

*More and more are rediscovering the great enjoyment of reading aloud. An enthusiast tells all about it*

# 'Just One More Chapter —Please!'

By SHIRLEY PALMER  
Photo: Russ Busby

VISUALIZE a large room filled with about a hundred people—wide-eyed school children, intellectual college students, seasoned grandfathers, attentive mothers, bachelors, career women sitting on the floor and in chairs—lying down on the soft carpet listening as a fantasy story, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis, is read aloud. There is no discussion, there are no comments, and in fact there is no talking at all except for the brief five-minute “brown bag” lunch break during the two-hour interval on a Sunday afternoon. This is my church, the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley.

Picture this: An active sixth-grade boy whose life is filled with baseball and music saying, “I would rather sit by the fire tonight and listen to Mom read than watch TV.” A pert 16-year-old girl shares with her family the appreciation she has for her English teacher who reads aloud every day in class, an experience she treasures because of the years of reading in her home. And an enthusiastic second-grader with arm around her best friend, drawing her into the room saying, “Come on in, my mom is going to read. You’ll really like it.” These are my children.

These situations out of my life have convinced me that something is going on in the reading-aloud experience that deserves attention in our society today. I can verify that for those who have shared in this adventure, reading a story out loud—particularly a fantasy story—is preferable to a jazzed-up program on the screen. In an age of mass media, how can the simple act of one person reading aloud to another, or to several, compete successfully for one’s attention? What is happening?

When I take the time to read aloud to someone, it tells the person that I *care* about him or her. I care enough to share not only a book that is important to me but I share myself as well. This action tells the person I am reading to that he or she is important to me. When I know that I am important to someone it makes me feel good. No wonder the children respond with enthusiasm! They are secure in the knowledge that I actually look forward to the adven-

Shirley Palmer and her husband Earl served six years in the Philippines prior to their ministry in Berkeley, California. They have three children: Ann, Jonathan and Elizabeth.

ture of our reading aloud together. It makes them feel good. In contrast to the isolation of reading alone, the reading-aloud experience is intimate. It implies relationship.

Is there a technique to reading aloud? I offer one crucial suggestion. I believe that if I am the reader I must become vulnerable to the events of the story. If the story is sad I may cry; if the story is hilarious I will laugh. I don’t curb my natural emotions. In my experience it is not unusual when reading aloud, especially to my family, to be overwhelmed by the events of the story so that tears roll down my cheeks and the lump in my throat forces me momentarily to stop the reading. My tears say, “Yes, I have feelings, too. It’s all right for you to have feelings. You can let me know your feelings if you ever want to do so.” As I respond to the content of the tale I communicate to the listener that I am a real person.

When I read aloud to others I try to empathize with the listeners. Can I feel how the story is affecting the listener? If I am reading to children, can I remember how I felt the first time I heard about witches in fairy tales? Andrew Lang wrote, “He who enters the kingdom of fairies should have the heart of a child.” There is a good reason for this. I try to project myself into the place of the listener. With my expressions of heart and face during the reading I communicate to the listener that I truly understand how he or she feels in response to the tale. This does not mean that I tell them that I understand, or discuss how one *ought* to feel.

In reading fantasy in particular I often come across characters or events that make me feel uncomfortable. I have discovered that it is important for me to be able to accept what is going on in the tale. In my voice and on my face I try to show acceptance. Often the listener may be identifying with that very character that I am struggling with, and if I show disgust or lack of acceptance the listener may transfer that to his own thoughts: “She doesn’t like me either, because I have thoughts like that character.” If I can accept the situation in the story, I help the person to know that I can accept the real person they



Shirley Palmer and pastor-husband Earl of First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, California, where reading aloud has caught on.

are, with those same feelings. This acceptance helps build healthy interpersonal relationships.

As I read, I am aware of two important factors in the physical setting. The first is the voice. I remember a white-haired gentleman who came up to me after a public reading in our church and said, "Thank you, It is so good to hear someone read. I haven't had anyone read aloud to me since I was a child." What he was saying was that he remembered the experience of someone's voice reading to him, paying attention to him and it was a comforting, pleasant memory. As you read aloud to someone your voice says, "You are not alone." Even the *rhythm* of the voice feels good.

The touch of our environment is a second part of this experience. While you are listening to a story you can lie on the floor and feel the cozy carpet or sit by the fireplace and feel the warmth of the blaze or stretch out on the sand at the beach and feel the sea breeze. I have read many books aloud to my children under the spreading branches of a majestic tree as they lay on their backs on the freshly

mowed lawn. These physical factors provide a comfortable refuge that is also associated with good feelings in the reading-aloud experience.

The value of reading aloud lies not only in the interpersonal dynamics involved but in the literature itself. Life doesn't stand still for us. Good books help give us a perspective that will allow us to live our life with meaning. Books allow us to get a closer look, to hold in our hands for a moment longer the experience that we want to think about more deeply. The best literature poses questions about life that we must answer but which might not ordinarily surface in our everyday thoughts.

