

The Gospel According to Narnia

Disney's blockbuster film The Chronicles of Narnia introduces a new generation to Christian spirituality.

He was a balding, bookish, British bachelor in his early 50s who was more accustomed to the smell of musty old manuscripts than the sound of children's laughter.

But Oxford University professor of literature C.S. Lewis knew how to climb down from academia's ivory towers, connect with his own inner child, and write delightful fantasy novels that were the world's best-selling children's series until a student witch named Harry Potter arrived on the scene.

Lewis also wrote scores of thoughtful but reader-friendly books on Christian theology such as Mere Christianity and The Screwtape Letters, leading the magazine Christianity Today to declare him evangelicals' "patron saint."

Still, it's Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia series that made him a beloved household name to millions of readers worldwide. Now a big-budget, special effects-filled movie version of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe-the first of the seven Narnia novels-is on its way to movie screens.

For months publishers have been releasing a blizzard of Narnia-related books and products. Meanwhile, children, parents, teachers and churches have been experiencing the kinds of prerelease movie mania that typically accompanies the latest Lord of the Rings or Star Wars film.

Though some Christians worry that the movie will water down the books' powerful Christian imagery, others applaud the partnership between Christian-owned Walden Media, which has secured the film rights to all seven Narnia books, and Disney, the entertainment conglomerate that was a target of boycotts by some Christian groups until earlier this year.

But behind all the Hollywood hoopla and hustle lies the fascinating story of how one of the 20th century's leading thinkers created an imaginary world that has delighted children of all ages for more than half a century.

"I don't see any reason why being an academic should keep someone from writing for children," says Douglas Gresham, who fell in love with the Narnia novels before Lewis became his stepfather.

"It would be senseless to suggest that only children could write for children, or indeed only childish adults. Surely the best person to write for children ... would be the most learned and wisest person one could find."

Lewis explained the secret of Narnia in a letter to a child named Anne, one of many children he corresponded with following the surprising success of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

"Supposing that there really was a world like Narnia and supposing it had (like our world) gone wrong and supposing Christ wanted to go into that world and save it (as He did ours), what might have happened?

"The stories are my answers. Since Narnia is a world of

Talking Beasts, I thought He would become a Talking Beast there, as He became a man here.

“I pictured Him becoming a lion there because (a) the lion is supposed to be the king of beasts; (b) Christ is called ‘The Lion of Judah’ in the Bible; (c) I’d been having strange dreams about lions when I began writing the work.”

These comments reveal a lot about Lewis: his love of mythical fantasy creatures similar to the unicorns he had read about as a child, his deep immersion into the Bible and the depth of his freewheeling imagination, which he happily followed wherever it led him.

Lewis, Catholic writer . Tolkien and other members of an ad hoc literary group called the Inklings let their imaginations run wild at their regular meetings, which were held at a smoky pub, The Eagle and Child, down the street from Oxford’s classrooms.

The men would drink ale, smoke their pipes and read portions of The Chronicles of Narnia, Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings and other works-in-progress to fellow Inklings, who were generous in their critiques of each other’s work.

Faith was central to Lewis and Tolkien, but Wheaton College literature professor Alan Jacobs, who has written a new scholarly biography of Lewis titled The Narnian (HarperSanFrancisco), says neither man sought to preach to readers through novels.

“Lewis mentions in an essay that a lot of people seemed to think that the Narnia books were all part of an evangelistic

or educational plan, but they were nothing of the sort," Jacobs says. "He just trusted the images, the pictures that came into his mind, and made a story based on them.

"And once he said a very interesting thing about these images: 'Let the pictures tell you their own moral. For the moral inherent in them will rise from whatever spiritual roots you have succeeded in striking during the whole course of your life.'

"In other words," Jacobs continues, "Lewis believed that if you are really grounded in the Christian faith, this will show through in your writing. You shouldn't try to force it."

Jacobs says personal problems were the main reason Lewis began creating a children's fantasy shortly after he turned 50.

"He was at a particularly miserable point in his life, and great stories for children had always brought him comfort and healing in dark and difficult times. He wrote the Narnia books, I think, to comfort and heal himself-and they ended up comforting and healing millions of others," he explains.

