

From Excalibur to Andúril: wielding magic swords

Start date 21st April 2023**End date**23rd April 2023**Venue** Madingley Hall
Madingley
Cambridge
CB23 8AQ**Tutors** Dr John Lennard and**Course code**

2223NRX028

Magnus Sigurdsson Hardradi**For further information contact**inteng@ice.cam.ac.uk

Tutor biography

John Lennard is a Panel Tutor for ICE. He was formerly a Fellow of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and Professor of British and American Literature at the University of the West Indies–Mona, in Jamaica. He has published on practical criticism, punctuation history, Shakespeare, Faulkner, Paul Scott, Nabokov, Tolkien, and widely on genre fiction.

Two practical sessions and a shared discussion session will also be contributed by Magnus Sigurdsson Hardradi, Master Armourer and swordsmith.

Course programme

Friday

Please plan to arrive between 16:30 and 18:30. You can meet other course members in the Terrace Bar which opens at 18:15. Tea and coffee making facilities are available in the study bedrooms.

19:00 Dinner

20:30 – 22:00 Session 1: What's in a Sword? (Dr John Lennard)

22:00 Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

Saturday

07:30 Breakfast (for residents only)

09:00 – 10:30 Session 2: Excalibur in Malory and T H White (Dr John Lennard)

10:30 Coffee

11:00 – 12:30 Session 3: Narsil, Andúril, and Other Blades of Middle-earth
(Dr John Lennard)

13:00 Lunch

14:00 – 16:00 Free time

16:00 Tea

16:30 – 18:00 Session 4: Forgework: how swords are made* (Magnus Sigurdsson)

18:00 – 18:30 Free time

18:30 Dinner

20:00 – 21:30 Session 5: The fighter's perspective: the power of the sword
(Discussion session: Magnus Sigurdsson and Dr John Lennard)

21:30 Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

Sunday

07:30 Breakfast (for residents only)

09:00 – 10:30 Session 6: Wielding long sharp things safely (handling session)
(Magnus Sigurdsson)

10:30 Coffee

11:00 – 12:30 Session 7: Deconstructing Magical Swords: Pullman and Bujold
(Dr John Lennard)

12:45 Lunch

- Depending on the weather, this may be a practical demonstration, or delivered via film footage of sword-making.

The course will disperse after lunch

Course syllabus

Aims:

The course will allow you to:

1. Understand the historical reasons for the very high cost and fetishisation of swords;
2. Trace in outline the magical sword from Excalibur to Andúril;
3. Explore recent fantasy deconstructions of the magical sword.

Content:

The course begins with a practical question: What's in a sword? The answers include not only iron, steel, and the materials of the hilt and pommel, but a considerable anterior industry providing raw iron, complex tools, and huge quantities of charcoal: good swords were and are as costly as luxury cars, and much of the fetishisation of them as inherited and violently practical objects initially arises from how advanced a technological work a good sword is.

In the second and third sessions, we will look at the emergence and tale of Excalibur, and the lore that accretes around it, in Malory and, rather differently, T H White. That in turn was one source that informs Tolkien's major blade in *The Lord of the Rings*, Narsil, re-forged as Andúril; we will also consider other magical blades in Middle-earth, including Sting and the blade of Westernesse that Merry uses so tellingly on the Witch-King of Angmar.

The fifth session centres on discussion around the fighter's perspective, both in real terms and from the film-producers' angle. Historically, how have swords developed, and how have myth and 'magic' developed around them? And what of their counterpart, armour, and the other weapons present on historical battlefields?

The fourth and sixth sessions are practical ones with Magnus Sigurdsson Hardradi, using (if weather permits) a portable forge, or talking to film-footage of Magnus forging if not, so students can see what is truly involved in hammering red-hot metal into the desired shape; and, using replica weapons, discover **carefully** why balance of both body and sword matters, back-scabbards are not a good idea, and some swords have very particular shapes.

- The forge session at least will necessarily be outside, so please dress appropriately.
- Health and safety considerations will be paramount, but sensible behaviour is required: even practice blades can do damage if people are careless.
- Photographs may be taken *only* with explicit permission.

The final session will consider some more recent variations on and deconstructions of the topos, Philip Pullman's *Subtle Knife*, largely a narrative convenience, and Lois McMaster Bujold's *The Sharing Knife*, a far more radical challenge to the mystique of the magical sword.

Presentation of the course:

Each literary session will have 35–40 minutes of formal instruction, with PowerPoint images, followed by open discussion.

The practical sessions will be organised as necessary for health and safety, but students will be allowed as much hands-on experience as is practicable. Please note that the timing of these session may necessarily vary from the formal schedule.

As a result of the course, within the constraints of the time available, students should be able to:

1. Understand the historical value and fetishisation of swords;
2. Analyse connections between underlying fact and narrative fantasies about swords;
3. Understand more fully Tolkien's uses of magical swords; and
4. Read contemporary versions of magical swords with far more insight into the trope and its reality.

Reading and resources list

Listed below are texts that might be of interest should you wish to supplement your learning on the course.

Author	Title	Publisher and date
Sir Thomas Malory	<i>Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript</i>	Oxford World's Classics 1998
T. H. White	<i>The Sword in the Stone</i>	Collins 1938
Philip Pullman	<i>The Subtle Knife</i>	Scholastic 1997
Lois McMaster Bujold	<i>The Sharing Knife: Beguilement</i>	Eos 2006
	<i>The Sharing Knife: Legacy</i>	Eos 2007
	<i>The Sharing Knife: Passage</i>	Eos 2008
	<i>The Sharing Knife: Horizon</i>	Eos 2009

None are essential reading, but students familiar with the literary material will get more from the course. All books listed are available in digital editions.