Of the many books that I have read aloud, it seems to me that fantasy most captivates the listener. Why? One reason is that it allows us to participate actively by using our imagination. I have had much to learn about imagination from watching my children. As a science major in the university I tended to be very rational and methodical in my thinking. I remember noticing how my children would sit for hours spooning sand from one bucket to another. As

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As they grew older I observed them sitting on the beach letting the sand sift through their fingers endlessly, or sprawled on the grass watching the clouds sail through the sky. My first inclination was to say, "Get busy! Do something!" How wrong I was! They did have something to do, and they

were doing it. They were creating a world of all their own and in that world they were using their imaginations to work through their problems and their worries with imagined characters who in some way resembled themselves. In doing this they better

understood themselves. Fantasy literature provides images which help us in this activity.

In Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy Stories," He talks about the capability of the human mind to form mental images of things not present. He discusses using that imagination to enter into a secondary world that is different from the primary world in which we live. This secondary world, the once upon a time world, is believable to us. In it there is an order and there are laws which represent an inner consistency of reality and truth. It all makes sense.

Every time I read C. S. Lewis *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, I enter the Land of Narnia with Lucy through the wardrobe, and go on to the lamppost. I can feel the soft crunching snow under my feet, and feel the branches against my face. I don't have to be in Narnia very long before I know that there is a struggle going on. There is evil in the form of the White Witch who has been responsible for the perpetual winter (and yet no Christmas). There is the true good in the form of Aslan, the great lion who is beginning to be "on the move" and with the warmth of his presence brings the spring thaw. Yes! This is how good crowds out evil.

When I read Lewis *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* I can understand why Eustace, the mean little boy, was turned into a dragon. He had been a dragon all along. No one could stand him because he was so obnoxious and selfish. Because of his contrary personality his captors could not even give him away, let alone sell him as a slave as was their business. I could easily visualize him turning into an ugly beast. Beastly was what he had always been inside! And then how exciting to read how Aslan, the Christ

figure de dragoned him, tearing away with his claws the layers of dragon skin that Eustace himself could not remove. He cleansed Eustace so that he became a boy again, and a likable boy at that.

What a look at the power of greed, in a person's life! How reassuring to see through his image what happens in our lives as Christ makes us whole again! This clearer view through a clean window is what Tolkien refers to as the "recovery," the essential ingredient in fairy tales. Fantasy presents a picture that helps us to see truth in a better light.

What else does fantasy offer to the listener? It offers a chance to escape. There is value for each of us in a healthy escape occasionally. In fact, for many of us a momentary escape from our present situation may be essential for our survival. And what could be more exciting than to escape with a horse—a talking horse—as Shasta does in the C.S. Lewis Narnia tale, *The Horse and His Boy*. Shasta discovered his father doesn't love him; in fact, he isn't even his father. Shasta must learn who he is, and he decides to run away. The entire book is about his journey, and who he finds himself at the end of the book to be.

Tolkien also mentions the consolation that is present in fairy stories. "They live happily ever after" is the good ending we like to hear. It is reassuring. Evil has been overthrown. Justice and right prevail. Usually there is a king and a queen who reign with mercy. We can believe there is going to be a happy-ever-after and it is in relationship. This is good news in a world that sometimes leaves us doubting what the end might bring. The fantasy may not be true, but the feelings it gives us are true. We can borrow the feelings as hopes for our own future. Sometimes this is a great help in our present real situation.

For us who are concerned about our Christian witness in the world, Tolkien makes clear that "the consolation of fairy stories, the joy of the happy ending or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous turn... is no essentially escapist, nor fugitive... It does not deny the existence of catastrophe of sorrow and failure; the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies universal final defeat and in so

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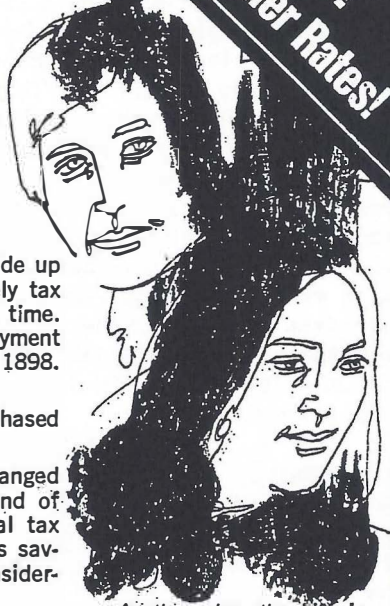
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far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world."

I think we can best understand this when we share in the story of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in the scene where the great lion Aslan has given himself in Edmund's place, and having been killed by the White Witch is lying dead on the stone table. I remember crying when I read this, and I remember the horror on the faces of the children when they heard this. Then with a flip in my heart came the joy (the consolation) when I realized that Aslan was alive again. I have been able to discuss with my children, long after the story has been read to them, this experience with Aslan using the biblical language of salvation through Christ, resurrection of Christ and justification by Christ. In this way I see Christian fantasy as *pre-evangelical*; it prepares us for the gospel.

