

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

Lewis's best-loved classic

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Finally, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is coming to the big screen. The anticipation is great. The book has already been at #1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Many people, both believers and non-believers, will see the film, and it will be an opportunity to speak to others about the film's meaning as well as about C.S. Lewis. There are already plans for other volumes of the *Narnia* series to be made into movies, so it is possible that all seven might eventually be filmed. Any preparation we do now may prepare us for future opportunities, so it's good to learn more about the *Narnia* series and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (LWW).



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An Allegory?

One of the first questions that arises about the series is: Are the books allegories, where each detail of the books has symbolic spiritual meaning? The answer is "No." Lewis stressed that each volume started with pictures in his mind, which he turned into a story. For instance, LWW started with the image in Lewis's mind of a Faun carrying packages, and he had been having dreams about lions. As he wrote, some of his Christian beliefs crept into the story, but it is important not to press every detail of the story as you might do with *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

For Children or for Adults?

In response to the charge that fairy stories such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* were childish, Lewis distinguished between fairy tales and children's stories. He pointed out that many children do not like fairy stories, while many adults do, and that a good story is a good story no matter what the reader's age. "Children's" stories retain their appeal through the generations. Lewis says:

Fashions in literary taste come and go among adults, and every period has its own shibboleths. These, when good, do not corrupt it, for children read only to enjoy. Of course, their limited vocabulary and general ignorance make some books unintelligible to them. But, apart from that, juvenile taste is simply human taste.

Lewis felt that to grow into adulthood without developing your imagination was to be impoverished. One five-year-old boy who visited Lewis's home outside Oxford during the bombing of London in World War II, had never been exposed to fairy tales. Lewis lamented that "his poor imagination has been left without any natural food at all." Lewis felt that it was important (as Jesus taught) for adults to keep a childlike outlook on the world: "Only those adults who have retained, with whatever additions and enrichments, their first childlike responses to poetry unimpaired can be said to have grown up at all." In *Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis writes:

But who in his right mind would not keep if he could that tireless curiosity, that intensity of imagination, that faculty of suspending belief, that unspoiled attitude, that readiness to wonder, to pity, to admire?

Lewis's friend Ruth Pitter said that Lewis had a child's sense of glory and nightmare. Lewis said about himself, "Parts of me are still twelve, and I think parts were already fifty when I was twelve." In any case, the capacity to avoid being hardened by cynicism and suspicion was regarded as essential to human well being.

I have met people of every age, from five to eighty-five, who have enjoyed the *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When I read the series to my sons, I found that I was more excited by rereading the stories myself than the boys were to hear them. As an adult I could better understand the many layers of meaning within the stories.

The Plot

The first thing that needs to be said about LWW is that it is meant to be enjoyed. Before you analyze or pick apart the story, realize that Lewis wrote it so that children (and others) could delight in the story itself. Next, we might ask why the story has had such appeal to so many. Perhaps some of the elements would include a magical entry to Narnia through a wardrobe, an invented world populated with strange creatures, talking animals, sibling rivalry (Lucy vs. Edmund), an aloof professor, a vivid portrayal of evil in the White Witch, a cosmic problem (always winter and never Christmas), its British-ness, temptation (Turkish Delight), places of rest and refreshment (the Beavers' house), adventure, and above all, the lion, Aslan.

The actual wardrobe that prompted the stories was one made by Lewis's grandfather and was in the family home in Belfast. Later, it was moved to Lewis's home at Oxford and now resides at the Wade Center, at Wheaton College. One of C.S. Lewis's cousins, Claire, remembered occasions when various cousins along with "Jack" (C.S. Lewis) and his brother Warren, would climb into the wardrobe while young Jack would tell them stories he had invented. It is interesting to note that Lewis mentions a few times that "it is foolish to shut oneself into any wardrobe" perhaps because he always kept a crack of light when he told his stories and also because he was warned. When Lewis sent a draft of LWW to friend Owen Barfield, Barfield's wife Maud was concerned lest children read the story and accidentally lock themselves in a wardrobe. So Lewis added five warnings to LWW. The wardrobe is such a vivid image that one Oxford boy, after reading the book, chopped a hole in the back of the family wardrobe trying to get to Narnia.

Aslan

There are many dimensions of the book we could examine, and there are plenty of new books on LWW or *The Chronicles of Narnia* to help you do so; but the central character is the lion, Aslan. Although the children hear about Aslan at the Beavers' house in chapter seven, they don't actually meet him till chapter twelve.

Not Safe but Good

Soon after the children arrive in Narnia, their new friend Mr. Beaver tells them: "They say Aslan is on the move— perhaps has already landed." When the children first hear the name Aslan, it stirs each of them in a different way:

Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if

some delicious smell or some delicious strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of summer.

They find out Aslan is a king and hear about an old rhyme, a kind of prophecy:

Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we will have spring
again.

Susan asks, "Is he quite safe?" "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver, "...Course he isn't safe, but he's good."

