Not · A · Tame LION

Unveil Narnia through the eyes of
Lucy, Peter, and other characters created by C. S. Lewis

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CHAPTER 1

INKLINGS OF NEVERLAND:

C. S. Lewis and the Origins of Narnia

When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.[1]

C. S. LEWIS

SUGGESTED READINGS FOR THIS CHAPTER:

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe: chapter 5
The Silver Chair: chapter 1

Just when we think we have outgrown fairy tales—and the influence they wield over our imaginations—a beloved character or startling image from a childhood story our parents read to us reminds us of a time when we truly cared about something innocent, magical, and true. Being grown up doesn't mean that we've satisfied the longing for these things but only that we have lost our pathway back to them. Perhaps we didn't read fairy tales in our youth but discovered their allure later in life, astounded by the freshness and power of their vision. That vision is inherent not only in this or that story but also in the nature of *faërie* itself, with its power to instill in us the desire for a strange, new, wonder-filled world, an enchanted cosmos or Neverland of our own. This world is not so much a place of retreat or escape as of renewal and rebirth. Can there really be such a place?

C. S. Lewis suggests a reason for this longing—why it exists and how it can be fulfilled. To see this for ourselves and to witness it in Narnia, we should learn more about Lewis's journey to faith, a spiritual quest that illumines the origins of Narnia as well as our own response to Aslan and his kingdom. Let's begin with a quick review of Lewis's life and career and then circle back for a closer look at the childhood and adolescence in which his fascination with fairy tales began.

OUT OF THE SHADOW-LANDS

Lewis died the same day that President John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas—November 22, 1963, one week short of Lewis's sixty-fifth birthday. He continues to be remembered by the academic world as a distinguished Oxford and Cambridge literary historian, especially noted for inaugurating rather than climaxing his scholarly career with a magnum opus.

This work, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), demonstrated Lewis's formidable critical talent. His scholarship on medieval and renaissance literature set the standards and the terms of debate in these areas of study on both sides of the Atlantic for decades. In numerous publications over the next twenty-five years, Lewis was both prolific and profound in discussing the literary foundations of Western civilization.

Admirable as his academic achievements are, however, it is not Lewis's scholarly work that we primarily celebrate in the twenty-first century. Rather, we admire him as the author of science fiction, myth, and fantasy and as a popular and influential Christian apologist.

That Lewis should be commemorated for his vocation as an orthodox Christian apologist in a time of ostentatious irreligion, postmodern posturing, and New Age mysticism is one of literary history's great ironies.

If we see Lewis only in his youth, we meet a confused and bitter atheist whose mother's death when he was nine robbed him of joy and serenity. If we encounter

him as a World War I soldier, we meet a foundering poet who, while crouching in the trenches of France, jots down a poem ridiculing the "ancient hope" of a "just God that cares for earthly pain" as merely a "dream." If we meet him later at Oxford University, we find a self-described "prig" prepared to enter postwar academic society as one more pretentious professor promoting an uninhibited lifestyle. All in all, the Lewis we meet in the 1920s is one of the more unlikely converts among the literati of his time.

In his superb spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy* (1955), Lewis recounts the circumstances that brought him to faith in God. In the manner typical of his writing, there are no Damascus Road melodramas but instead a series of ruminations about crucial books and providential friendships that led him out of unbelief into principled agnosticism, to benign theism, and eventually to robust, orthodox, Trinitarian Christianity.

After he committed his life to Christ in 1931, Lewis embarked on a remarkable dual career. He maintained his scholarly poise and productivity, astonishing colleagues with his erudition and his prolific publication rate while slowly and quietly building a reputation as a modern Aquinas or Newman, a translator and popularizer of Christian doctrine for a skeptical and credulous age. Lewis created *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), the first book in a science-fiction trilogy of interplanetary romances, to "steal past . . . watchful dragons"

while promulgating his Christian views.[2] He published his first purely apologetic work, *The Problem of Pain*, in 1941.

In this book, Lewis endeavored to reconcile the concept of a good, all-powerful God with the presence of evil and suffering in the universe he had created. It drew the attention of James Welch, head of religious broadcasting for the BBC, who would inadvertently launch Lewis as a religious celebrity. Welch was so impressed with Lewis's compelling arguments and fresh analogies in explaining the essentials of the Christian faith that he persuaded Lewis to do a series of radio broadcasts that would commence in the late summer of 1941.

