SOFTWARE & TECH

When Was The The Hobbit Written

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Unearthing the Origins of a Classic: When Was The Hobbit Written?

Few books have captured the imagination of readers quite like J.R.R. Tolkien's **The Hobbit**. This beloved fantasy novel, which introduces the world to Bilbo Baggins, Gandalf, and the iconic dragon Smaug, has become a cornerstone of modern fantasy literature. For devoted fans and casual readers alike, a common curiosity arises: **when was The Hobbit written**? The answer is not a simple date on a calendar but a fascinating journey of creativity, inspiration, and meticulous craftsmanship that unfolded over several years. Understanding the timeline of its creation offers a deeper appreciation for the novel and the rich world it helped to birth.

The short answer to the question of **when was The Hobbit written** can be pinpointed to the mid-1930s, with the book being published in 1937. However, the story began much earlier, taking root in Tolkien's academic life and his private mythology. To fully grasp the timeline, we must look at the events that led Tolkien to put pen to paper, the writing process itself, and the revisions that shaped the story we know today. This article will explore the full narrative behind the creation of this timeless masterpiece, from its spontaneous beginnings on a blank page to its lasting legacy.

The Accidental Beginning: A Story for His Children

Unlike the meticulously planned epics of *The Silmarillion* or *The Lord of the Rings*, **The Hobbit** began almost by accident. The primary catalyst for its creation was Tolkien's role as a father to his four children: John, Michael, Christopher, and Priscilla. Tolkien was a gifted storyteller who often entertained his children with improvised tales, letters from Father Christmas, and whimsical illustrations. It was within this domestic, intimate setting that the story of a hobbit first emerged.

The most widely accepted account of the novel's conception places it in the early 1930s. While grading a stack of student examination papers during a particularly hot summer, Tolkien found himself bored. On a blank sheet of paper, he scribbled a sentence that would become one of the most famous openings in literary history: **"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."** At that moment, even Tolkien himself did not know what a hobbit was. The word was a spontaneous invention, but it triggered a creative impulse that would not be denied.

This initial spark is crucial to answering **when was The Hobbit written** in its earliest form. The initial drafts were not intended for publication. They were ad-hoc bedtime stories for his children, told in fits and starts. Tolkien would often tell a chapter, then need time to develop the next part of the adventure. This organic method gave the story a unique, conversational tone, as if a wise narrator were speaking directly to a young audience. The early adventures of Bilbo, the dwarves, and the encounter with trolls all took shape during these informal storytelling sessions.

From Oral Tale to Manuscript

The transition from oral tale to written manuscript is a key milestone in understanding **when was The Hobbit**

written. Encouraged by friends and colleagues, including C.S. Lewis, who heard early versions of the story, Tolkien decided to commit the narrative to paper. He began typing the manuscript in the early 1930s, but the progress was slow and interspersed with his heavy academic workload as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University.

It is believed that the bulk of the manuscript was completed between 1932 and 1933. This was a period when the story began to take on a life of its own. Characters became more defined, and the geography of Middle-earth started to emerge, though it was not yet the fully developed world it would later become. The narrative also began to deepen, moving beyond a simple children's adventure to include themes of luck, courage, and the moral complexities of a world filled with both greed and heroism.

Publication and the Road to the Publisher

The journey from a personal story to a published book answers the second half of the question, **when was The Hobbit written** in its final, published form. The manuscript was shown to several publishers before finding a home. It was finally accepted by George Allen & Unwin, a London publishing house. The deciding factor was a review written by Rayner Unwin, the chairman's ten-year-old son. Young Rayner was paid a shilling for his review, in which he stated that the book "would appeal to all children between the ages of 5 and 9."

This decision led to the official publication date of **September 21, 1937**. This is the definitive answer to the question of when the book was first made available to the public. The first edition was a modest print run of 1,500 copies, but it sold out quickly. The book was an immediate critical and commercial success, earning praise for its originality, its rich world-building, and its charming protagonist.

However, the timeline of writing did not end with the 1937 publication. One of the most significant aspects of the novel's history involves the revisions Tolkien made later, particularly concerning the chapter "Riddles in the Dark" and the character of Gollum. In the original 1937 edition, Gollum willingly gives the Ring to Bilbo after losing the riddle contest. However, after Tolkien began work on *The Lord of the Rings* and developed the Ring into a malevolent force of immense power, he realized this initial depiction was inconsistent. He revised the chapter to show Gollum's more desperate and treacherous nature, where he intends to use the Ring to find and kill Bilbo. This revised version was published in 1951 and is the canonical text read today.