Eventually, Aslan appears and the battle between good and evil begins in earnest. As the story unfolds, Aslan shows up when and where he will. He does not appear often, almost never on demand, and always at his own discretion. And, he does not have to be visible in order for his power to be felt.

Throughout the Narnia stories we see in Aslan the attributes of Jesus. He is always present, whether or not we are aware of him. He is always working for our good, whether or not we understand (or even like what he does). He transforms us in ways we could never do for ourselves. Greatest of all, he sacrificed his life for us and has risen again to free us from the bondage of sin.

The Lion Who Sacrifices Himself

In LWW there is a confrontation between the White Witch and Aslan. She comes to claim the life of Edmund because he has turned traitor. She appeals to a deep magic from the beginning of time saying that "Every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey" and that "for every treachery I have a right to kill."

Aslan and the White Witch talk privately, and Aslan declares Edmund free from the witch's claim. But the look of joy on the witch's face as she departs, and her allusion to a promise Aslan has made, indicate that something ominous is about to happen. Late that night, Aslan leaves the camp "head hung low" and walking slowly. As Lucy and Susan watch from a distance in horror and disbelief, the witch and all manner of evil creatures bind Aslan to the Stone Table, shave him, and muzzle him. Finally, the witch takes a stone knife and kills Aslan. Exhausted by grief, Lucy and Susan wait for morning. As the sun rises, they hear a loud crack and see the Stone Table broken in two. But there is no Aslan.

"Who's done it?" cried Susan. "What does it mean? Is it more magic?" "Yes!" said a great voice behind their backs. "It's more magic."

Aslan is alive! He is real, not a ghost. He licks Susan's forehead. The girls are overjoyed and throw themselves on him, kissing him repeatedly. When they calm down, Susan asks: "But what does it all mean?"

"It means," said Aslan, "that though the witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little farther back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."

Just as Aslan was killed in Edmund's stead and saved his life, so Jesus' death for us not only takes away our guilt for what we have done or left undone, but when we believe in Him, new life begins to transform us from the inside out, from death to life that will go on for all eternity. This story has the capacity to sneak "past watchful dragons" of our religious upbringing, giving us a new view of an old message. LWW can prepare people to hear the gospel in a new way.

Interesting Notes

Here are a few interesting tidbits or insights on Narnia in general or LWW in particular, gleaned from my recent reading of C.S. Lewis's books:

- The origin of the name Aslan is from the notes of Lane's *Arabian Nights*. It is Turkish for lion. Lewis pronounced it Ass-lan. He did mean to portray the Lion of Judah (Jesus!).
- LWW was originally planned to be a single, stand alone 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.
- After LWW, the rest of the books came quickly—published one per year after 1950.
- 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 begun to be broken. Second, the gifts he brings serve an important role in LWW (and in other books of the series): Peter—shield and

armor; Susan—bow, quiver and ivory horn; Lucy—bottle of cordial and a small dagger.

- The magic in Narnia contrasts with the Harry Potter series. In the *Narnia* books magic is part of the genre of fairy tale and an affirmation that the supernatural is real. Magic exists in LWW and others of the series primarily in the fantasy world, not in our world. Whereas in Harry Potter, magic is the central focus, draws attention to itself, and is located in our world. In LWW, magic is practiced by supernatural agents, whereas in Harry Potter magic is a result of human spellcasting and occult practice. In Narnia the children are not generally permitted to engage in magic, but invited to call on Aslan for help.
- There have been about 85 million sets of *The Chronicles of Narnia* sold since their publication.
- The chronology of the seven Narnia books cover 2,555 Narnian years to only 52 English or earth years.
- Strange mythological creatures present on Aslan's side—dryads, naiads, centaurs, unicorns, a bull with the head of a man, a great dog, animals with symbolic meanings (pelican, eagle, leopards)—indicate a historical continuity, ancient myth coming to its fulfillment in Aslan.

Battle Between Good and Evil

Lewis believed that the battle between good and evil that we see in LWW and in the rest of the *Narnia* series is a battle in which we all partake. We need to 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.

Although Narnia is an imagined world, it can point us to central truths we need to grasp anew in our own world. LWW also provides opportunities to talk to others not only about *The Chronicles of Narnia* series but also about what C.S. Lewis believed about other things. [There are many helpful books written to help us grasp this moment of opportunity. See this issue and our web site for a review of *C.S. Lewis's Case for Christ*.]

To summarize the message of LWW in a nutshell: the Emperor beyond the sea created Narnia through Aslan, it had come under a spell from the White Witch making it "always winter, never Christmas," Aslan came to reverse the curse and to sacrifice himself for

Edmund's sin. Though there are more battles to be fought, the time will come when the kids will truly live "happily ever after." They will forever enter the great Adventure, like a book where every chapter is better than the one before. In short, it is the timeless message of creation, fall, redemption, consummation put into a new disarming form.

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