Lewis made his debut at 7:45 p.m., Wednesday, August 6, 1941. Later in the evening, air-raid sirens would blare all over Britain, preparing citizens for what might be yet another bombing attack by Germany. But that night a most unlikely new radio personality was born, speaking on the topic "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe." With no practical experience in broadcasting or in addressing such a diverse, indiscriminate audience, Lewis was called upon to rally a fearful, war-beset nation to courage and hope.[3]

Lewis was an immediate sensation, and hundreds of letters, pro and con, poured in from all quarters of the United Kingdom. The BBC invited Lewis to extend his original commitment first to eight, then to twelve, and finally to twenty-six broadcasts over a two-year period.

These talks became the foundation for the book eventually published as *Mere Christianity* (1952), the most widely read work of Christian apologetics of the last fifty years. It continues to be credited with countless conversions and recommitments by such disparate people as the former Nixon "hatchet man," Charles Colson, now a respected Christian commentator and prison reformer; Kathleen Norris, the poet and spiritual memoirist; and former Domino's Pizza magnate Tom Monaghan.

Lewis's reputation as a witty, articulate proponent of Christianity continued with *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), purportedly the intercepted correspondence of a senior devil with a junior devil who is fighting "the Enemy" (Christ) over the soul of an unsuspecting believer. *The Great Divorce* (1945) uses the conventions of the medieval dream vision to recount a man's shattering bus ride to hell. *Miracles* (1947) is a defense of God's intervention in human history—the logic, as it were, of the Incarnation. But Lewis's most critically notable and commercially successful creative work emerged in the seven-volume Chronicles of Narnia, published in single volumes between 1950 and 1956.

C. S. Lewis ("Jack" to his friends and family) remains the most widely read Christian writer of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, his works explored by evangelicals, mainstream Protestants, devout Catholics, and Orthodox believers alike. All of Lewis's works, save a few anthologies of early literary criticism, remain

in print as a measure of his continuing influence. To explain this phenomenon is to go against the grain of a recent popular film that purports to tell the true story of Lewis's relationship and marriage to Joy Davidman Gresham. On our way to Narnia, let us take a little time to rehabilitate the dour, reticent Lewis that many have seen depicted in Sir Richard Attenborough's 1993 motion picture, *Shadowlands*.

The man called Oxford's Bonny Fighter is portrayed in this film as inexperienced with women and children, perpetually solemn, and given to excessive brooding about suffering and God's penchant for using pain to rouse a deaf world to action. Such a man would never attract the following the real Lewis had, let alone the attention of as vivacious and intellectually potent a woman as Joy Davidman Gresham. According to the William Nicholson screenplay, Lewis met Joy and his life finally blossomed. He embraced her exuberance and American brusqueness, came out of his shell, suppressed his doubts, inherited a family, and entered into an idyllic though short-lived marriage stopped cold by Joy's death from bone cancer. At the end of *Shadowlands*, Lewis is shown skulking about, grasping for straws of faith, questioning the existence of heaven, and rebuking those who remind him of his former Christian confidence. This is hardly true to life.

As one who has spent the greater part of his professional career studying Lewis's life, works, and times, I

can unequivocally say that the Lewis of *Shadowlands*—even conceding generous poetic license—never existed. The C. S. Lewis known to friends, students, colleagues, publishers, correspondents, and readers was a gregarious, ebullient, even impish sort of fellow who loved conversation. In his day, he was the most popular lecturer in Oxford, and there was standing room only for his classroom presentations.

Jack loved to meet his friends—Charles Williams, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Owen Barfield, a group quaintly self-labeled as "the Inklings"—at a favorite local pub to read aloud from their works in progress, down a pint or two along the way, and entertain anyone who strayed into their domain. Far from being an austere or humorless "fundamentalist," Lewis practiced and affirmed a cheerful, reasoned Christianity, informed by his encyclopedic reading of culture and filtered through his Irish literary upbringing.

The Jack who eventually met Joy in 1952 had behind him two years of intimate correspondence with her, the knowledge that she was very familiar with his story and his theology, and a profound respect for her own creativity and scholarly prowess. There is no question but that Joy's presence in his life sparked Jack's further literary output, but the personal transformation he experienced was much more subtle than that depicted in *Shadowlands*.

The relationship more accurately brought a quiet

renewal, not a radical shift in temperament. By all accounts, the couple made a formidable duo as soul mates united by faith, hope, and love. The movie does cover well the cruelty of their relationship's brevity. Joy was diagnosed with cancer, rallied, and then succumbed. Jack took Joy's death hard—as any husband would. He wrestled openly with God, as he admirably and candidly recounted in his memoir, *A Grief Observed* (1963). Lewis explored his loss and returned chastened but emboldened to his faith.

