

Book Review  
by Dr. Art Lindsley

Review of *The Way Into Narnia: A Reader's Guide*, by Peter J. Schakel, (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmanns) 2005.

Peter Schakel is a professor at Hope College and a specialist in the Chronicles of Narnia, having two previous books on the subject (*Imagination and the Arts in C.S. Lewis*, and *Reading with the Heart*). This book, *The Way Into Narnia*, is a great contribution to the subjects. The core of the book contains a background and discussion of each book in the series. These are very helpful chapters. But, the most helpful sections for me were the introductory chapters and the annotations at the end of the book.

Two introductory chapters deal with "Controversies over Texts and Reading Order" and a discussion of the form of the stories, "The Storytelling: The Fairy Tale, Fantasy, and Myth." The concluding annotations deal with difficult words, concepts, or passages in the Chronicles. Significant insights in the book include:

- Lewis's first class honors at Oxford were in Greek and Latin, classical philosophy, and English language and literature. (p. 8-9)
- Lewis and Tolkien spent a morning each week with each other during the 1930's (in addition to "Inklings" meetings). (p. 9)
- *Perelandra* was one of Lewis's favorite books. One night when walking with friend Roger Green, they saw Venus shining brightly, and Lewis said with a sense of passionate longing, "Perelandra!" (p. 11)
- Lewis made a number of revisions in the text that have not been included in most versions of Narnia available today. (See p. 14-15.)
- Although Lewis did at one time indicate a wish that the Chronicles be numbered in chronological order (Narnia time – *The Magician's Nephew* first), there are compelling arguments for reading the books in the order in which they were written. (p. 15-21) Also, it is important to note that the "wish" did not seem that important to Lewis. He wrote in a letter: "Perhaps it does not matter very much in which order anyone reads them." (p. 17)
- All seven Narnia books and all three science fictions books began with Lewis seeing pictures in his head. (p. 25)
- The favorite form Lewis chose was that of "fairy story." By that, he meant not a story containing fairies, but a story taking place in an enchanted world, Fairy Land or Faerie. Mythological characters such as elves, dragons, giants, nymphs, etc. can be said to inhabit such a land. (p. 28)

- Fairy stories are not just for children (some don't like them) but also for adults. Some adults only gain a taste for fairy stories later in life. (p. 28)
- Tolkien asserts that fairy stories tap into a "primal desire" to get into another world, a desire to fly, to talk to animals, to meet living things from Other Worlds. (p. 28)
- Escaping through story from this world can be heroic—not a running away from home but an escape from a prison where we are held captive (by cultural ideas) (p. 29)
- Frederick Buechner writes, "Good and evil meet and do battle in the fairy-tale world much as they meet and do battle in our world, but in fairy tales the good live happily ever after. That is the major difference." (p. 29)
- In the Chronicles, we see: (1) Stories take place in a Fairy-land, (2) they arouse desire for an other world, (3) they are characterized by strangeness and wonder, (4) they give escape from the ordinariness of the "real world," (5) they lead to a sense of recovery enabling us to see our world in new, fresh ways, (6) they have "eucatastrophic" plots that offer hope of Joy beyond our own world. (p. 30)
- Fantasy literature requires that the Secondary world created by the author allows us to suspend our disbelief. But, if the "spell" is broken by too much intrusion of the Primary World (ours), then the power of the story is lost. (p. 32)
- In literature myth does not usually mean fictitious or unscientific, but refers to matters above and everyday life about origins, endings, aspirations, purpose, and meaning. (p. 34)
- George MacDonald writes about myth that such a story "arouses in us sensations we never had before . . . hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles old certainties till all questions are re-opened, and in general shocks us more fully awake than we are for most of our lives." (p. 36)
- MacDonald also maintains that "A fairy-tale is not an allegory, there may be allegory in it, but it is not an allegory." (p. 36)
- Lewis was not using allegory but supposition. Suppose Narnia exists and that the Son of God became a Lion there, what would happen?" (p.37)
- Though Aslan's death in LWW has allegorical overtones, it does not fully parallel Christ's death for us. Aslan's death does save Narnia from destruction, but he dies for Edmund, not to "save" all Narnians from their sins. Aslan dies by stabbing, not by crucifixion, is dead only overnight (not two nights) and comes back to life the next day (not the third day). (p. 44)

- The general meaning of Aslan's death is similar to Christ's death in its structural movement from Deep Magic to Deeper Magic, from catastrophe to eucatastrophe, conveying the magic of grace. (p. 45)
- Aslan's death in LWW follows more of a ransom (pay-a-debt) theory of atonement. Note the phrases, "His life is forfeit to me," "His blood is my property," Aslan later says that the Witch had "renounced the claim on your brother's blood." (p. 46-57)
- "Belief" or "believed" are used more than 28 times in Prince Caspian. (p. 53)
- In *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (VDT), Lucy remembers a few details of a magical book she reads – a cup, a sword, a tree, and a green hill – all symbols of Christ. (p. 66)
- A lamb turns into a lion in VDT, again a clear allusion to Revelation 5. (p. 68)
- In VDT, Lucy and Edmund are told they will not return to Narnia but they need to know Aslan by another name in their own world. (p. 69)
- The Green Witch in *The Silver Chair* is not the same one as the White Witch in LWW (she died), but, "one of the same crew." (p. 74)
- In *The Horse and His Boy*, the horse, Bree, needs humility and Shasta (the boy) more confidence. Their two companions, Aravis (the princess) needs humility, and Hwin (the horse) more confidence. (p. 86)
- For fantasy purists like Tolkien, the eclecticism of the Narnian world is problematic. But, for general readers it is one of the primary attractions. (p. 115)
- The phrase, "always winter, never Christmas," in LWW is anachronistic to Narnia because its creator is Aslan not Christ. But, nevertheless, this blending of Primary and Secondary Worlds "works." (p. 116)
- Lewis loved Samuel Johnson, who said, "Men more frequently require to be reminded than informed." (p. 117)
- Names of Aslan in the Chronicles are: the Great Lion, the son of the Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea, and the King above all High Kings. (p. 147)
- Contrary to some recent editorials, Susan is not excluded from Narnia because she likes "nylons and lipstick" but because she has chosen to exclude herself by referring to Narnia as "those funny games we used to play when we were children." Lewis wrote a letter in answer to a child who asked about Susan:

The books don't tell us what happened to Susan. She is left alive in this world at the end, having by then turned into a rather silly, conceited young woman. But there is plenty of time for her to mend, and perhaps she will get to Aslan's country in the end – in her own way. I think that whatever she had seen in Narnia she could (if she was the sort that wanted to) persuade herself, as she grew up, that it was 'all nonsense.'" (p. 159)

As you can see, there are many helpful insights in this book, and there are many more I haven't dealt with. The introductory material is excellent, the summaries of books insightful, and the annotations illuminating.