



N REVISITING
ARNIA

Fantasy, Myth and Religion
in C. S. Lewis' Chronicles

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BENBELLA BOOKS, INC.
Dallas, Texas



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CHARLIE W. STARR



*The Silver Chair and the Silver
Screen: C. S. Lewis on Myth,
Fairy Tale and Film*

IN PLATO'S "THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE," people sit in a cavern chained against a wall; a fire behind them lights the chamber. Puppet figures and objects are passed before the fire, and their shadows are cast where the viewers can see them. The people chained to the floor look at the performance of the shadow puppets and think it's real life. Plato's cave is the classical version of the Matrix: people trapped in a world of illusion they believe is completely real. And some of them actually like it.

I myself, just the other day, subjected my entire family to such an experience. There we were, glued to our seats (admittedly they reclined and had cup holders) while the fire of a high luminance projector shot pictures of people and objects which weren't really there onto a great white wall before us. And we paid good money (fifty bucks with popcorn and drink) to sit there, watching sights and listening to sounds that didn't exist—total illusion, complete lies. Plato would say we needed to break the chains of illusion and turn and walk out of the cave into the light of the sun. That's where the real world is. That's where the illusion of the Matrix falls from our eyes. But what if Plato was wrong?

What if movies are a window, a doorway like Narnia's magical ward-

robe into a world far more real than the illusion first suggests? What if Plato's real world of sunshine and truth were to be found on the cave wall all along, or, at least, what if it's there now, in that wondrous, magical place of shadow and light we call the Cineplex?

C. S. Lewis was not a big movie fan. He once wrote to his friend Arthur Greeves, "You will be surprised to hear that I have been at the cinema again! Don't be alarmed, it will not become a habit" (2004, 120). But he said some positive things about movies as well the few times he talked about them. And what he said connects film to art forms and ideas he did spend a lot of time talking about: myth, truth and fairy tales. Through Lewis' vision I want to argue something that may very well belong in a fantasy book. I want to explore the possibility that fairy tales are true, that myth is history and that movies may be more real than the reality we see around us.

How Everything Meant More

Lewis understood that there was a magical window capable of showing us things that are as far from illusion as are people from the shadows they cast. His description of the window appears in the final book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Last Battle*. At the end of the series, the old Narnia has passed away, and the human heroes from the stories have come into the heavenly realm known as Aslan's country. They begin to notice something strange. This new country looks like their old Narnia. Hills, mountains, valleys—places in the old Narnia look like places here. And yet they're different. Lucy, the youngest of the four Pevensie children who enter Narnia in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, says of the hills and mountains, "They have more colors on them and they look further away than I remembered and they're more . . . more . . . oh, I don't know. . . ." And Digory, who saw the creation of Narnia in *The Magician's Nephew*, answers, "More like the real thing. . . ." (1956, 210). The heroes of Narnia have entered Lewis' version of Plato's most real world. Digory explains that the old Narnia was not the real one and so will pass away. It was only a copy of the real Narnia which never had a beginning and will never see an end. And so of course they are different from each other, "as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream. . . . It's all in Plato, all in Plato. . . ." (211–12).

LAWRENCE WATT-EVANS



On the Origins of Evil

“The Lion growled so that the earth shook (but his wrath was not against me) and said, It is false. Not because he and I are one, but because we are opposites, I take to me the services which thou hast done to him, for I and he are of such different kinds that no service which is vile can be done to me, and none which is not vile can be done to him. Therefore if any man swear by Tash and keep his oath for the oath’s sake, it is by me that he has truly sworn, though he know it not, and it is I who reward him. And if any man do a cruelty in my name, then, though he says the name Aslan, it is Tash whom he serves and by Tash his deed is accepted.”

—The Last Battle, Chapter XV

IN NARNIA’S FINAL DAYS, a Talking Ape named Shift and a Calormene nobleman called Rishda Tarkaan declared that Aslan, the Lion of Narnia, and Tash, the vulture-headed god of the Calormenes, were two aspects of the same being and convinced many Narnian creatures of this.

Aslan himself explicitly denies it, as quoted above. Aslan was the true

creator of Narnia, and Tash was the god of all that is vile, and the two are opposites, not parts of a larger whole.

But that leads to an inevitable question: *where did Tash come from?*

There can be no doubt that Tash does really exist; he appears on-stage in *The Last Battle* and eventually carries Rishda Tarkaan off to a hideous, if unspecified, fate. He comes to the land of Narnia because Rishda Tarkaan inadvertently summoned him. But how did he come to be in the *world* of Narnia, a world Aslan created?