Lewis's friend Owen Barfield shrewdly gets to the source of Lewis's enduring influence when he says, "Somehow what Lewis thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything."[4] Lewis's life was, in other words, thoroughly integrated. His presuppositions about life, faith, and reality; his reason; and his imagination were all surrendered to God, and this spiritual coherence manifested itself in all that he wrote and said.

As a witness to the remorselessly sectarian strife of his native Belfast and dismayed by the confusion about Christ and his kingdom both inside and outside the church, Lewis came to care most about what he called "mere Christianity." His wartime BBC broadcasts and subsequent apologetic works were about the irreducible essentials of the faith that have been central to the creeds of the church since the apostles first announced the Good News. Lewis wanted to share a gospel free of

denominational idiosyncrasies, untrammeled by the debris of history, and grounded in the identity and mission of Jesus of Nazareth. This "mere Christianity" focuses on what unites Christians, not on what divides them. The Chronicles of Narnia and the character of Aslan are anchored in this core Christian faith.

SURPRISED BY ASLAN

To pick up the trail that leads to Narnia, we should note the unexpected appearance of Lewis's spiritual autobiography soon after the publication of the Chronicles. While completing the last of the tales, perhaps in 1952 or 1953, Lewis began his most unusual and most personally revealing work, *Surprised by Joy*. In writing this story of "a blessed defeat," Lewis says that his specific goals were to answer "requests that I would tell how I passed from Atheism to Christianity" and "to correct one or two false notions that seem to have got about." *Surprised by Joy* actually does much more than this. When read in tandem with the Chronicles, it provides a dramatic commentary on many of the predicaments faced by the human visitors to Narnia. It seems clear that Lewis had been tracing out the elements of his former personal struggles as well as of his difficult journey to faith in depicting the exploits of the Pevensies and others in the land of the untame Lion.

Though he had been a practicing Christian for almost twenty-five years and a vigorous public defender

of the faith since the appearance of his first religious work, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), Lewis had never directly recounted anything about his private life or his conversion to Christ. By fictionalizing in Narnia some of the spiritual lessons drawn from his life (including the undeniably autobiographical *The Magician's Nephew*), Lewis found a meaningful, coherent, and satisfying way to tell his own story. Indeed, it seems that after his own encounter with Aslan, Lewis was liberated to tell the very personal story of his conversion that thousands of readers on both sides of the Atlantic longed to hear.

Lewis was reluctant to cover this ground apart from his decades of private correspondence with fellow converts and fans. No doubt he had the conventional modesty of the spiritual autobiographer who downplays the importance of his life while giving glory to God. He was also convinced that no writer's creative work was especially illuminated by psychological inquiry into his or her life. In his role as a critic and historian of literature, Lewis had witnessed too many works passed off as "literary criticism" that were actually imaginary reconstructions of the author's composing process or thought life—poor substitutes for perceptive attention to an author's text.

Lewis believed that this approach robbed literature of its power and meaning by reducing literary criticism to biographical skulduggery. He rejected out of hand

the notion that an artist was obliged to lay bare his private life, warts and all, either for celebrity's sake or for its putative insights into his or her literary works. To accomplish the task he set himself, Lewis explains in *Surprised by Joy* that he had to overcome his "distaste for all that is public, all that belongs to the collective."[5]

So why are we apparently violating Lewis's principles of good readership? We are listening to his life, related under conditions Lewis has set, and linking the facts as he reported them to the stories as he told them. We are residing in Narnia under his passport, using the map he has provided. Who would be a better guide than Lewis himself? Lewis similarly chose a fictional George Macdonald to guide his narrator in *The Great Divorce*. Knowing more about the origins of Narnia in Lewis's heart and mind does not rob us of primary experience, but enhances it. We could also reverse the argument and use Narnia to comment usefully on *Surprised by Joy*.

Lewis temporarily opened his life to the world at large only to the extent that it contributed to his articulation of a Christian worldview. He was not submitting it for approval to the self-styled critics of his career who searched for evidence to undermine his Christian apologetics, as some celebrated recent Lewis biographers have done. Lewis recounted nothing that was not directly related to his purpose, but he gives his readers a warning in the preface to *Surprised by Joy*.

> The story is, I fear, suffocatingly subjective; the kind of thing I have never written before and shall probably never write again. I have tried so to write the first chapter that those who can't bear such a story will see at once what they are in for and close the book with the least waste of time.[6]

One man's halting "subjectivity" is his reader's delighted entry into the author's heart and soul!

