Introduction
An Intellectual Dilemma

I first read J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in high school. A group of my friends became enchanted by the book, and they started giving names to each other based on the fictional characters. I decided to read the book in self-defense—I didn't like feeling left out—and it wasn't long before I came completely under its spell. I enjoyed Hobbit dinner parties, trembled in the presence of the Black Riders, adored Rivendell, hated Orcs, and wondered where the Entwives could have gone.

I couldn't put the book down. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I read more and more slowly as I neared the conclusion because I did not want it to end. It was wonderfully written. Page after page of it was fresh, alive, and magical.

When my friends found out I'd read it too, they dubbed me Galadriel. I liked that; she was an elf, serene, beautiful, happy, "wise and fearless and fair" (*Fellowship* 356). She was pure in heart, and so she was able to resist the wickedness of Sauron's magic ring. I liked that a lot.

I read more Tolkien, taking up *The Hobbit* next, then "Leaf by Niggle," then I dove back into *The Lord of the Rings* because nothing else I knew had such power to take me out of this world and immerse me so completely in another. Tolkien's creative power was so compelling that I didn't just *read* about Middle-earth; it was as if every time I opened the book, I went there. Throughout my years in high school, I visited again and again.

I decided to find out more about the author of these books, and I was delighted to learn that Tolkien had been close friends with other important writers. Through his work, I discovered C. S. Lewis, and more magical worlds were opened to me: Narnia, Malacandra, Perelandra, and Glome. My own creative imagination resonated with every Lewis book I read.

Then, looking for more of the same, more of the kind of books I like to read, I picked up *The Place of the Lion* by Charles Williams. Nothing I had

ever read prepared me for such a complex, compelling supernatural thriller. I had picked up the book innocently; I finished it wide-eyed with awe.

As I read more about these writers, I discovered Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams met regularly to talk about their writing. Other writers participated, including Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, R. E. Havard, David Cecil, Nevill Coghill, and Warren Hamilton Lewis, C. S. Lewis's brother. Many of them were Oxford dons. They read their manuscripts aloud to one another, encouraged and criticized one another, and revised their books based on the feedback they received: Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings,* Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet,* and Williams's *All Hallows' Eve* were all created in this context. They gathered at different times in different places—notably in Lewis's rooms at Magdalen College, Oxford, and in the Eagle and Child, an Oxford pub—and they held regular meetings for about seventeen years. They called themselves the Inklings.

I started to research the nature and the activities of the group. To my surprise, most scholars claimed that these writers had no influence on each other. Humphrey Carpenter, who has written a book-length biography of the Inklings, is most insistent on this point. He writes, "It must be remembered that the word 'influence,' so beloved of literary investigators, makes little sense when talking about their association with each other" (*Inklings* 160). And in an almost ominous tone, Gareth Knight issues this warning: "We have to be careful however not to attribute influence where none existed" (4).

Other scholars take great pains to emphasize that these men were very different from one another. Mark Hillegas, for example, stresses that "each writer is excellent in his own fashion, unique in style and technique" (xii). William Ready states, "The differences between these men are far more important than the appearance of their likenesses," and he ends his evaluation of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams by asserting, "Trio they were not" (37, 38).

Why such forthright denial of influence? Why such adamant insistence on individuality? I was mystified. Tolkien, Lewis, Williams and the other Inklings met regularly, read their works aloud to one another, discussed and critiqued each manuscript, revised and rewrote their work, and people say they didn't have any influence on each other? That didn't sound plausible.

I dug a little deeper and found more of the same. Some writers discussed the Inklings as a group; others focused on only one of the authors. The claim I found most frequently was that no one had any influence on J. R. R. Tolkien. Knight, for example, writes, "Inklings or not, Tolkien would probably have gone on to do what he did anyway, as a man writing from great depths within himself" (5). In *Imaginary Worlds,* Lin Carter writes, "Whatever criticism the Inklings offered, Tolkien paid no attention," and, stronger still, the Inklings were "unable to influence the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* in any way" (112, 113).

And in *Tolkien: A Look Behind the Lord of the Rings,* he writes, "Though they no doubt discussed it and commented upon it, they did not, apparently, have any appreciable influence on the trilogy as it took shape." He adds with sweeping emphasis, "Everyone concerned seems quite adamant on this point" (18).

Carpenter states the case more fervently, and he considers Williams as well as Tolkien. He writes, "Tolkien and Williams owed almost nothing to the other Inklings, and would have written everything they wrote had they never heard of the group" (*Inklings* 160). And John D. Rateliff agrees: "I think Carpenter is right in saying Tolkien and Williams had no real influence on each other's work" ("'Something'" 51). More recent scholarship continues in the same vein. Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, for example, claim, "One would *never be tempted to suggest* that the Inklings' reading and critiquing could be appropriately labeled 'collaboration'" (150, emphasis added).[1]

Carpenter, Knight, Hillegas, Carter, Rateliff, Fredrick, McBride, and others generally base their conclusions on statements made by the Inklings themselves. One of the most famous is this declaration by C. S. Lewis: "No one ever influenced Tolkien—you might as well try to influence a bandersnatch" (*Letters* 481).[2] Lewis apparently made his irritation very clear to Tolkien, for Tolkien explained, "Once he said, 'It's no use trying to influence you. You're uninfluenceable!'" (qtd. in Plimmer and Plimmer 2). In a letter written late in his life, Lewis concludes, "I don't think Tolkien influenced me, and I am certain I didn't influence him" (qtd. in Kilby, *Tolkien* 76).

But Lewis is not the only Inkling to deny Inkling influence. When Barfield found out that Lewis had called him his greatest unofficial teacher, he laughed, explaining, "What am I supposed to have taught him? He continues to deny everything I say!" (*Owen Barfield* 150). Tolkien says of Charles Williams, "I do not think we influenced one another at all! Too 'set,' and too different" (*Letters* 209). Robert E. Havard, an Inkling who faithfully attended the weekly meetings, dismisses the notion of influence: "I don't think any of us were much affected by the criticism or altered what had been written."[3] He also downplays any suggestion of group cohesion or group identity. Havard claims, "We really had no corporate existence. In my view we were simply a group of C. S. L.'s wide circle of friends who lived near enough to him to meet together fairly regularly" (qtd. in Carpenter, *Inklings* 161).

The members of the Inklings met in one form or another for more than forty years. Despite this lengthy and substantial interaction, the members of the group and the scholars who study them seem unanimous in their insistence that the Inklings were nothing more than an informal association of friends.

Yet common sense suggests that these men would not have continued to read and critique each other's manuscripts if doing so had not been fruitful

and influential. Common sense also suggests that the members of any long-standing group are bound to change each other.

Having wrestled with these statements by Inklings scholars and by the Inklings themselves, I decided to see how the members of other writing groups addressed this question of mutual influence. I read about the Bloomsbury Group, the Transcendentalists, the Brideshead Generation, the Lost Generation. As I considered these accounts, I was struck by how often the members gratefully acknowledged the help they received and how readily scholars took influence for granted.[4]

I looked further, considering scholarly research on creativity, collaborative circles, and composition theory and rhetorical processes. It was clear from all of these research areas that formal and informal writing groups are quite common, and that they thrive in academic and non-academic settings. And over and over participants and observers alike comment upon the extent to which formal and informal groups changed the writers who took part in them.

My own experience confirmed this. When I have participated as a member of a writing group, I have always gained a great deal from the experience. In fact, even when I submit my work to just one reader, it makes a difference. I need the feedback and comments of others in order to shape my text and sharpen my meaning. I rely upon the encouragement that comes when someone is interested in what I have to say. And I genuinely appreciate the criticisms and the disagreements, for even if I don't change my position, I change the emphasis, proportion, or support for my argument to make my point clearer in the face of objections.

My experience in writing groups also confirms my belief that anticipation shapes the creation of my text. When I write with a particular reader in mind, I make changes, large and small. I find myself anticipating questions, bracing against challenges, accommodating interests. In short, if I know David will be reading my story, I will write more and more with David's priorities in mind. If I know Linda will be editing my work, I become particularly alert to the mistakes that catch her eye. If I know Mike will ask how the project is coming along, I am more likely to be motivated and stay on task. Having interested, thoughtful readers has invariably transformed my own writing.

This was my dilemma. Considering my own experience as a writer, my research on composition and the creative process, and my reading about other writing groups, the emphatic denial of influence expressed by Inklings scholars and by the Inklings themselves just didn't make any sense to me. This book is the result of trying to grapple with that tension: the persistent claims that the Inklings did *not* influence each other and my sense that they *must* have.

Did J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, R. E. Havard, David Cecil, Nevill Coghill, Warren Lewis, and the other Inklings influence each other? In what ways? To what extent? What is the evidence? And what are the larger implications for the study of creativity and community? That is the story I tell in these pages.

NOTES

1. Fredrick and McBride deny that collaboration is a valid way to label the interaction of these authors (150). In the pages that follow, I assert that the Inklings did work collaboratively.

2. The Bandersnatch is a mythical beast introduced in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky."

> Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
> The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
> Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
> The frumious Bandersnatch! (134)

This is the first mention of the Bandersnatch in Carroll's book. However, as Linda S. Spitser has pointed out, Lewis's comment refers to an incident later in Carroll's text (personal correspondence 19 July 2004). When Alice is out of breath from running with the White King and asks him to "stop a minute," he replies, "A minute goes by so fearfully quick. You might as well try to stop a Bandersnatch!" (202).

3. Oral history interview with R. E. Havard, conducted by Lyle Dorsett for the Marion E. Wade Center (26 July 1984), page 20.

4. See, for example, S. P. Rosenbaum's study of Virginia Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant et al. in *The Bloomsbury Group;* Carlos Baker's study of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and others in *Emerson among the Eccentrics* (1997); Humphrey Carpenter's study of John Betjeman, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and friends in *The Brideshead Generation* (1990); and Noel Riley Fitch's study *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation* (1985). Other useful works include Carpenter's study of Ernest Hemingway, Robert McAlmon, Kay Boyle, and others in *Geniuses Together* (1987); Beach's description of her interaction with James Joyce, Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, André Gide, Ezra Pound, Alice B. Toklas, D. H. Lawrence, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and others in *Shakespeare and Company* (1991); Nicholas Delbanco's study of Joseph Conrad, Stephen Crane, Ford Madox Ford, Henry James, H. G. Wells et al. in *Group Portrait* (1982); and Michael Farrell's important overview of six creative groups in *Collaborative Circles* (2001).