Slave Trading and "Amazing Grace"

Amazing Grace: The Story of the Hymn. Linda Granfield. Illus. Janet Wilson. Tundra Books, 1997. 32 pp. $17.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-389-8.

Far too often, it seems to me, people turn a poem, piece of music, painting, or other artifact into an icon quite removed from its original historical and cultural context. Not only does this contribute to an over-simplifying and perhaps misrepresenting of the work, but it also speaks of a shallowness in our own culture, I think, a tendency to assume that the past is buried and all present cultural expressions are simply commodities for our use, wherever they might have come from or whatever meaning they might once have held.

So, for example, we find wedding couples requesting music like Wagner's Wedding March (from a tragic opera), Handel's Largo (a funeral procession from an opera), or the hymn "Amazing Grace" with its stern Calvinistic theology of guilt and repentance. Perhaps some couples approach the altar in such a state, but they might wish to ponder the text and the story before choosing it as a wedding song. Tundra Books' new publication for young people, *Amazing Grace: the Story of the Hymn*, provides the opportunity. Here the author and illustrator, who also teamed up to create *In Flanders Fields: The Story of the Poem*, provide a very effective and detailed account not only of the hymn's origin in John Newton's 1779 collection (the Olney Hymns), but of its author's life as an eighteenth-century slave trader turned Methodist minister. The careful historicizing work achieved in this entertaining text and in its illustrations offers a model for other such narratives of the past.

Linda Granfield's story of Newton's life is supported beautifully by Janet Wilson's full-colour illustrations of scenes of slavery (in Africa, in the Middle Passage, in America). Dramatized by these illustrations, Granfield's narrative takes the reader in considerable detail and for the most part in engaging prose through the economic, geographical, and historical contexts of Newton's experiences. A huge amount of historical material is conveyed in concise readable form, although on occasion the style slips into a stilted passive construction, as in this reference to the industrial revolution: "Destitution and death were written about, and portrayed in art."

One might also quibble that the narrative and, especially, the publisher's jacket note imply a rather too direct relationship between a storm that the 22-year-old Newton encountered while a novice seaman off Newfoundland in 1748 and the hymn "Amazing Grace," published in 1779 after Newton had spent many years as a slave trader and many more as a Wesleyan minister. The storm may have "changed his life forever" and in some sense prepared for the hymn about grace that "saved a wretch like me," but the intervening years were the years of Newton's slave trading. Nonetheless Granfield skilfully and logically interlinks the details of this complex of historical and personal circumstances and does a fine job of showing how Newton became an influential figure in the anti-slavery movement towards the end of the century.

While some of the vocabulary and concepts of this narrative will be too demanding for the younger members of the recommended age group (nine and

up), this book is especially successful in its thorough and sensitive handling of African slavery. It manages to balance and blend its dual subjects — Newton's hymn and his life and culture — in both an entertaining and informative way, and therefore will be an important resource for a study of cross-cultural influences in the eighteenth century. It is unfortunate, then, that the book's title (while reflecting its genre) may mislead the casual observer about the book's significant content; a quick glance at the inside cover and illustrations, however, draws the reader into this striking account of slave trading and its English history.

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A New Biography of C.S. Lewis

The Man Who Created Narnia: The Story of C.S. Lewis. Michael Coren. Lester Publishing, 1994. 152 pp. $24.95 cloth+jacket. ISBN 1-895555-78-7.

Among brief biographies of Lewis, this is the most readable, most attractively printed, and most abundantly illustrated by photographs, not to mention well-chosen epigraphs. Undoubtedly, it can be read with interest by readers and teachers of children's literature. The question is whether it should.

On the positive side, it offers them a coherent account of Lewis's life and friendships, and well describes the meetings of his circle of Christian authors and friends known as the Inklings. Though too indulgent of his bullying tactics, it succinctly describes debates on religious questions at the Socratic Club. Finally, it offers a moving account of his happy but late and all-too-brief fulfilment as husband and stepfather. From it readers can gain a full understanding of Charles Williams's importance to Lewis as editor, friend and fellow-author, and a less full but sufficient one of Tolkien's, yet learn little of his lifelong friendships with Arthur Greeves and Owen Barfield. Readers can learn how and in large part why the Chronicles of Narnia came to be written, the difference between their orders of publication and of Narnia "history," and usefully compare actual with Narnian history. Coren goes beyond established fact, however, in calling the Narnian mythological sequence that in which the books "were supposed to be read (78). His selection of the first-published, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* for his only detailed account appears inconsistent with his recommended reading order. Had he focussed instead on *The Magician's Nephew*, he would have had to point out its allusions to the Creation and Fall narratives, and to Lewis's childhood bereavement via the hero's miraculous healing of his mother. However expertly done, his summary of each book but the first in a sentence or two leaves an impression of superficiality.

A yet more serious flaw is that writing the Narnia stories is made to seem the central act of Lewis's literary career. In 1944, after publishing his *Abolition of Man*, we are told, he was "too excited to bathe in any glory. His mind was racing now and he was eager to devote his energies to a new project, a new idea, a new set of stories, and a whole new world.... It was time for Narnia" (60). All this is supposition, and in any case before finishing *The Lion, the Witch and*