

Dr. Art Lindsley
Into the Wardrobe
Book review

Into the Wardrobe: C.S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles, (San Francisco: Josey Bass, 2005) by David Downing

David Downing has established himself as one of the best C.S. Lewis scholars. His books, *Planets in Peril* (on the space trilogy) and *The Most Reluctant Convert*, are excellent and have received widespread recognition. Likewise, this present volume does not disappoint. It demonstrates the spiritual, moral, psychological, and literary depth of the Chronicles of Narnia. In *Into the Wardrobe*, Downing provides not only a survey of the Narnia Chronicles, but an exploration into the sources of C.S. Lewis's ideas, names, terminology, and appeal. Some of the helpful insights in this work include:

- One of Lewis's cousins recalled the wardrobe in "Jack's" Belfast home. She remembered the children climbing into the wardrobe in the dark to listen to "Jack's" adventure stories. This same wardrobe was moved to C.S. Lewis's home at Oxford and now resides in the Wade Center at Wheaton College. (p. 4)
- You can hear many echoes of Lewis's childhood life in his writings. Lizzie Endicott, "Jack's" nurse, was deeply loved. Nurse and nursery in Lewis's works inevitably have a positive connotation. For example, in one of his essays Lewis writes: "Unless we return to the crude and nursery-like belief in objective values, we perish." (p. 5)
- Writing about his mother's death (at age nine), he says that he and his brother Warren were "two frightened urchins huddled for warmth in a bleak world." (p. 11)
- As Lewis's books became popular, he created a charitable fund in which he placed two-thirds of his royalties (I believe the other third was for taxes.) (p. 23)
- Lewis sent a draft of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to friend and fellow Inkling, Owen Barfield. Barfield's wife Maud was concerned that kids might lock themselves into wardrobes, so Lewis gave five warnings in the book to prevent them doing so. After the story was published, a little boy in Oxford took an axe and chopped a hole in the back of his family's wardrobe trying to find Narnia. (p. 35)
- C.S. Lewis was drawn to "Northerness" (Norse and Icelandic mythology), so one of his characters, Reepicheep, is drawn to Easternness." (p. 47)
- Lewis told Walter Hooper that he considered his favorite and most successful characters from Narnia—Reepicheep and Puddleglum. (p. 53)

- Puddleglum was likely patterned after family gardener, Fred Paxford. (p. 53)
- There are parallels to the Trinity in Narnia. When Shasta (from *The Horse and His Boy*) asks Aslan who he is, he gets the answer “Myself” three times. Aslan is described in the *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as the son of the Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. (p. 70)
- Lewis’s concept of character demonstrates that every moral choice moves us in a particular direction. Good choices strengthen resolve for further good choices, while bad choices tend to lead to further bad choices. (Note Edmund in LWW.) Lewis writes that “rebellion of the will” leads to “fogging of the intelligence.” (p. 93)
- Lewis defined the Renaissance as “an imaginary entity responsible for anything a modern writer approves of in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.” He considered two titles for a series of lectures he was going to give at Cambridge, “Absence of the Renaissance” and “What Was Happening While the Renaissance Was Not Taking Place.” He argued that “dead” civilizations (prior to the “rebirth”) do not produce classics such as the King Arthur tales, the works of Dante, or cathedrals such as Chartres or Canterbury. (p. 107)
- In the Narnia stories Lewis invented more than 200 characters with names drawn from Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, Old English, Norse, and Celtic. He used names drawn from every letter of the alphabet (except “X”). Downing explores the derivations of many of the names.
- Lewis defended the violence portrayed in Narnia. Among other things, he argued that we live in a world of “death, violence, wounds, and adventure, heroism and cowardices, good and evil.” He thought it better to deal with the darker side of life, to show children that light can overcome darkness and heroic action can defeat evil. (p. 154)
- Some have charged Lewis with sexist attitudes because of his portrayals of evil queens, a misguided headmistress, and so on. Critics often fail to note “male malefactors” such as Uncle Andrew, Miraz, Sopespian, Glozelle, Gumpas, Pug, and Shift the Ape. Although Lewis did work in a largely male world, he was not afraid of strong women—he married one. Lewis was universally liked and respected by women who knew him. It is often the villains in Narnia that make sexist remarks (p. 156-158)
- Sometimes Lewis is accused of racism because of his portrayal of the Calormenes in Narnia. One author thinks that this contributes to the “demonization of Islam.” However, this is mistaken. Islam is monotheistic, whereas the Calormenes have “gods” such as Tash, Azaroth, and Zardeenah. Tash is similar to an evil spirit appearing in *The Thousand and One Nights*, not to Allah. Lewis is demonizing demons not Islam. When Nikabrik calls Dr. Cornelius a “half and halfer,”

Trumpkin tells him to keep quiet as a “creature can’t help its ancestry.” A couple of the heroes of Narnia are Calormenes—Aravis and Emeth.

There are many other insights into Narnia and our own lives in this insightful work.