

Book Review of *The Soul of the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by Gene Veith

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Gene Veith's book, *The Soul of the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is a helpful introduction to the novel. Its predominant strength is in the second section on "The Fantasy Wars," where Veith takes on critics of Lewis, particularly Phillip Pullman. Here are some interesting insights given in this book:

- The Chronicles of Narnia are not allegories, but they do have an "allegorical core." For *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (LWW) this core is the sacrifice of Aslan on the Stone Table for the sins of Edmund. (p. 40)
- Some Christians object to LWW having a witch as part of the story. However, it is important to ask the questions: Does the story make us want to be like the witch? Or, does the story make us want to reject witchcraft and all it stands for? (p. 54)
- Note Edmund's relativistic philosophy. He asks, "How do we know the faun was on the right side? How do we know the queen is really a witch? How do we know she is on the wrong side? Who are we to say who is right and who is wrong? (p. 63-64)
- Veith quotes Michael Ward to the effect that ". . . although Aslan apparently dies only for Edmund, it is conceded in later books that he died for the whole of Narnia, for if Edmund had been lost, the prophecy about the four thrones could not have been fulfilled, and the White Witch would have ruled forever . . ." (p. 115)
- Some object to reading fiction because it is made up and not real. Christian author Philip Sidney wrote in the sixteenth century, "To lie is to affirm that to be true which is false," but a fiction writer affirms nothing, "and therefore he never lieth." Fiction, Sidney affirms, is a "profitable invention" because it both teaches and delights. It teaches by delighting. (p. 132)
- Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim has found fairy tales useful in treating trauma and abuse. The "scary parts" anticipate children's actual fears and show how through overcoming trials and temptations with courage and virtue, they can live happily ever after. (p. 138-139)
- Veith believes that the popularity of the Harry Potter series (HP) can be attributed in part to "imagination deprivation." It is a powerful indictment of our educational system where children's imaginations are imprisoned within a politically correct curricula, emphasizing depressing social problems with a bleak materialistic system of thought. (p. 145)

- LWW contrasts with HP in that in LWW the witch is the villain, whereas in HP witches are heroes. The HP glorify the British boarding school, whereas the Narnia series consistently shows its problems. (Lewis had negative experiences in such schools.) HP is about an escape to school while Narnia is about an escape from school. In HP Muggles are the materialists who don't believe in magic. Narnia is also opposed to such a view of life that excludes the supernatural. (p. 153-159)
- Philip Pullman, author of *The Dark Materials*, is anti-Lewis and anti-Narnia. He is a militant, hostile atheist. This is shown in his over-the-top rhetoric, "I hate the Narnia books, and I hate them with a deep and bitter passion." Thus, Pullman opines that Narnia [horrors] is "one of the most ugly and poisonous things I have ever read, with no shortage of nauseating drivel." He believes this, in part, because he sees racism and sexism in the books. [See other book reviews on these questions.] The quick answer to the racist charge is that the dark-skinned Calormenes are not Muslims (they worship multiple gods) and one of the most noble characters, Eneth, is a Calormene, where the witch in LWW is "white." In answer to the "sexist" charge, note that Lucy is the most prominent and most spiritually mature character in Narnia. (p. 165-166)
- Pullman is on the side of Satan trying to liberate himself from God. He is very anti-God and anti-Christian. His *Dark Materials* is an attempt to appeal to readers and reach them for the atheist perspective. Pullman rejects all hierarchy. While Pullman portrays himself as a rebel, he is actually part of the secular establishment. (Note that the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* recently quoted with approval his caustic language about Lewis and Narnia.)
- Although Pullman urges moral responsibility and kindness, it is difficult to see how this can be consistent with his absolute freedom from any constraints or hierarchy and it is not explained why we ought to act in such a way given his worldview.

Overall, Veith's book is a helpful addition to the literature on Lewis particularly placing LWW within a cultural context with its currents and counter-currents. It also shows how hostile people can be to anything that hints of Christ.