Lewis never explains that.

In fact, Lewis tells us very little about Tash. He is never mentioned in five of the seven books in the series. In the fifth, *The Horse and His Boy*, Tash is referred to repeatedly as the chief god in the Calormene pantheon, but we are given no reason to believe he actually exists at all; other Calormene deities, such as Zardeenah and Azaroth, are spoken of, often literally in the same breath as is Tash, and we never *do* see any sign that they have a basis in reality. There are no tales about visits from Tash, no mention of his appearance anywhere. Aslan does tie the punishment of the despicable Prince Rabadash to the temple of Tash in the Calormene capital of Tashbaan, but that is clearly *Aslan's* doing, and not evidence of Tash's existence.

But then, in the final volume, Tash follows his worshipers into Narnia, where he can be seen and his presence felt by most (though not all) of the characters. The rest of the Calormene pantheon does not accompany him; in fact, they're never mentioned at all, even by the Calormenes.

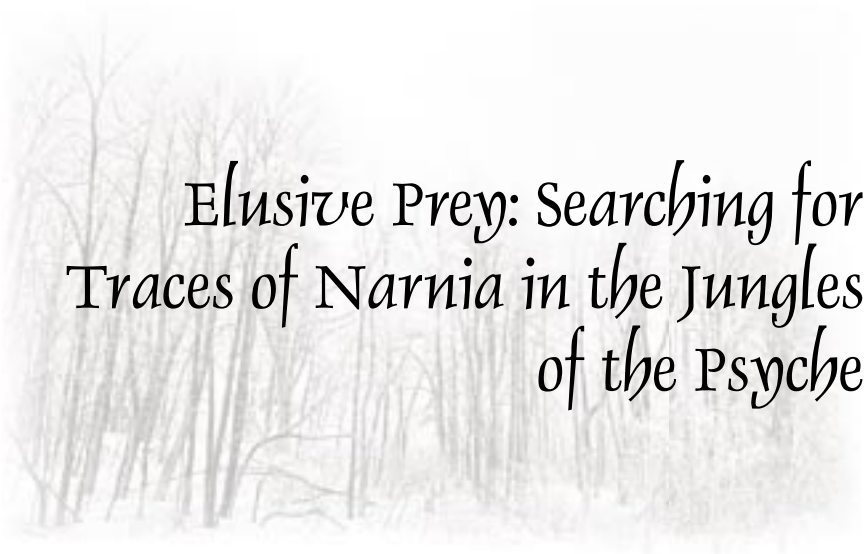
How does *that* work?

Was Tash present all along and simply not concerned with the doings of mortals, or at least not the ones we read about, while the other Calormene gods were mere myth? That would seem to fit the evidence well enough—were it not for the sixth Narnia book, *The Magician's Nephew*.

In that story, we get to see the creation of Narnia's world. Aslan, the great Lion, son of the Emperor-over-the-Sea, sings Narnia into existence—a genesis interestingly similar to the one Lewis' friend and compatriot, J. R. R. Tolkien, gave his own Middle-earth in the tales collected in *The Silmarillion*. In this beginning was not just the word, but the melody, as well.

One major difference, however, is that Narnia's creation is witnessed

NATASHA GIARDINA



*Elusive Prey: Searching for
Traces of Narnia in the Jungles
of the Psyche*

IT HAPPENED AT A DINNER PARTY RECENTLY. The conversation, having exhausted sex, religion and politics, moved inevitably to children's books (doesn't it always!). There we sat, fortified by slightly too much chardonnay, reminiscing about children's fiction we'd read—the best, the worst, the ones that changed our lives. And then someone asked the fateful question: “Do you remember when you first read *Narnia*?” Immediately there was a torrent of excitement. Like September 11 or JFK's assassination, everyone remembered their first amazing experience of Narnia.

Everyone but me.

For some reason, although I was sure I had read at least one of the Narnia stories, I couldn't really recall anything about reading them. Me—the party's resident expert on children's literature! I felt like an outcast, a freak, like someone who had been at the greatest party of the century and spent the entire time in the kitchen, doing the washing up. Of course, I was too embarrassed to blow my cover and say anything then and there, but later I did a little frantic mental interrogation. I googled my brain on the search terms: “Me AND childhood AND books.” A huge number of results emerged: sites devoted to various stories, favor-

ite authors, influences, memories. A constellation of sites on *Gone with the Wind*—the favorite book of my thirteenth year; a veritable galaxy—all hyperlinked—on Roald Dahl’s fiction. But where was Narnia?

