

Dr. Art Lindsley

Book Review

*The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis*

By Alan Jacobs (San Francisco: Harper) 2005

Alan Jacobs' new biography of C.S. Lewis is a fascinating study weaving together his life and writings. It is a great addition to the fast growing literature on Lewis. It is beautifully written and always interesting, at many points shedding new light on aspects of Lewis's life. Each chapter is titled with a quote about Lewis - all but one from Jack (C.S. Lewis) himself. When an event in Jack's life relates to something later in his writings, Jacobs carefully draws parallels and connections. As the title suggests, an important goal is to show what sort of person wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia*. There are many helpful insights in this book; here are a few for you to consider:

- J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books, "adored" the Narnia books when a child. (p. xi)
- One of Jacobs' central ideas in this book is that Lewis had a "willingness to be enchanted." (p. xxi)
- Although Lewis drew on both reason and imagination, he insists that the "imaginative man in me is older." (p. xiv)
- Lewis was a Narnian long before he wrote the books. (p. xxv)
- Lewis's father, Albert (after her death), wrote that his wife was "as good a woman, wife and mother as God has ever given to man." (p. 9)
- Lewis loved to go for long walks. There are also some long hikes in the Narnia books.
- His tutor, Kirk, wrote of Jack that, "He has read more classics than any boy I ever had – or indeed I might add than any I ever heard of, unless it be an Addison or Landor or Macaulay. These are people we read of, but I have never met any . . . He is the most brilliant translator of Greek plays I have ever met." (p. 59)
- Jack never passed his math entrance exams for Oxford. If he had not been exempted from them as a returning serviceman, he might never have attended a university at all. (p. 66)
- In May 1921 he found that he had won the Chancellors Prize at Oxford for an essay on "Optimism." (p. 102)
- Lewis said that his chosen career as a tutor/teacher was "the only one in which I can ever hope to go beyond the meanest mediocrity." (p. 107)

- Lewis, while meditating on his own self-admiration: “And, will you believe it, one out of every three is a thought of self-admiration: when everything else fails, having had its neck broken, up comes the thought, ‘What an admirable fellow I am to have broken their necks!’ I catch myself posturing before the mirror, so to speak, all day long. I pretend I am carefully thinking out what to say to the next pupil (for *his* good, of course) and then suddenly realize I am really thinking how frightfully clever I’m going to be and how he will admire me . . . And then when you force yourself to stop it, you admire yourself for doing *that*. It is like fighting the hydra . . . There seems to be no end to it. Depth under depth of self-love and self-admiration.” (p. 133)
- Jack’s wife Joy wrote about what she was taught before becoming a Christian that, “Life is only an electrochemical reaction. Love, art, and altruism are only sex. The universe is only matter. Matter is only energy. I forget what I said energy is only.” (p. 142)
- In 1917 Lewis had a physical exam: his height was five feet eleven inches, and he weighed 13 stone (about 182 pounds). (p. 164)
- Jack first wrote chapters of *The Screwtape Letters* as installments for a magazine. One clergyman (missing the point) wrote in to cancel his subscription because the advice given by Wormwood was “not only erroneous but positively diabolical.” (p. 168)
- Screwtape’s advice points out that the demonic way involves “An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula . . . To get a man’s soul and give him *nothing* in return – that’s what really gladdens Our Father’s heart.” (p. 189)
- Lewis says of friendship, “Every real friendship is a sort of secession, even a rebellion . . . In each knot of Friends there is a sectional ‘public opinion’ which fortifies its members against the public opinion of the community in general. Each therefore is a pocket of potential resistance.” (p. 203)
- There are many other helpful insights in this biography. There are occasional interpretations of Lewis that I find dubious (particularly a few pages blast against apologetics), but I find Jacobs’ judgments characteristically trustworthy. Jacobs helps us see that almost everything of substance that Lewis writes about in any of his writings can be found in the Narnia books. As Barfield points out, what C.S. Lewis thought about everything could often be found in what he thought about anything.