The best of fantasy literature deals with serious questions that we are often unable to talk about in everyday language. It helps us deal with questions that we might otherwise want to avoid. Fantasy provides images which let us deal with serious concerns without having to outwardly recognize them. The fantasy allows me to look without ever having to become directly involved if I don't wish to do so. It doesn't threaten me, because I know that I am in a secondary world. Yet the questions being considered are the big questions that I ought to be asking in my primary or real world. I can find resolution as I watch the problems being worked through in the story, and then transfer the answers I discover to my own life.

I often see parts of myself in the characters of the story that I might not otherwise recognize. I can relate to the hero if I wish, as I see him find his way out of incredibly difficult situations. Often we can see parallels in our own lives.

I believe fantasy has two main concerns. The first has to do with evil. In fantasy evil is always there, in some form or another. In J.R.R. Tolkien's classic *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the struggle between good and evil forms the basis for the entire work. Fantasy also alludes to the struggle that each of us has with the potential for evil within us. Sometimes we think we don't want children to know about

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this. But this contradicts what the child may already know about himself. Children know that they are not always good, and the child sees the possibilities for both good and bad within him. He has to solve the problem. As the good hero emerges the child is helped with his moral decision. Children see that the decision for evil causes alienation and separation. This doesn't feel good. Recognizing this complex reality is the first step in working out the solution, and we are set free to accept Christ's love and companionship in our lives knowing that he really knows us and has forgiven us our sins.

In our family we have often discussed the fact that evil is sometimes disguised. The Emerald Queen in C. S. Lewis's *The Silver Chair* was so beautiful that it was almost impossible to resist her. She managed to capture the Prince and hold him in bondage for ten years. But what did she turn into at the end of the story? A tortuous serpent bent upon destruction for her gain. No wonder C. S. Lewis writes, "Evil is the destructive eminence which should be openly recog-

nized." Fantasy asks us to recognize evil, then to learn how to deal with it.

Secondly, I believe that fantasy tales deal with the fear we all have experienced: the fear of being alone. I love to read to my children the story of Shasta among the tombs from *The Horse and His Boy*. Shasta was alone wondering if there were ghouls present and, hearing the jackals in the distance, he became terrified. He was going to run at what he thought was the sight of a great beast when, "feeling something warm lying down at his feet, he opened his eyes and said, . . . 'I do declare, it's only a cat. Oh Puss, I am so glad to see you.'"

We later find out that the cat is Aslan, the great lion who also protects him as his companion on the cliff in the fog. What better way to communicate to children what it means to be not alone? This opens the way for a more special understanding of Jesus' words: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

But let me add one more thing: Fantasy isn't just for children! C. S. Lewis wrote an entire essay entitled, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say

Best What's to be Said," and in his writings make it very clear that his stories are intended to be read by adults. Tolkien adds, "If fairy stories of a kind are worth reading at all they are worthy to be written and read by adults." Countless men and women have been challenged by the questions posed in good fantasy literature to search out the gospel and in so doing have found Christ in their lives. How much richer we all can be for the same reading! □

#### Recommended Reading

Lloyd Alexander: *The Book of Three, The Black Cauldron, The Castle of Llyr, Taran Wanderer, The High King*. John Bunyan: *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Kenneth Graham: *Wind in the Willows*. Madeleine L'Engle: *A Wrinkle in Time*. Ursula K. LeGuin: *A Wizard of Earthsea, The Tombs of Antuan, The Farthest Shore*. C.S. Lewis: *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, Prince Caspian, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, The Silver Chair, The Horse and His Boy, The Magician's Nephew, The Last Battle*. George MacDonald: *The Princess and the Goblin, The Princess and Curdie*. J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Hobbit, The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, The Return of the King, The Silmarillion*. Susan Cooper: *The Dark is Rising, Greenwitch, The Gray King, Silver on the Tree*.



"Oh, children," said the Lion, "I feel my strength coming back to me. Oh, children, catch me if you can!" He stood for a second, his eyes very bright, his limbs quivering, lashing himself with his tail. Then he made a leap high over their heads and landed on the other side of the Table. Laughing, though she didn't know why, Lucy scrambled over it to reach him. Aslan leaped again. A mad chase began. Round and round the hill top he led them, now hopelessly out of their reach, now letting them almost catch his tail, now diving between them, now tossing them in the air with his huge and beautifully velvety paws and catching them again, and now stopping unexpectedly so that all three of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs. It was such a romp as no one has ever had except in Narnia; and whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten Lucy could never make up her mind. And the funny thing was that when

all three finally lay together panting in the sun the girls no longer felt in the least tired or hungry or thirsty. From *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, by C. S. Lewis, © 1950 by Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission.