

From Book to Film

A One Ring Circus

Unless you've been living in Gollum's cave, you're probably aware that before *The Lord of the Rings* was a trilogy of films, it was a set of books.

J.R.R. Tolkien became a popular author quite by accident when *The Hobbit*, a story he had written for his children, came by chance to the publishing firm George Allen & Unwin. It was published in 1937 and became an instant classic, leading fans (and the publisher) to ask for a sequel. After many years of hard work (and procrastination), Tolkien finished *The Lord of the Rings*, and it was published in three volumes in 1954 and 1955.

By the time of Tolkien's death in 1973, the books had become popular enough to capture the attention of the film industry. Hollywood didn't understand the books, of course, but saw dollar signs in the property, and various studios looked into the possibility of a film adaptation. Ralph Bakshi, a director and Tolkien fan, thought three animated films were the way to go, and he successfully got the rights into the hands of producer Saul Zaentz, with whom he had worked before. However, a trilogy was an ambitious idea, and Bakshi was quickly asked to make it two films. Despite deadline pressure, Bakshi delivered Part One on time, but that's about all that went well. The distributor, United Artists, figured more people would want to see the whole *Lord of the Rings* than half of it, so they dropped "Part One" out of the title and marketed the film as if it were the complete story. In 1978 it hit the theaters, and the duped audiences made Denethor look like a happy guy by comparison. Meanwhile, Zaentz decided not to go through with Part Two, forcing Bakshi to spend the next three decades answering questions about why he didn't finish what he started.

However, as one director's quest ended, another began. During the film's run at the Old Plaza Theatre in Wellington, New Zealand, a curly-haired seventeen-year-old was introduced to Middle-earth, and



Ralph Bakshi (left) and Saul Zaentz (right) worked together to make an animated adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. (Victoria Bakshi Yudis)

shortly afterward the young man bought a copy of *The Lord of the Rings* featuring the film's tie-in cover art. His name was Peter Jackson, and a couple decades later he would become an established writer and director in the film industry while simultaneously witnessing a change in the business. Back when Bakshi made his film — and throughout the '80s — if films needed special or visual effects they had to use an expensive, experienced company, or the effects would look silly next to *Star Wars* and the other big budget films. (You can see why Bakshi, who didn't have a lot of money to spend, bypassed the problem by using animation.) Furthermore, the effects were limited by both physics and the ingenuity of these contracted workers, and writers were forced to consider this when writing scripts. However, in the early 1990s, Jackson saw that digital technology was about to change this. Effects were moving into a new realm, that of hardware and software. In 1993, Jackson bought a computer, cofounded his own effects house, Weta Digital, and began preparing scripts with his own company in mind.