

C. S. Lewis as a Writer

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In this issue of *Radix* I want to look at C. S. Lewis as a writer, to figure out why he's so great and why his work has been so durable. His books, beginning in 1931, when he started publishing, are still in print today. Further, basically everything else he wrote is in print. I heard from one librarian that the best-selling 20th-century author was C. S. Lewis.

Lewis was a great communicator because he met students. He knew what they were thinking. He was reading their papers. He was arguing with them personally and he cared about them.

Toward the end of his life, Lewis anticipated that his royalties would come to an end, maybe five years after he died. That was true of other authors he knew about. He was wrong. Six, seven, or eight years after he died, instead of fading, his book sales accelerated. That is why his two stepsons, David and Douglas Gresham, are very wealthy men now. They own the C. S Lewis estate, which is astounding.

So Lewis never anticipated that what he wrote would continue to be read. Many authors are tied to a certain period, and their work becomes old hat. It made sense in that period but it's not relevant now. That's not true of Lewis's writings.

For example, in 1940, in church one day (actually in a church service) he wrote a letter to his brother saying, "I've been thinking about a book by a senior devil writing to a junior devil. It could be a story." And then he wrote *The Screwtape Letters*, which the *New York Times* called "the finest piece of religious satire of the 20th century." It's a masterpiece. When you read *The Screwtape Letters*, you say to yourself, "This stuff is timeless."

Lewis begins *The Screwtape Letters* describing a fictional character he calls the patient, a young soldier. Lewis, who was in the First World War, wrote about a young man who was analyzing what was going on in his life at the time. The senior devil writing to the junior devil said, "Your patient has been used to having a thousand incompatible ideas dancing around in his head at the same moment." In my opinion, nothing could better describe post-modernism today with its thousand incompatible ideas.

Lewis also kept diaries until about 1928 and then stopped. But those diaries have been preserved. They give insight into that atheist period in Lewis's life and you see that although he is not yet a believer, the friends

he's choosing tend to be believers.

Lewis was also a letter writer. The largest collection of his letters was written to Arthur Greeves (1914-63). The two of them met as boys who lived in the same neighborhood and became friends when they discovered they both liked northern adventure stories. Lewis never saved letters that were sent him; after seven days he burned every letter. But Arthur Greeves saved every letter Lewis wrote to him. Because Lewis was a great correspondent, when he replied to someone, he always repeated what they had said. So we know what Arthur Greeves wrote, because Lewis mentioned it in his own next letter.

Interestingly, Lewis describes Greeves as a dull boy. He wrote, "I was a scholar. He had no ideas. I could understand concepts, logic, facts, arguments, but he had only feelings to offer. But nonetheless, I learned charity from him—and failed for all my efforts to teach him arrogance in return."

In the early days, Arthur Greeves was a Christian. He was raised a Plymouth Brethren, a very severe movement in England at that time. He was raised in that group. His father was very austere, a man who was impossible to relate to, a little like Lewis's father. That gave their sons a bond with each other. Then, a strange thing happened. Lewis became a believer.

As he wrote to Arthur, "I rode in my brother's sidecar. At the beginning of the ride I did not believe in the deity of Christ. At the end, I did believe in the deity of Christ. The long talk last night with Tolkien and Dyson had much to do with it."

So when you read these letters, in the early letters you see that Lewis was arguing with Arthur Greeves about Christianity, and Arthur already was a believer. Then Lewis becomes a believer and Arthur Greeves began to drift away from Christianity, first into Unitarian-

ism, and then finally into the Rosicrucian movement. So Lewis argued with him about that, trying to win him back to Christianity.

Lewis answered every letter he received, because, as a Christian, he felt it was his duty. Consequently, countless school children in America wrote him letters and he answered all of them—in longhand. Toward the end, his brother typed those letters. Lewis had a defect in his hand, making writing quite difficult. Yet for years he wrote all these letters by hand. In those letters Lewis was both pastoral and funny.

He was a great correspondent, and of course he also wrote books. In 1939, he was so alarmed about what was happening in Europe that he wrote *The Problem of Pain*. Out of that, the BBC contacted him and asked him if he would give a radio lecture on “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.” Lewis decided to take that challenge, and those broadcast talks later became *Mere Christianity*.