More than 85 million others, to be precise. That means the combined sales of the seven Narnia books are almost a third of the totals for the six Harry Potter novels but twice as much as the first 13 Left Behind novels.

Unlike the Harry Potter novels, which are set in a school for witches, or even The Lord of the Rings books, which feature battles between good and evil but little of Lewis' explicit Christian imagery, the Narnia books represent a tried and trusted gold standard of children's literature, says Scott Bolinder, executive vice president of Zondervan Publishing

House. With parent company HarperCollins, Zondervan publishes most of Lewis' books, including 127 Narnia-related titles.

"Reading imaginative, creative stories is a great exercise," he says. "And if you have the confidence the author was a wonderful, thoughtful, leading Christian, this should provide even more assurance these are great stories to read. You can't lose."

The British Broadcasting Corp. created a Chronicles of Narnia film series in the 1980s, but these movies cost a tiny fraction of the estimated \$100 million to \$150 million that has been lavished on The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.

Many believers credit Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ for convincing Hollywood that there's a huge market for Christian films. But the man who is most responsible for bringing Narnia to the big screen is Philip Anschutz, a Christian billionaire from Colorado who's a big movie nut.

Anschutz-who's worth \$7.2 billion and is the 28th richest American, according to Forbes-made his billions in oil, railroads and high technology before buying up soccer teams, newspapers and Regal Entertainment, the country's largest chain of movie theaters.

He founded Walden Media in the belief that making movies such as Narnia (and an earlier Christian allegory titled Joshua) would make both spiritual and economic sense.

Walden will make other Narnia films if The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is a success. And the Hollywood professionals charged with translating Lewis' book into film feel the

pressure of staying true to the author's vision while not alienating Narnia's many non-Christian fans.

"I've never felt the burden of being faithful to a book quite to this degree before," says producer Mark Johnson, whose previous projects include *The Rookie*, *Moonlight Mile*, *Dragonfly*, *My Dog Skip* and other films.

"It is such an important book for so many of us that it would really be a crime not to do it justice, or to make big changes to it," he says. "Plus, I and a bunch of us would be run out of town if we did that."

Johnson and his production crew shot major portions of the film in the Czech Republic and New Zealand, supplementing this footage with more than 1,300 visual-effects shots of talking animals and the White Witch's warriors.

Gresham, Lewis' stepson who manages the author's literary estate with his brother, is anxious to see the results. "Making any book transpose from literary media to visual media is a difficult and demanding task," he says, "but in the case of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, this is an immense task."

Millions of people who have read the Narnia books can't wait to see the initial film, and many pastors, churches, parachurch organizations and Christian bookstores have planned outreach events based around the film's Dec. 9 release.

And even though the book version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* contains crucifixion and resurrection scenes that one journalist described as "The Passion of the Lion," Gresham

says his stepfather, who was known as “Jack” to his friends, wouldn’t like well-meaning Christians turning his childlike fantasy world into an in-your-face sermon.

“Jack never wanted *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to be presented or thought of as a ‘Christian book,’” says Gresham, who operates a Christian ministry in Ireland. “Jack said that we don’t need more people writing ‘Christian books’ [but] what we need is more Christians writing good books. I think he was absolutely right.

“And we don’t need more people making ‘Christian movies,’” he adds. “What we need is more Christians making good movies, and failing that, more people making true, honest and entertaining movies that do not depend on the false stimulations of sex or violence but on the true stimulations of visual beauty, integrity of form and plot, and intellectual intrigue and delight.”

Wheaton’s Alan Jacobs agrees.

“Millions of people, including Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, have read the Narnia books without even suspecting that they were Christian, and that will certainly be the case with the movie as well,” he says. “My sense is that, even though the shape of the story is Christian, it will probably have its best effect as a kind of pre-evangelism-getting people to see and to be moved by the picture of loving sacrifice that the story presents.”

Or as Lewis himself wrote in “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” an article that appeared in the New York Times Book Review:

“Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feeling.

“But suppose by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency. Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.”

Steve Rabey is the author of *Revival in Brownsville: Pensacola, Pentecostalism, and the Power of American Revivalism* (Nelson Books).