The Shape of My Early Life (the subtitle of *Surprised by Joy*) succinctly communicates the scope of Lewis's autobiography. It deals almost exclusively with his childhood and pre- and post-adolescent search for "joy" and covers events leading up to and surrounding his surrender to Christ at age thirty-one. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis identifies himself as no more and no less a sinner than anyone else, but believes it is chiefly his intellectual and imaginative journey that needs charting. The story of his encounter with Christ is not of a grand repentance from fleshly indulgence, but the slow, powerful recovery of childlike wonder at the world and its transcendent mysteries.

Surprised by Joy thus contains only those people and places, ideas and contexts that helped Lewis to explain his conversion—first to himself and secondarily to his readers. Lewis announces the grand climax of his journey to faith in matter-of-fact, understated terms: "Every step I had taken, from the Absolute to 'Spirit' and

from 'Spirit' to 'God,' had been a step toward the more concrete, the more imminent. . . . To accept the Incarnation was a further step in the same direction."[7]

Lewis begins this book with a meticulous but sprightly overview of the Lewis household and his early schooling. His household was a particularly bookish one in which the reality he found on the pages of books in his parents' extensive library was as tangible and meaningful to him as anything that transpired outside its doors. Two childhood influences get special mention: E. Nesbit, whose *Five Children and It*, *The Railway Children*, and *The Amulet* considerably influenced Lewis's Narnia, and Beatrix Potter, whose *Squirrel Nutkin* enraptured Lewis with its concept of "autumn," his first profoundly numinous encounter. Later, he depicts himself and his brother, Warnie, as comrades in arms—absolute confidantes who shared their deepest longings and secrets without sibling rivalry within the secure shelter of their parents' Belfast home.

The precocious young Lewis, denied none of the volumes in his father's library, traveled far and wide in history, myth, and story long before he was shuffled off to boarding schools or ever thought of entering the venerable Oxford University. Warnie speaks to the birth of their creative impulses:

> By the standards of a present-day childhood in England, we spent an extraordinary amount of our time

> shut up indoors. We would gaze out of our nursery window at the slanting rain and the grey skies. . . . But we always had pencils, paper, chalk, and paintboxes, and this recurring imprisonment gave us occasion and stimulus to develop the habit of creative imagination. . . . And so, my brother's gifts began to develop: and it may not be fanciful to see, in that childhood staring out to unattainable hills, some first beginnings of a vision and viewpoint that ran through the works of his maturity.[8]

Out of their nighttime conversations and daytime reveries, often inside the literal wardrobe of their Belfast home, came Boxen, Lewis's fictionalized world of talking animals. As Walter Hooper, Lewis's literary biographer, tells us, "At about the age of six, C. S. Lewis invented the imaginary world of 'Animal Land' or 'Boxen,' as it later came to be called, and over the next few years he wrote numerous stories and histories about 'the dressed animals' which inhabited it. [It] is remarkable that a boy could write so well and could sustain a single story over a hundred pages."[9]

These stories, clever as they are, betray the extent to which the enterprising Lewis was striving to please his father and to find a pathway into the adult world of his stuffy dinnertime table talk about Belfast politics and business transactions. Lewis's creatures debate political issues, quarrel over their own importance, and

generally reflect the common and mundane facts of the "real world."

There's no "deeper" or, for that matter, "deep" magic to be observed in Boxen; Narnia is surely glimpsed there to some degree, but through a glass darkly. Lewis was not destined to write realistic novels about contemporary politics; rather, he was born to explore the supernatural and the ineffable in the genre he grew up loving the most: the fairy tale. He was well caught in its grip by the time the illness and death of his mother, Flora, shattered the tranquility and sanctity of the Lewis home when he was only nine. Lewis then recounts the sometimes melancholy but ultimately salutary search for the security and settledness he had taken for granted during the peace and grace of his early childhood. This search ended with the surprise discovery that such security is not the goal of human life and that, in seeking it, one will surely not find it. This theme—the longing for joy and the uncovering of its true source—permeates the rest of *Surprised by Joy* and undergirds the adventures of Narnia.

