

The LION,



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the WITCH and the WARDROBE

~ A Fairy Tale for All Ages ~

BY EARL F. PALMER
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JASON LETHCOE

C.S. Lewis wrote *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in 1950 as a gift for his godchild, Lucy Barfield. He explained the gift to her in his preface to the book: "I wrote this story for you, but when I began it I had not realized that girls grow quicker than books. As a result you are already too old for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound you will be older still. But some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again. You can then take it down from some upper shelf, dust it, and tell me what you think of it. I shall probably be too deaf to hear, and too old to understand a word you say, but I shall still be your affectionate Godfather, C.S. Lewis."

Lewis later told a friend that he intended to write only the one story, but we know that something happened to this Oxford don, because his story asserted itself into

his heart and mind and became seven stories, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. We are grateful that he was carried away and into Narnia, because we are too!

Why is it that people as young as 6 and as old as 90 love the tales about Narnia? I found part of the answer from Lewis himself in an essay he wrote about William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Lewis challenges the deconstructionists who were beginning to dominate university literature classes with their various psychoanalytical, political, and sociological interpretive

models of Shakespeare's play. One simple sentence from Lewis clears the air when he reminds us that, first and foremost, *Hamlet* is a darn good story: "This play is, above all else, *interesting*."

The Chronicles of Narnia are darn good stories, too, and we are drawn into the world of Narnia the moment a friendly voice reads aloud the opening sentences of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. When the reader says, "Well, you better go to sleep now," we inevitably say, "Just one more chapter, please." And then, when the lights finally go out, flashlights mysteriously appear as

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little boys, little girls, moms and dads too, read on ahead just to see what's going to happen next.

Many of us will crowd into movie theatres to see the film adaptation of this tale just the way we did for *The Lord of the Rings* and for *Harry Potter*. Now is the time to ask one simple question: What is it we meet in C.S. Lewis' story that is so good?

As *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* begins, we meet up with four ordinary English children, sent by their parents to stay in the country with a family friend in order to

escape the air raids of a world at war. The children do what youth would naturally do in a big house where an old professor lives. The morning after their arrival, they explore this house of stairs, corridors, and many rooms, including some that are completely empty. The heavy rain and fog make being outside impossible, and anyway they want to see for themselves such a large country dwelling, so different from their home in London.

An almost-empty room is where everything begins. An old wardrobe stands against a wall, and the youngest of the four



children, a girl named Lucy, opens its door and decides to step inside. Long fur coats are hung in the wardrobe, and they feel good close to her face. What happens next takes your breath away, because the story becomes what Lewis described as “a story of the marvelous.” In his dedication of the book to Lucy Barfield, he calls the story a “fairy tale.” He says to her, “you are already too old for fairy tales.” Well, Lewis was wrong on one count. We are never too old for this story.

Why? As I see it, we love *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* because of a convergence of six elements:

First, because our imagination is encouraged to wonder beyond what we think we know of the real world.

Second, because we meet up with characters who fascinate us. We care about them and want to know what happens to them.

Third, because Lewis is careful about small details as a storyteller. The details that he keeps meticulous track of are both fun and important to notice.

Fourth, because we meet up with very deeply felt themes of our own life, such as love, fear, temptation, and courage.

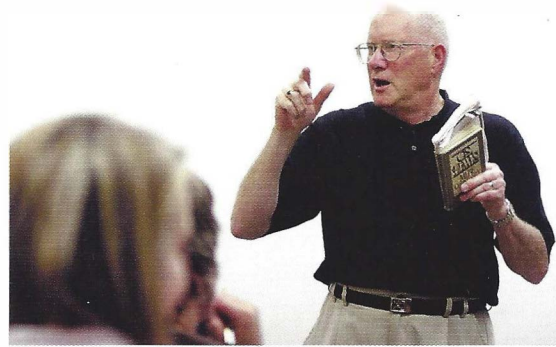
Fifth, because the grand themes of all great literature are there, too: the battle between good and evil, and the victory of good over evil.

Finally, because the story is fun to read and hear.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, indeed all of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, are stories of the marvelous that spark our imagination. Lewis once said that he wanted to write stories he would have liked to read as a boy, and Lewis as a boy always imagined animals that would talk, especially mice. The meaning of time also fascinated him, as well as the changes in reality because of distance. He was intrigued by distance in the first two books of his space trilogy: *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*. In *The Chronicles*, he could achieve distance from England and even earth itself by imagining two kinds of time and two distinct places alongside of each other. Time spent in Narnia does not use up time in England. And in a different world, he could re-imagine what good, evil, courage, and redemption would be like.

The *Narnia* tales are stories in which we meet up with talking animals — such as the brave mouse, Reepicheep, and the grand flying horse, Fledge. There are other creatures too, like the faun, Mr. Tumnus, and the marshwiggles, Puddleglum. The stories invite our imagination to delight in this place so far away yet, because of magic, so close. We find ourselves welcomed into the stories like the children are welcomed into Narnia, so that we look forward to each surprise on the next page — and best of all we, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Beaver and the English children, meet the golden lion Aslan, son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-sea. Aslan is not tame, but he is good.

The details in the stories have a way of falling into place just the way details should. For this reason, as a reader of stories



The WARDROBE in the CLASSROOM

Professor Teaches “C.S. Lewis and Values”

SEATTLE PACIFIC UNIVERSITY Professor of Foreign Languages and Literature Mike Macdonald pulls out a tattered copy of C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It looks as lovingly worn as an old teddy bear with a missing button nose. The spine has lost its glue, and the yellowed, marked-up pages are held together by a frail-looking cover. But Macdonald isn’t about to retire the book to his grandchildren’s nursery. “No book is really worth reading at the age of 10 if it’s not worth reading at the age of 60,” he says. “This is a book for everyone.”