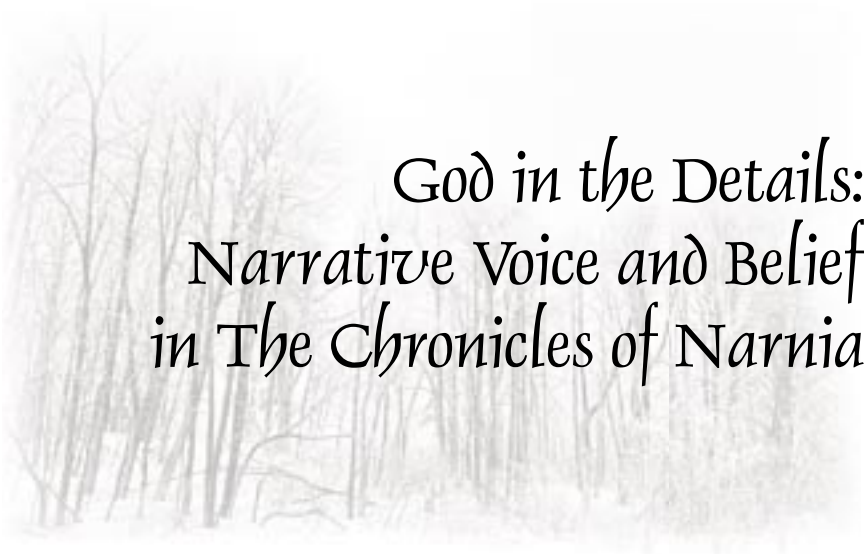
Finally I saw it. One lone reference tucked in between *Choose Your Own Adventure* and the *Jacaranda Junior School Atlas*. It said simply: “Natasha read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* at age ten.” Was that all, I wondered? This was arguably one of the top ten children’s books of the twentieth century; it was both popular and controversial, but I hadn’t found it at all memorable. Maybe I’d made a search error, or perhaps some of my mental hard drive had become corrupted. I double checked, but I wasn’t wearing my underpants on my head, so the latter explanation seemed unlikely.

I had to find out the answer to this mystery: why did Narnia have so little effect on me that I could barely remember it? I now knew the answer wouldn’t be found by a simple mental google; instead I would have to trek through the deepest, darkest jungles of my psyche to find out why Narnia was missing, where it had gone and if any trace of it was left. Like a rare wild animal, Narnia was an elusive prey; I would need every ounce of my skill, knowledge and cunning to track it.

So in order to prepare for my safari, I reviewed what I’d learned about Narnia as an adult. One of the most enduring contentious issues about Narnia has been the extent to which child readers are influenced by the various religious and secular messages Narnia presents. C. S. Lewis himself was quite open about what he wanted the Narnia chronicles to achieve. Discussing his motivations for writing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis revealed that as a young person, he found that the imposed obligation to feel certain emotions toward God and Christ, together with the stultifying sense of reverence inherent in Christian teachings, made the Christian message unappealing and difficult for him to understand. Consequently, as an adult, he wanted to bring that message and experience of Christianity to child readers in its “real potency,” devoid of any negative or dull associations. By writing the Christian message into a fairy tale, Lewis knew that what he was doing was deceptive: he hoped that the essence of Christianity would “steal past [the] watchful dragons” of readers’ resistances to religion (1966, 36–37).

This aspect of the stories has caused no end of controversy between Christians and non-Christians alike. Some groups have encouraged

NAOMI WOOD



God in the Details:
Narrative Voice and Belief
in *The Chronicles of Narnia*

A SA CHILD GROWING UP in a devout Evangelical Christian family, I knew that imagination must be carefully constrained by distinguishing between revealed truth and the merely make-believe. Though gifts appeared in stockings every Christmas morning, we did not believe in Santa Claus because Santa was not real; though we could not see them and tangible evidence for their existence was more scant than evidence for Santa, God and Christ were real. Of the many books I read, none played a larger part in my imaginative life than those by C. S. Lewis. With them, I could be confident that no unauthorized doctrine need be feared—no suspicious tendencies toward Roman Catholicism, pantheism, occultism, atheism or any of the myriad belief systems deemed untrue. And in those books my imagination sought relief from the scarier aspects of the Bible—the seemingly random way some were blessed no matter what they did (King David, for example) and others were cursed no matter what their intentions were (what was so wrong about Cain’s offering “the fruit of the ground” instead of a blood sacrifice?), the fear that I might inadvertently have committed the unforgivable sin. By contrast, the Narnian chronicles offered,

to use Tolkien's famous phrase, "escape, consolation and recovery" (1947). Lewis is known for the force and accessibility of his narrative style; the narrator of *The Chronicles of Narnia* is a fine example: he draws readers in and then establishes parameters for spiritual fulfillment and moral agency through the imagination. What is the result of such a strategy?