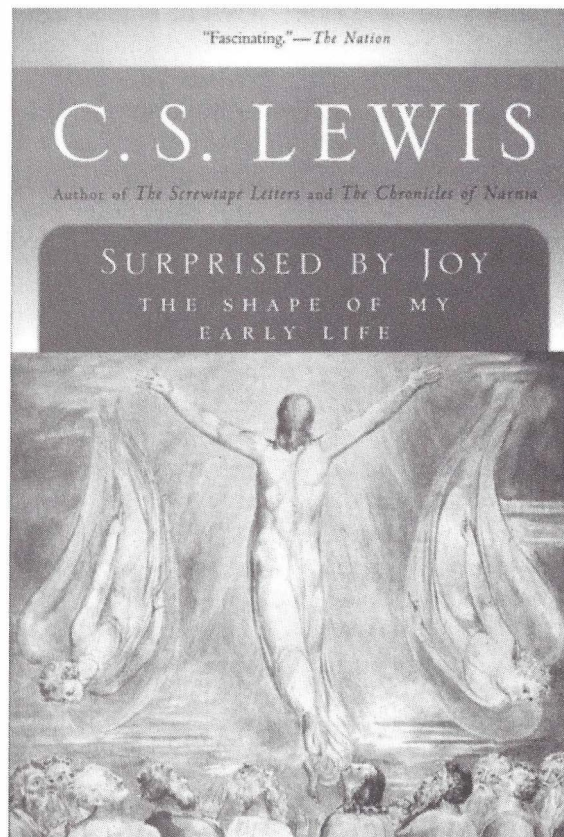
He also wrote the story of his life, the wonderful book *Surprised by Joy*. He wrote: “It’s the surprise that got me. I didn’t expect to discover God’s love and I did.” It’s a book about the shape of his early life, ending with his conversion.

He wrote poems too. In the early period of his life as a young atheist he was preoccu-

pled with writing poetry. In the letters to Greeves, you learn a lot about that. He wrote a poem called “Souls in Bondage.” Some people think he was trying to work through his post-traumatic stress syndrome. Lewis had been wounded in the war, in the Battle of the Somme, a battle that inflicted tremendous harm psychologically on those who fought in it. Many people think both Tolkien and Lewis later worked out their trauma from that battle by writing fantasy.

Lewis also gave talks. In 1939, he made a well-known speech right after the invasion of Poland, “Learning in Wartime.” I think it’s one of his greatest. In 1941, during the Battle of Britain, he gave his most famous speech, “The Weight of Glory.” St. Mary’s Church was packed with students who came to hear him at Evensong. You can get the book, *The Weight of Glory*. In fact, it has been recorded by a famous actor, David Suchet, who plays Inspector Poirot, and is a Christian.

Lewis spent years teaching at Oxford, where he was a tutor but not a full professor. Finally, Cambridge University made him a full professor at Magdalen College, and then Oxford quickly made him an offer. But it was too late. Cambridge had already hired him. In all those years at Oxford, however, he didn’t get promoted. That



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meant he had to have office hours; he had to lecture more; he had to meet with students; he had to read student papers. He had to stay on campus and eat at the high table with students.

Why is Lewis such a great communicator? In my opinion it was because he was protected from the Peter Principle—which is getting promoted to the area of your incompetence—farther and farther away from students and teaching. A full professor at Oxford has students around him doing all the work. Lewis once complained, "I have these flashes of poverty," because tutors didn't make much money. But he also said, "All of these things did me much good."

Lewis was a great communicator because he met students. He knew what they were thinking. He was reading their papers. He was arguing with them personally and he cared about them. What seemed like a bad thing ended up as a good thing.

Why is he such a great writer? First, he uses short sentences. Short, clear sentences. A new book has now been published of letters that Lewis wrote to children. I'm going to quote from one. He wrote a girl from Florida who sent him things she'd written. Lewis wrote back, saying, "You describe your wonderful knight very well; that is, you describe the place and the people and the knight and the feeling of it all."

She asked him whether you should use contractions, and he said, "There are no real rules. It's what educated people say. That's the best rule." That's interesting. But then he added, "What really matters is this." And then he gave her five pieces of advice for a writer. And I want to say that Lewis himself lived out these five pieces.

1. *Always try to use the language so as to make clear what you mean and make sure your sentence couldn't mean anything else.*

2. *Always prefer the plain direct word to the long vague one. Don't implement promises, but keep them.*

3. *Never use an abstract noun when a concrete one will do. If you mean "More people died," don't say "mortality rose."*

Here's the Hebrew language coming through Lewis, who knew Hebrew. That's why the Hebrew language is so poetic, because the psalmists used concrete language. "The Lord is my shepherd"—not my ontological guide. "He prepares a table before me. My cup runneth over." It's concrete. It's why we love the 23rd Psalm.

4. *In writing. Don't use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to feel about the thing you are describing. I mean, instead of telling us a thing was "terrible," describe it so that we'll be terrified. Don't say it was "delightful"; make us say "delightful" when we've read the description. You see, all those words (horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers, "Please will you do my job for me."*

(Maybe today we shouldn't use the word *awesome* so many times.)

5. *Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say "infinitely" when you mean "very"; otherwise you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite.*

The advice Lewis gave to this young girl was the advice he followed—which he had learned from his own tutor, Kirkpatrick, who insisted on clarity. Surely that helped Lewis become the great and lasting writer he is. ■

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