This year, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is required reading for Macdonald’s SPU course “C.S. Lewis and Values.” For the first time in several years, students will read the text alongside other Lewis classics such as *Mere Christianity* and *The Great Divorce*.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, says Macdonald, Lewis teaches about “loyalty, how to tell if someone is lying, the relationship between good and evil, and the importance of imagination. We learn about the perils of pride, and the value of obedience. It’s why the book is so worthwhile.”

Macdonald’s academic interest in Lewis dates back to the early 1970s. “Former SPU President [then Dean of Academic Development] Curtis Martin asked me to teach a class about Lewis,” he says. By 1978, not only was the class a resounding favorite among students, but momentum for “all things Lewisian” was also building across campus. As a result, Macdonald helped found Seattle Pacific’s C.S. Lewis Institute, which brought internationally renowned Lewis scholars to campus for conferences and seminars. The Institute continues to operate today.

In his Autumn Quarter class, Macdonald says he’s seeing a new surge of interest in Lewis among his students — a phenomenon he credits partly to the forthcoming film adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. But it’s also the vivid illustrations Lewis makes about everyday life that resound with students. “In a generation that says ‘if it feels good, do it,’” explains Macdonald, “Lewis says ‘beware of feelings, they will come and go.’”

Now in his 39th year of teaching at SPU, Macdonald says he’s drawn a connection between the insights of Lewis and the vision of Seattle Pacific.

“Engaging the culture and changing the world,” says Macdonald, “is something I think Lewis would identify with.” After all, he explains, “Lewis was a man who spent his life engaging with people around the world about the great truths of the Christian faith.”

myself, I always advise other readers to begin your journey in Narnia with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and read the stories in the order that Lewis wrote them. In that way, we find the details when we should and not a moment too soon.

The themes of our lives are in the *Narnia* tales, too. We feel the cold presence of fear; we experience bad temper; we see courage, temptation, treachery, love, wisdom. These themes appear as they should

and are never fastened like moralistic stick-

ers to the stories; instead they flow out of the story. Lewis has a light touch, and it makes these life themes accessible to us, but never forced upon us. The emotional content, therefore, is realistic even though the story is magic.

Best of all, the grand themes are here, too. We meet up with the sheer terror of evil that deceives, tempts, and destroys, but yet is not as powerful as it first appears. Evil does not know the deeper magic of the power of redeeming love when one who has not committed treachery takes the place of the traitor. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, evil works well enough when everything is frozen, but it is not efficient when the thaw begins as Aslan draws near to Narnia. In *The Silver Chair*, the witch does not finally deceive Puddleglum with her sweet incense and swaying voice; he puts his foot in the fire

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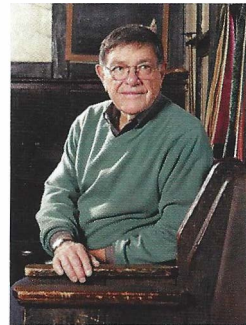
and since burnt marshwiggle smells terrible, it clears his head and the heads of Prince Rilian, Jill, and Eustace, too.

How should *The Chronicles* be read? My advice is to let them happen over and around you in their own way and without interpretation. Read and enjoy them first of all as stories, and then discuss what you read and what you feel and what you wonder about.

The grand Narnia story has a way of preparing its reader for the discovery of the vast themes of the Bible that Lewis has made real and new to our imagination and our minds — so that readers

discover for themselves the great golden Lion, the One who was called both the Lion and the Lamb in the New Testament. Lewis wrote to one friend, “Children know who Aslan is.” ■

EARL F. PALMER is senior pastor of Seattle’s University Presbyterian Church. A C.S. Lewis devotee since his undergraduate days at the University of California-Berkeley, he often speaks about the writings of Lewis to his congregation of 4,500 members, and to national and international audiences.



JOHN KERTLEY

He has described Lewis as a storyteller to whom he owes “a great debt in helping me to grasp the greatest of all stories — the one that is both wonderfully fantastic and yet true.” A frequent presenter for SPU’s C.S. Lewis Institute, Palmer is pictured here in *The George and Dragon*, a Seattle pub not unlike *The Eagle and Child*, one favorite Oxford meeting place of Lewis and his literary friends, the Inklings.

JASON LETHCOE has spent 17 years working for such studios as Walt Disney Feature Animation and Sony Pictures as an animator and story developer. He is the author and illustrator of *Amazing Adventures from Zoom’s Academy*, a book that is also a Summer 2006 film starring Tim Allen and Courtney Cox. Lethcoe, a “tremendous fan of C.S. Lewis,” drew most of the illustrations on these pages while staying at Lewis’ home, *The Kilns*, this past summer.



Join Us in Reading The LION, the WITCH and the WARDROBE

RESPONSE HAS AN ANNUAL TRADITION of featuring a book that is taught in Seattle Pacific’s Common Curriculum or University Scholars Curriculum, and offering that book free to readers. This year, in honor of the release of the film version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we are instead offering a free copy of that book to those who would like to join us in reading — or rereading — the C.S. Lewis classic. To receive your HarperTrophy collector’s edition, with illustrations by Pauline Baynes, call 206-281-2051 or send email to response@spu.edu. Copies will be available as long as supplies last.