The *Chronicles of Narnia* inspire belief because of the distinctive narrative voice, a seductive voice that makes the marvelous seem reasonable, almost (but not detrimentally) mundane. Peter Schakel encapsulates the narrator's appeal:

He establishes the appealing tone of the stories and creates an intimate, personal bond with the reader. He conveys a reassuring feeling that events are under control, that ultimately, for the followers of Aslan, everything will turn out in a satisfactory way. And he creates a moral center for the stories, a sense of decency, honor, respect, common sense and intelligence. (2002, 88)

However, even though the narrator reassures, the *Chronicles* conclude in an apocalyptic melee. In *The Last Battle*, the narrator relinquishes his story after having killed off his entire cast, destroyed his lovingly created world and transferred the action to a new location: "And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. . . . now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before" (2000a, 210–11). Employing standard fairy-tale closure, the tale requires us to detach from any imaginative fulfillment experienced in Narnia to gesture to stories that cannot be told and will never be read by anyone alive. The shift may be intentional on Lewis' part to drive readers back to this world and the religion he sanctioned here. On the other hand, it also opens the possibility of exploring other prospects for imaginative spirituality beyond the "merely Christian," to reference his famous apologia, *Mere Christianity*.

SAM MCBRIDE



Coming of Age in Narnia

C. S. LEWIS' NARNIAN ADVENTURES apply a convenient science fiction conceit: no matter how long one spends in Narnia, hardly any time at all has passed back on earth. As a result, Narnian decades pass by in just a few earth seconds. This concept is a mind-bender, as Peter and Edmund discuss in *Prince Caspian* at Aslan's How. As the two pass ancient-looking cave drawings, Edmund notes that, technically speaking, he and his siblings are still older (in Narnian time), since the drawings appeared after the Pevensie children's first visit to Narnia. "Yes," Peter responds, "That makes one think" (1951, 156).

Thinking is certainly something Lewis wants his readers to do, even readers of his children's books. Thus the Narnia stories are filled with things worth thinking about: virtues, values, emotions and an underlying Christian theology. One of the issues Lewis wants his young readers to consider is what it means to grow up, to experience the process of maturing, which itself is a central theme of nearly all children's literature.

Such growth affected even the publication of these works. The dedication page of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* implies Lewis had in

mind a specific audience while writing the book, along with the general audience of children and adults who enjoy fantasy. That specific audience was his goddaughter, Lucy Barfield, who very likely inspired the name of the story's younger heroine. Lewis' dedication implies, however, that by the time of the book's publication, Lucy Barfield had matured to a stage when she would not appreciate fantasy literature; Lewis expresses hope that after yet more growth she will come to appreciate fantasy once again.

The conjunction of the theme of growing toward maturity and Lewis' science fiction conceit gives his characters a unique experience not directly available to readers such as Lucy Barfield: while remaining children (back at home), his characters can grow and mature toward adulthood (in Narnia). Thus the process of growing toward maturity is a key to understanding the characters. In fact, the Narnia books reveal Lewis himself maturing as a writer in his ability to depict realistically admirable characters.

Lewis provides several types of maturation experience for the characters. The first of these is the most mundane: while in Narnia the children mature physically as well as emotionally. By the end of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, for example, the four children have grown to be adult kings and queens. Peter is tall and large-chested, while Susan is tall, beautiful and gentle; Edmund is grave, quiet and wise, while Lucy is gay, golden-haired and valiant. All four speak Elizabethan prose. On their return to earth they resume their childhood state, but they recall their feelings and experiences as Narnian adults; in *Prince Caspian* Susan refers to her earlier Narnian maturity as having been "sort of grown-up" (27).

The most important means of Narnian growth toward maturity is the intensely painful or frightening life-changing event. Such events produce emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth, occasionally accompanied with at least temporary physical transformation. Examples are Peter's first battle with a wolf, Edmund's rescue from the White Queen and Eustace's awakening as a dragon. For Peter, slaying the wolf is a rite of passage, symbolic of becoming a man. Edmund and Eustace's life-changing transformations are comparable to (and in fact allegorically parallel to) conversion to Christianity. For both Edmund and Eustace, however, the transformation includes putting aside childish attitudes.

Edmund's transformation is fully detailed in *The Lion, the Witch and*