auden. New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux; 1967.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. "Smith of Wootton Major." In *Smith of Wootton Major*. By J.R.R. Tolkien; ed. Verlyn Flieger. Extended ed. London: HarperCollins, 2005. 5-62.
- . "Genesis of the story": Tolkien's note to Clyde Kilby." In *Smith of Wootton Major*. By J.R.R. Tolkien; ed. Verlyn Flieger. Extended ed. London: HarperCollins, 2005. 69-70.

- . "Tolkien's draft introduction to *The Golden Key*." In *Smith of Wootton Major*. By J.R.R. Tolkien; ed. Verlyn Flieger. Extended ed. London: HarperCollins, 2005. 71-75.

Kel Richards. *The Sinister Student*. SPCK, 2016. 240 pp. \$6.58. Reviewed by Shannyn Jordan.

If I could be a fly on the wall of history I would chose to alight in the study where the Inklings engaged in their critique sessions. The concept of a cozy mystery (crime fiction in which sex and violence are downplayed or treated humorously, and the crime and detection take place in a small, socially intimate community) with C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien as the detectives, thrilled me beyond words. I was so excited when I started to read this book. That it opened with the group reading of the final chapter of Tolkien's *There and Back Again* was simply the icing on the cake.

Richards immediately intrigued me with his first person amalgam of Tolkien and Lewis' writing styles. Description, though sometimes tedious in length, was vibrant with Tolkien's manner. Dialogue matched Lewis' directness. His characterization of the professors was vivid and on point, for most of the plot. There were points in the story where it felt like taking a stroll with two of my favorite people from history, listening to the timber of their voices echo on the Oxford stone.

The story itself was where my problems began. When I picked up this story it promised me a "1930's Mystery." What I got was a cozy-scifi fusion with time travel (that seemed like it would barely avoid copyright infringement), a predictable murder mystery, a flat romance, and a weak religious de-