In the epigraph for this chapter, Lewis mentions reading fairy tales at ten years old "in secret." This would have been within a year of his mother's death, surely the most important event in the lives of widower Albert Lewis and the young Lewis brothers, Warnie and Jack (or "Jacksie," as Lewis renamed himself at age three). Flora's passing set in motion years of doubt, sadness, and alienation between Lewis and his father, and it

strained and stained the image of his father in him. Albert Lewis was "all business and bottom line"—no fairy tales for him. Albert's stolid resignation to a bleak and lonely future forced his benighted realism on the household: buck up, be brave, be quiet. The thought of being discovered reading such childish fare as fairy tales in a house filled with weighty books of science, history, and economics terrified the heartbroken Jack, who had only his brother to share his sorrow. Albert lacked the resources for coping with his wife's illness and death, and he did not have the psychological capacity to rear his sons alone. He dispatched them to boarding schools hither and yon as his own grief consumed and debilitated him for most of his remaining life.

The effects on Lewis were dramatic, traumatic, and immediate. Feeling dispossessed and abandoned by his father, he turned more inward to myth and fairy tale as an outlet for creative expression and as a refuge during a tumultuous adolescence. There he found "the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited," a classic statement from his most famous sermon, "The Weight of Glory," of the elusive joy we seek.[10] By "joy," Lewis did not mean momentary pleasure, but the sublime experience of the transcendent, that glimpse of the eternal that is only fleetingly available in earthly loves and in aesthetic experience. Once upon a time, in childhood, he had it, or thought he did.

The retrospective adult Lewis discovers that joy is found only in knowing his Creator and Savior, who invented world and word, person and personality.

In describing his progression toward faith, Lewis paints fascinating pictures of turn-of-the-century Britain, especially of its private-school system and the tribulations of a nonathletic boy whose aesthetic sensibilities were manifestly out of step with those of his peers—painful remembrances first rehearsed in the lives of Eustace and Jill in *The Silver Chair*. In his search for solace, Lewis first embraced what he referred to as "Northernness," the key elements of Norse mythology that embodied "otherness" for him and offered an escape from the mundane realities and stifling conformity of boarding school. Before his return to faith, Lewis would explore the occult, sample Eastern mysticism, and embrace philosophical idealism—all stopping points on his way to accepting the compassionate, incarnate Deity of Christianity.

Lewis depicts his steady ascent of mind and heart—both reason and imagination—toward the renewal of his preadolescent faith as resulting from his propitious encounter with two religious authors and three other key individuals. He cites each of them as a critical catalyst to these gradual but permanent changes in his worldview.

The first of these was George MacDonald, the nineteenth-century Scottish Congregationalist minister and novelist whose *Phantastes* and *Lilith* Lewis first read

at age nineteen. These works baptized Lewis's imagination, preparing in him the idea of a preternatural world beyond the strict materialism he had grown so tired of. MacDonald, like Nesbit and Potter, kept alive in Lewis the promise of a Neverland whose enchantments were more appealing than the reality of this world. MacDonald's collected sermons were later essential to Lewis's growing understanding of his faith, and Lewis frequently referred to MacDonald as his mentor.

The popular London journalist and sprightly Christian apologist G. K. Chesterton was the second influential author. *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton's portrait of Christ and of his impact on culture, offered Lewis his first plausible Christian theory of history. Lewis adopted Chesterton's wit and cunning in diagnosing the ills of his time, and Chesterton's startling use of metaphor and paradox became hallmarks of his own apologetics. Lewis said, "In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. . . . God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous."[11]

Apart from his voluminous reading—and Lewis may reign as the original multiculturalist for the inclusivity of his reading—three persons stand out as particular provocateurs. The first is William Kirkpatrick, whom Lewis called the "Great Knock." Kirkpatrick had been Albert Lewis's tutor, and he was

Lewis's last real teacher before he entered Oxford. Albert finally responded to his son's impassioned plea to rescue him from his most recent dreadful boarding school and dispatched him to Kirkpatrick, then a retired schoolmaster. Kirkpatrick taught Lewis a fierce and exaggerated form of Socratic dialogue, a give-and-take analysis built on the relentless probing of an opponent's position.

Lewis described Kirkpatrick as the man closest to being a "purely logical entity" that he had ever known.[12] Kirkpatrick interrogated his pupil daily to help him master polemics and debate, teaching him to marshal his arguments and to be precise in definition. Under his tutelage, Lewis put on intellectual muscle that complemented his creative faculties. Lewis admired Kirkpatrick and tried all his adult life to think like he did, saying that he was "a man who thought not about you but about what you said. . . . Here was talk," Lewis concluded, "that was really about something."[13] As an atheist, Kirkpatrick did not directly support Lewis's metaphysical yearnings, but he infused him with the idea that while reason alone can never bring an inquirer to ultimate truth, it is the principal foundation for all credible, defensible belief. No doubt the Great Knock's interrogative style inspired the character of Professor Kirke in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*—minus the unbelief, of course.

