

Book Review of *A Reader's Guide Through The Wardrobe: Exploring C.S. Lewis's Classic Story*

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A Reader's Guide Through The Wardrobe: Exploring C.S. Lewis's Classic Story by Leland Ryken and Marjorie Lamp Mead, InterVarsity Press 2005.

A Reader's Guide Through The Wardrobe is an excellent and appealing study of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. The book combines the efforts of Leland Ryken, a professor of English at Wheaton College, and Marjorie Mead, associate director of the Wade Center since 1977. As you might expect, there are many literary insights into *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* (LWW) as well as interesting facts and quotes about C.S. Lewis, his process in writing about Narnia, and his sources for names and ideas. This study of LWW is clearly written and very satisfying on a number of levels.

The book proceeds through a chapter-by-chapter study of LWW, followed by chapters on "How the Narnian Books Came to Be," a chapter addressing criticisms of LWW and the Narnia series, and an Appendix on the correct order of reading Narnia. Here are a few of the many insights given in this work.

First, LWW was not written as an allegory. It all started with images in C.S. Lewis's mind. Lewis had an image of a Faun carrying packages and of a lamppost, and had been having dreams about lions. Lewis set out to create a story about these images, and naturally some of Lewis's beliefs about Christ found their way into the story. However, LWW as well as the rest of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, are not to be interpreted as allegory, where each detail has a spiritual meaning (as in *Pilgrim's Progress*).

Other interesting facts revealed in *The Reader's Guide Through The Wardrobe*:

- The span of the seven Narnia books covers 2,555 Narnian years, to only 52 English or earth years (p. 56).
- The origin for the name Aslan is from the notes to Lane's *Arabian Nights*. It is Turkish for Lion. Lewis pronounced it as Ass-lan. He meant to portray the Lion of Judah (Jesus) (p. 66).
- There have been 85 million sets of Narnia sold since publication (p. 139).

- The LWW was originally thought by Lewis to be a single book, not part of a series.
- It took ten years from 1938 (when Lewis first had the idea of a children's story) till 1948 to actually get down to completing the task (p. 136f).
- After LWW, the rest of the books came quickly, published one per year after 1950 (p. 140).
- The last book written (though the next to last published) was *The Magician's Nephew*. This work was the hardest one for Lewis to write. He had to go back to it several times.
- Father Christmas, though thought by some (Roger Green and J.R.R. Tolkien) to be an alien intrusion into the story (LWW), serves an important role. First, his arrival shows that the spell "always winter and never Christmas" has started to be broken. Second, the gifts he brings serve an important role in revealing insights into the characters of LWW: Peter – shield and armor; Susan – bow, quiver, and ivory horn; Lucy – bottle of cordial and small dagger (p. 75).
- Strange mythological creatures present on Aslan's side – dryads, raiads, centaurs, unicorns, a bull with the head of a man, a great Dog, animals with symbolic means (pelican, eagle, leopards) – indicate a historical continuity coming to its fulfillment in Aslan (p. 84).
- The Witch's army is decidedly sinister: giants, werewolves, Ghouls, Boggles, Ogres, Minotaurs, Cruels, Hags, Specters and people of the Toadstools (p. 92).
- There is an interesting contrast between the Harry Potter series and the Narnia books. In the Narnia series, magic is part of the genre of fairy tale. It is actually an affirmation of the view that the supernatural is real. In the Harry Potter books, magic is the central focus and draws attention to itself. In the Narnia books, magic exists primarily in the fantasy world apart from our world (with a couple exceptions). In Harry Potter, the magic is located in our world. In LWW, magic is practiced primarily by supernatural agents, whereas in Harry Potter magic is the result of human spell casting and occult practice. In Narnia the children are not generally permitted to engage in magic but invited to call on Aslan for help. Lewis labels some attempts at magic as black sorcery (wicked dwarf Nikabrik in *Prince Caspian*) (p. 88-91).

- Although there is some violence in the Narnia series and in LWW (Peter's fight, Aslan's death, the final battle), Lewis defended its place in a children's series. He argued that this world does contain violence, death, the need for courage, and a battle between good and evil. To shield children from such realities may give them "a false impression and feed them on escapism in the bad sense." They are likely to meet cruel enemies so it is of value to have heard of brave knights. Lewis says: "Let there be wicked kings and beheadings, battles and dungeons, giants and dragons, and let villains be soundly killed at the end of the book. Nothing will persuade me that this causes an ordinary child any kind or degree of fear beyond what it wants, and needs to feel. For, of course, it wants to be a little frightened" (p. 87).
- The book advocates that you read the *The Chronicles of Narnia* in the order of publication (LWW first, etc.) rather than in the order of Narnian chronology (Magician's Nephew first) (p. 172-174).
- The section addressing the criticisms of the Narnia Chronicles is very helpful (p. 142-154).
- Lewis believed that the battle between good and evil demanded that we take sides. Lewis wrote: "...there is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan" (p. 165).

Overall, this is an outstanding book, helpful for teaching on LWW or for study groups on the book.