Key Dates in the Writing Process

To provide a clear timeline, here is a summary of the major milestones in the creation of **The Hobbit**:

- 1930-1931: Tolkien scribbles the famous opening line on a student exam paper. The story begins as an improvised tale for his children.
- 1932-1933: The bulk of the first draft of the manuscript is written. The story is largely complete in its initial form.
- 1936: The completed manuscript is loaned to a friend, who shows it to a publisher. It is eventually sent to George Allen & Unwin.
- 1937: After positive feedback from the publisher's young reader, the book is accepted. It is published on September 21, 1937.
- 1951: Tolkien revises the "Riddles in the Dark" chapter to align with the darker themes of The Lord of the Rings. This becomes the definitive version of the text.

The Influence of Academic Life and Mythology

While the initial answer to **when was The Hobbit written** is rooted in the 1930s, the intellectual and creative soil from which it grew was tilled over decades. Tolkien was a philologist and a scholar of Old English and Norse mythology. His professional life directly fed his creative writing. The names of the dwarves, for instance, are taken directly from the *Völuspá*, a poem in the *Poetic Edda*. The concept of the dragon guarding a hoard of treasure is a central theme in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, which Tolkien had translated and written

extensively about.

This is not to say that **The Hobbit** is a simple retelling of ancient myths. Tolkien was a master of synthesis. He took the linguistic and mythological building blocks of Northern European legend and infused them with his own unique sense of morality, humor, and pastoral nostalgia. The hobbits themselves, specifically Bilbo, are a completely original creation. They represent the unassuming English country gentleman, thrust into a world of high adventure. This contrast between the mundane and the epic is a large part of the book's charm.

The Hobbit as a Precursor to a Legendarium

When discussing **when was The Hobbit written**, it is essential to consider its relationship to Tolkien's larger body of work. By the time he wrote **The Hobbit**, Tolkien had already been working for over a decade on the elaborate mythology that would become *The Silmarillion*. This private mythology was a collection of grand epics about the creation of the world, the rebellion of the Elves, and the wars against the dark Vala, Morgoth.

Initially, **The Hobbit** was not intended to be part of this mythology. It was a separate, simpler story. However, as Tolkien wrote, he began to incorporate elements from his legendarium. The name "Gondolin" is mentioned in the songs of the Elves, Elrond is identified as a Half-elven figure from the Elder Days, and the swords Orcrist and Glamdring are ancient weapons from the wars against Morgoth. This process of integration is why the answer to **when was The Hobbit written** is also the answer to the beginning of the connection between the two worlds. After the success of **The Hobbit**, his publisher asked for a sequel, which forced Tolkien to bridge the gap between his children's story and his epic mythology, culminating in the creation of *The Lord of the Rings* .

The Enduring Legacy of a "Children's Book"

Understanding **when was The Hobbit written** also helps us understand its unique place in literary history. Published in 1937, it arrived at a time when the world was on the brink of immense change. The book offered a form of escapism that was deeply needed. Its themes of home, adventure, and the small person making a big difference resonated with readers then and continue to do so today.

The novel has never been out of print. It has been translated into over 50 languages and has sold tens of millions of copies worldwide. Its success directly enabled the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* and later, posthumously, *The Silmarillion*. Furthermore, the question of **when was The Hobbit written** is often revisited with each new adaptation. The book has been adapted into an animated film, a stage musical, and more recently, a multi-part live-action film trilogy by Peter Jackson. These adaptations have introduced the story to new generations, ensuring that the tale of Bilbo Baggins remains a vital part of global culture.

Why the Writing Timeline Matters

For writers and fans, the timeline of the novel's creation is inspirational. It shows that great works often begin not with a grand plan, but with a simple, curious idea. The fact that the answer to **when was The Hobbit written** spans several years of refinement demonstrates the importance of patience and revision. Tolkien did not rush his story. He allowed it to grow organically, to change, and to deepen in meaning. He was not afraid to go back and revise his work even after publication to ensure consistency and artistic truth.

1. The Spark of Inspiration (1930): The single sentence about a hobbit in a hole. A moment of pure, unplanned creativity.
2. The Period of Growth (1932-1936): The story expands from a bedtime tale into a complex narrative. The characters of Bilbo, Thorin, and Gollum are fully fleshed out.
3. The Moment of Publication (1937): The book enters the world. It is defined as a children's book, but its appeal is universal.
4. The Act of Refinement (1951): The author revisits his work to ensure it fits into a larger, more complex

universe. This shows a commitment to the integrity of the world he built.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the concise answer to the question **when was The Hobbit written** is that it was conceived in the early 1930s and published in 1937. However, the full story of its creation is far more nuanced. It was a labor of love that began with a moment of whimsy, grew through years of oral storytelling and careful drafting, and was finally polished to perfection for publication. The timeline reflects the organic, almost accidental nature of true genius. **The Hobbit**was not written in a single burst of inspiration but was nurtured over time, much like Bilbo Baggins himself grows into his role as a burglar and a hero. Today, standing as a timeless bridge between children's literature and epic fantasy, the story

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