No less important to Lewis was his boisterous

encounter and subsequent friendship with Owen Barfield, whom he met at Oxford in 1916. Barfield, a keen dialectician and a lawyer by trade, helped to sharpen Lewis's understanding of both reason and faith. In their "Great War," a vibrant correspondence between the two over many years, Lewis and Barfield debated the meaning of the supernatural and the role of God in history. Barfield's greatest contribution to Lewis's journey of faith, however, was in demolishing Lewis's "chronological snobbery," the "uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited."[14]

Freed from the notions that the past is invariably wrong and that the present is always the barometer of truth, Lewis was able to embrace the possibility that the ancient Christian narrative could be true and valid even in the twentieth century. Impressed by Barfield's commitment to "deep philology" and aware of the cognitive power of metaphor, Lewis described language as incurably "mythopoeic," that is, as mythmaking. Language used to create myth inevitably and simultaneously links hearers/readers to items, persons, and relations on several planes of existence, while also pointing them backward and forward to ever deeper, more resonant layers of meaning that lie beyond any single soul, lifetime, or civilization into eternity.

Barfield set Lewis up for the final blow to his fading

atheism, which would come from another Oxford friend and companion, the devout Catholic and future Middle-Earth architect, J. R. R. Tolkien. One cannot stress too strongly Tolkien's role in overcoming Lewis's objections to the possibility that Christianity could be true. Both Tolkien and Lewis had been steeped in the traditions of ancient Greco-Roman, Celtic, and Norse mythology and the mythical landscapes of Arthurian Britain. When they first met in May 1926, they had much more in common than they could have imagined.[15]

Tolkien and Lewis regarded imagination as an organ of truth—a way of knowing and seeing that complements the role of reason without displacing it. Tolkien led Lewis to the conclusion that while Christianity may comprise a mythology of sorts, it is "the true myth, myth become fact," one in which Lewis could place his full confidence—heart, mind, and soul. Christianity fulfilled (and filled in) the many plots and prophecies hinted at in ancient tales and traditions.[16]

Surprised by Joy is a special gift to Narnia lovers, for in it we learn how indebted Lewis was to a romantic view of history and culture. This is the atmosphere that permeates Narnia, exemplified in such characters as Professor Kirke, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, Puddleglum, and, of course, Aslan. Reason and imagination are held in tension at all times and neither is allowed to dominate or cancel the other. Lewis explicates in *Surprised by Joy* and dramatizes in Narnia that reason and imagination

must each bow to revelation, for only therein lies their redemption and their potential utility in navigating this and other worlds.

In Kirkpatrick and Barfield, Lewis touched on the power of reason and rationality. In MacDonald, Chesterton, and Tolkien, he experienced the power of the imagination. In Christ, Lewis embraced the author of both. There is no more moving or relevant passage in *Surprised by Joy* than that which captures the surrender, both mind and heart, of this "most reluctant convert" to his Lord:

> You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most . . . reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms.[17]

These words might as easily have been spoken by Edmund or Emeth, Jill or Eustace; that Lewis had already captured these lessons in fiction allowed him now to say

in straightforward nonfiction prose what he once said in the Chronicles, that "there is no other stream."[18]

RE-ENCHANTMENT AND IMAGINATION

In some ways, it would have been surprising if Lewis had not, like his close friend, Tolkien, authored works of *faërie* lands, for such reading had animated and comforted both of them throughout their lives. As Lewis famously said to Tolkien early in their friendship, "Tollers, people don't write the books we want, so we have to do it for ourselves."[19]

What kind of books did Lewis and Tolkien want? Simply put, they were stories of derring-do—daunting quests populated by fantastic yet credible characters traversing romantic landscapes that intrigue and delight through repeated encounters. Such tales feature a central theme that uplifts our spirits while challenging the accepted wisdom of the present age, pushing us toward the true reality. Lewis and Tolkien coveted books that offered a portal to another world, an authentic Neverland in which justice reigned and the good, the true, and the beautiful were honored and celebrated.

For Lewis and Tolkien—and the other Inklings—imagination was not just the proverbial muse for creating literature or art, but the primary means by which we make sense of the big picture behind the world at large, whether past, present, or future. Reason may give us the facts, but the imagination enables us to put them in

meaningful order. Imagination provides the rationale for trusting reason in the first place and helps us to grasp the gestalt of life's meaning—its enchanted core. In the Narnia Chronicles, Lewis imaginatively rewards the child and entreats the adult with the same rigor of re-enchantment found in the fairy tales and myths he was forced to read in secret but now exhorts us to read openly.

