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Martin Freeman: 'The Hobbit' finds its Bilbo Baggins

Oct. 22, 2010 | 3:35 p.m.

Let's hope actor **Martin Freeman** is prepared to attend Comic-Con for the rest of his life.

With the news that Freeman has snagged the role of **Bilbo Baggins** in **Peter Jackson's** two-part adaptation of "The Hobbit," the 39-year-old has earned himself a standing invite to any and all fantasy-fan conventions this side of Middle Earth. More than the Bilbo role, too, Freeman has established fanboy cred with his work in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" and "Sherlock," the modern-day television reworking of **Arthur Conan Doyle's** iconic sleuth, which features Freeman in the **Dr. Watson** role.



Martin Freeman (Gareth Cattermole/Getty Images)

Freeman's confirmation as Bilbo has received universal praise, and rightly so. He brings a charismatic frisson to the role, just as **Elijah Wood** did with his spot-on inhabiting of the **Frodo** part. It just *feels* right. Bilbo is middle-aged and set in his ways and certainly *not* looking for an adventure. ("Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner!") And yet he has decency and reserves of daring

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that prove the making of him; Freeman's wry, everyman appeal as **"The Office"** drone **Tim** fits that description perfectly.

Numerous other actors were announced, principally the group of dwarves that Bilbo joins in the quest of **Erebor** to reclaim a dragon's hoard stolen from their people. As with **"The Lord of the Rings,"** many of the parts are filled by little-known actors.

A quick rundown:

* **Thorin Oakenshield**, the imposing if long-winded leader of the dwarves, will be played by **Richard Armitage**, a regular on the UK spy series **"MI-5."** In the upcoming **"Captain America: The First Avenger,"** Armitage plays **Heinz Kruger**, a Nazi spy and key early foe of the superhero.

* As the cheerful young fellows **Kili** and **Fili** (the **Merry** and **Pippin** of this tale), Jackson has chosen **Aidan Turner** (the vampire **Mitchell** in U.K. series **"Being Human"**) and **Robert Kazinsky** (the tempestuous **Sean Slater** of **"EastEnders"**).

* **Graham McTavish** (a Russian baddie on **"24"** and cast member on one season of sci-fi comedy **"Red Dwarf,"** appropriately enough) will play **Dwalin**.

* **John Callen** (numerous voice roles, including two **"Power Rangers"** series) is **Oin**, rather handy at lighting fires.

* **Stephen Hunter** (a brief turn on **"ER"**-like hospital drama **"All Saints"**) has the role of the fat, sleepy, generally clueless **Bombur**.

* **Mark Hadlow** (voice work in **"Meet the Feebles"** and a small role in Jackson's **"King Kong"**) is **Dori**, the stout dwarf who drops Bilbo in the tunnels of the Misty Mountains and loses him, thus setting up Bilbo's meeting with **Gollum** and the One Ring.

* **Peter Hambleton** (regular work on New Zealand TV, including a turn on **"The Strip,"** a series about a female lawyer who chucks it all to open a strip club!) is **Gloin**.

* **Ian McKellen** and **Andy Serkis** return as **Gandalf** and **Gollum**. Oddly, the Hollywood Reporter suggests that the role of **Elrond** needs to be cast, when surely **Hugo Weaving** will reprise his role as well.

More juicy roles have yet to be officially announced, including the **Goblin King (Alan Cumming?)**, the shape-shifter **Beorn** (sorry, **Robbie Coltrane**, one fantasy series is enough) and the dour **Bard the Bowman**. Surely **Jonathan Rhys Meyers** would be an ideal Elf in there somewhere? Numerous names like **David Tennant** have been bandied about, often more out of fan frenzy than any particular knowledge about Jackson's leanings.

Perhaps the biggest remaining role is the voice of the wily dragon **Smaug**. **Bill Nighy** has been bruited about and that seems so ideal you can't help but imagine him bantering with Bilbo as they compete in a duel of wits. (Plus, it would be a reunion of sorts since he and Freeman both appeared in **"Love Actually"** and Nighy played **Slartibartfast** in **"Hitchhiker's Guide."**) Add in Nighy's turns in **"Shaun of the Dead,"** two of the **"Pirates of the Caribbean"** films and **"Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1"** and it appears that he has one of those lifetime passes to Comic-Cons as well.

Sean Connery would be fitting as **Smaug**, since he reportedly turned down the role of Gandalf. Yet, he's already done a dragon (remember the **Dennis Quaid**-starrer **"DragonHeart"**?) and is all but retired. On the other hand, Connery has done some voice work in recent years, so it's not *completely* out of the question. **Stephen Fry** (another name mentioned repeatedly for a role) would be a delicious possibility as Smaug and especially welcome to the U.K. kiddies who have grown up hearing his delightful audio book readings of the "Harry Potter" series.

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In any case, most directors will tell you that casting is at least half the battle in making a great movie, so Jackson had a big decision to make. Even more than Frodo, Bilbo is front and center throughout "The Hobbit." Freeman must shoulder a burden as daunting as possession of the One Ring but he surely goes into it knowing that the fans are eager for the epic adventure ahead.

– Michael Giltz

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Jason Isaacs [recently seen as "Lucius Malfoy"] as Thranduil, King of the Forest Elves, and father of Legolas.
Already painted in the role: <http://www.thranduil.net/mirkwood1.jpg>
You can see the strong "family resemblance".

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Brian Blessed as Beorn.

And although Christopher Lee already did Saruman, his voice is quite flexible enough to do a convincingly reptilian Smaug as well -- and who better? He's a long-time devoted Tolkien fan and reciter.

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Geoff Boucher always wanted to be a mild-mannered reporter working for a major metropolitan newspaper ... or maybe a wookiee. He came to The Times in 1991 and covered crime, politics and music before becoming the paper's go-to geek. His legion of super contributors include Dawn Chmelewski, Ben Fritz, Lisa Fung, John Horn, Susan King, Chris Lee, Gina McIntyre, Jevon Phillips, Scott Sandell, and Steve Zeitchik.

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