The Breath of God

The Holy Spirit played an important role in C.S. Lewis' life and writing.

In the Bible, the Holy Spirit is described as wind, water and fire. In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the third person of the Trinity is represented by Aslan's breath.

“Lewis reflects his profound assimilation of this Judeo-Christian tradition in the rich symbolism with which he surrounds Aslan,” writes Paul Ford in his *Companion to Narnia* (HarperSanFrancisco).

The characters who are touched by the lion's warm and fragrant breath don't begin speaking in tongues or shouting hallelujah. Rather, Aslan's breath serves to reassure them (as it does

with Lucy after Aslan's "resurrection") or even bring them back to life (as it does with the creatures who have been turned into stone by the White Witch).

And according to Thomas Williams, an author and visual artist who has studied Lewis' life, Lewis made ample room for the Spirit in both his writing and his personal life.

"Lewis believed that the Holy Spirit is active and dynamic," says Williams, author of *The Heart of the Chronicles of Narnia* (W Publishing). "He believed in miracles and thought the three-year remission of his wife's cancer to be one. And though he did not speak in tongues, he refused to dismiss the practice as invalid and made tongues the subject of one of his essays."

Williams also says Lewis, a devoted Anglican, believed in the power of prayer.

"He believed that the Holy Spirit assisted him in his prayer life," he says. "He had a highly active prayer life. Friends often found him in prayer at any time, day or night. And the topic of prayer appears in his writings more than any other subject. "

Lewis wrote less about the Holy Spirit than he did on other subjects, but this was because he believed the Spirit to be mysterious and therefore more difficult to describe in words.

Scholars who have studied the creation of the Narnia novels don't believe the writing was directly inspired by the Holy Spirit, even though many of the key images and ideas for the books came to Lewis in his dreams. Instead they suggest his writing indirectly reflects the spiritual vitality at the

center of his life, his intellect and his imagination.

The Passion of C.S. Lewis

The author of The Chronicles of Narnia was perhaps the greatest Christian writer of the 20th century.

Irish-born Clive Staples (C.S.) Lewis (1898-1963) is probably best known for his crafting of the seven children's fantasy novels that make up The Chronicles of Narnia. But his genius extended far beyond children's fare. As a professor at first Oxford and then Cambridge, he produced a plethora of works, from books to poems to letters to literary and philosophical treatises, that have contributed to his enduring popularity. Many of his writings about the Christian faith had such a profound impact on religious thinking that as early as 1947 he was featured on the cover of Time magazine and ceremoniously dubbed "one of the most influential spokesmen for Christianity in the English-speaking world."

But Lewis gave no sign in his early years that he would one day qualify for such an accolade. Though as a boy he attended church regularly, he was turned off by "the dry husks of Christianity" offered him there. While still in his teens, he abandoned the faith of his childhood and declared himself to be an atheist.

His subsequent conversion was unremarkable and occurred in two phases. The first involved taking the leap from atheism to theism.

Two years later, in 1931, sometime after engaging in a long conversation on Christianity with close friends and colleagues

. Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, Lewis quietly crossed over into the next phase-belief in Christ. He describes the event in his autobiographical work, *Surprised by Joy*: "When we [he and his brother, Warren] set out [for the zoo] I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did."

No heavenly visitations, no Damascus road experience. "It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake," Lewis wrote.

Subtle though the event itself may have been, the change it effected in Lewis was dramatic. In addition to developing an intense devotional life, he threw himself into his work as a professor at Magdalen College, Oxford, and more importantly, into his writing, producing not only scholarly works on English literature but fantasy novels and books on Christian apologetics as well.

Lewis' passion-and his genius-was his drive to reconcile rational thought with creative imagination, and it is perhaps this quality more than any other that has gained him such popularity through the years. Though his strictly theological treatises, including *The Problem of Pain* (1940), *Miracles* (1947) and *Mere Christianity* (1952) earned him a reputation as an articulate proponent of Christianity, it was *The Screwtape Letters*, a fable about temptation and faith, that first catapulted him to fame and caused his voice to be heard-a voice that, more than 40 years after his death, continues to influence believers and nonbelievers around the world for Christ.

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