Re-enchantment restores an original enchantment, making possible a fresh encounter with the world created by the original spell and un-inhibiting the seeker who desires to embrace the cosmos as it once was and as it might still be, or be again. The "original spell," of course, is our creation in the image of God, who has spoken or "spelled" our world into existence by his mighty Word. The gospel is a "good-spell," a good word that will save us if we believe it.

In reading Narnia, we come to understand imagination as the divinely given human faculty of comprehending reality through images, pictures, shapes, and patterns, seeing what was, what is, and what could be through artistic re-presentation. Imagination is the counterpart and complement to reason. We come to know what is true through words and propositions, and through what is mediated in the heart's "groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26, NASB). By the imagination, sculptors and writers, painters and photographers, metalsmiths and quilters—and also, I submit, journalists and lawyers, scientists and farmers, truck drivers and

tailors—grasp, negotiate, and understand the world directly before them and the world just beyond them.

We are able to re-present reality through imagination because imagination engages both creation and interaction with the cosmos, not just static gazing. Through the tools of the imagination, art imitates life and life imitates art, and reality seeps through both. The products of creative imagination become part of the reality that is, in turn, engaged by that same imagination. Our encounter with art helps us to defamiliarize what has become habitual and mundane in our world and allows us to re-vise our art (literally to *re-see* it as it is), thus permitting godly change and renewal. Great hymns, novels, movies, and sermons can all do this.

The Christian imagination at work in Narnia and in Tolkien's Middle-Earth is illuminated by revelation, by the life and light of Jesus Christ. It is "seeing with the heart," as the apostle Paul puts it in his prayer for the Ephesians:

> *I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.* EPHESIANS 1:18-19

This is one of Paul's most arresting metaphors. Clearly, "the eyes of [our] heart" must sometimes be further

enlightened for us to understand what logic alone cannot reveal. We can be oblivious to things that God wishes us to know but that we cannot apprehend only with our minds. We may read the New Testament and come to know Jesus intellectually as a man with a message, but if we learn to "see with the heart," he becomes more than that. The Son of God is also a Shepherd, the King of kings, the Morning Star, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is a Lamb and, most certainly, a Lion. These images are all true, and they are all captured first in the heart and then with the intellect.

NOT A TAME AUTHOR

If one were to explain the theological and aesthetic premises behind C. S. Lewis's construction of the Chronicles of Narnia, they would look something like this:

> The world as we know it is not the world as it once was. The world as we see it and experience it is not the world as it was originally designed and ordained to be. It is now a world of spoiled goodness, of decay. It is withstood and understood only by those with an unfathomably wild anticipation of a soon, sure redemption. The world of shadows, almosts, neither/nors, close calls, and what-ifs will give way to the bright sunshine of a world that is free of evil, pain, and death.
>
> Secret facts inform our every attempt to ex-

> plain, or explain away, the universe and our place in its shadow-lands. In all of our millennia on earth, no civilization has been entirely able to disavow the stubborn rumors of a Lost Eden, an Elusive Nirvana, or a Passage to Eternity. In the end, these give the truest estimation of our predicament and of our destiny.

These principles were regarded by Lewis, Tolkien, and the other Inklings as foundational to mythopoeia, or the act of mythmaking. For them, *myth* was not a legendary tale of dubious authority but the grand, overarching narrative that provided a reason to be, and to become, for members of the village, polis, and nation touched by its encompassing themes, images, characters, and plot lines.

Neither antihistorical nor ahistorical, myth evokes awe, wonder, passion, and pursuit. A culture's myth explains a people's origin and destiny, orients them in history, guides them in the present, and points them to a future in which they and their offspring will live. It locates them in the presence of their Creator and Benefactor, Judge and Advocate, and answers the questions of their existence. A true myth has the power to explain where we came from, to shape our identity and purpose, to instill hope, to promote justice, and to sustain order. That is why Lewis can describe the gospel in these terms:

> As myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. *It happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle. . . . To be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths. The one is hardly more necessary than the other. . . . Those who do not know that this great myth became Fact when the Virgin conceived are indeed to be pitied. But Christians also need to be reminded . . . that what became Fact was a Myth, that it carries with it into the world of Fact all the properties of a myth. God is more than a god, not less; Christ is more than Balder, not less. We must not be ashamed of the mythical radiance resting on our theology.[20]

The only reliable, all-encompassing world story, and the one integral to Lewis's craft and motive, is found in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. It has provided cultures

from Asia to Africa, from Europe to South and North America with just such a frame for working out our salvation in the cosmos with fear and trembling. It is the true history of all peoples of our planet, and the only trustworthy forecast of our destiny. But the biblical narrative has been crowded out or discarded in civilizations that have ignored its relevant witness and forgotten its historical impact. How can recovering postmoderns take a second or third look at its testimony?

The Inklings' answer was to create fantasies and new myths that could serve as an alternate history, a winsome, redemptive, inclusive worldview that would restore personal dignity and a promising destiny to those with eyes to see and ears to hear. It is the alternative to the false history written out of a disenchanted and dehumanizing naturalism that reduces men, women, children, and even whole civilizations to instincts, impulses, genetics, and environment. The dreams and visions of these "cosmic accidents" nonetheless point them to longings that they cannot account for in scientific terms.

Lewis is not a tame writer. It is part of our deep longing to know that there is a homeland where we truly belong, an enchanted world that calls to us in the midst of confusion and doubt, a world that we can see when the eyes of our hearts are enlightened. That longing has seldom been better expressed than in this passage from Lewis's *Mere Christianity:*

> If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.[21]

In his fiction, Lewis was determined to turn hearts toward this true country, to write its history in our hearts by drawing attention to the echoes that already exist in our imagination. In his scholarship, Lewis championed works and authors that embodied the mythological premises he treasured, hoping to reveal the transcendence already present in human endeavor that has been obscured by the relentless cacophony of modern education.

From Middle-Earth to Narnia, from Perelandra to Cair Paravel, and on to Mordor and Malacandra, Lewis

and Tolkien call upon each of us to re-enchant the cosmos, to keep alive the promise and animate the search for the world beyond the world. The surprising reality of the fellowship of heaven can be glimpsed in Lewis's Space Trilogy, his Chronicles of Narnia, and Tolkien's Middle-Earth. That is what Lewis is talking about in this early review of Tolkien's *The Hobbit:*

> The publishers claim that *The Hobbit*, though very unlike *Alice*, resembles it in being the work of a professor at play. A more important truth is that both belong to a very small class of books which have nothing in common save that each admits to a world of its own—a world that seems to have been going on long before we stumbled into it but which, once found by the right reader, becomes indispensable to him. To define the world of *The Hobbit* is, of course, impossible because it is new. You cannot anticipate it before you go there, as you cannot forget it once you have gone.[22]

In his later review of *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis defends his friend's choice of genre, explaining that the fairy tale may be the best medium for directing wayfarers to their true homes:

> But why, some ask, why if you have a serious comment to make on the real life of men, must you do it

> by talking about a phantasmagoric never never land of your own? Because, I take it, one of the main things the author wants to say is that the real life of men is that of mythical and heroic quality. One can see the principle at work in his characterization. Much that in a realistic work would be done by "character delineation" is here done simply by making the character an elf, a dwarf, or a hobbit. The imagined beings have their insides on the outside; they are visible souls. And man as a whole, man pitted against the universe, have we seen him at all till we see that he is like a hero in a fairy tale? In the book, Eomer rashly contrasts "the green earth" with "legends," and Aragorn replies that the green earth itself is "a mighty matter of legend."
>
> The value of myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity. . . . If you are tired of the real landscape, look at it in a mirror. By putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it.[23]

"The veil of familiarity" is a telling phrase; in the realm of the fantastic, within mythical landscapes, vistas, and perspectives, anything might happen, anything be discovered. A reader is not restricted by the colors, shapes, creatures, languages, and predicaments of the "real

world." The author of fantasy can use these and also invent more, intermixing them with the familiar and the real to create a secondary world that encompasses and surpasses both. These alternate histories rescue readers from the veil of familiarity by ushering them into a transcendent realm unreachable by mere reason or coldhearted induction. We do not "retreat from reality," Lewis reminds us. "We rediscover it."

This is certainly the case in Lewis's greatest creations: the landscapes of the Space Trilogy, the foreboding domain of Glome in *Till We Have Faces*, and, of course, the glorious kingdom of Narnia. In our adventures with Aslan, Lewis renews in us a longing for "the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."[24]

Long before Willy Wonka or Harry Potter appeared, Lewis was re-enchanting a cosmos that had been emptied of significance by twentieth-century thinknocrats, who reduced the universe to numbers and human life to bodily appetites and genetic impulses. With a little help from his friends, Lewis has established an outpost on the edge of darkness, opening the wardrobe door to help us find the object of our longing, the true end of our journey.