

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*

the Wardrobe (1950) Lewis completed his adult fantasies *That Hideous Strength* (1945) and *The Great Divorce* (1945). In fact, while writing the Narnia stories, he was also writing his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy* (1956) and his monumental history of sixteenth century English literature (1954), not to mention numerous articles, essays and addresses.

Distortions and inaccuracies begin early on, when Coren writes of the boy Lewis's "beloved Bible" (15), a statement unsupported from the juvenilia and family papers. Again, we are told that Lewis was an "unwilling" soldier (30) despite having volunteered, though Irish and so exempt from conscription. After fifty years' acquaintance with Oxford, one is startled to find the city "set in the middle of the Cotswolds" (21). Undoubtedly his father's death in 1929 and the purchase of The Kilns stimulated both Lewis's religious conversion and the finest of his letters to Greeves, posthumously published as *They Stand Together*. Yet it hardly "spurred him on to writer" (37), for he had been a compulsive writer since childhood, had already published two books of verse (one mentioned by Coren), and had been writing *The Allegory of Love* for a year. Though a lover of Wagner, according to Barfield Lewis only ever attended one performance at Covent Garden. Though sometimes seen at student productions, he simply wasn't a "theatre-goer" (47-8). He experienced music through his brother's records, and literature almost wholly through reading.

The Man Who Created Narnia is written with admirable fluency and charm. It suffers, however, from superficial reading of Lewis's works for adults and use of outdated sources. Coren mentions the ridicule of fascism and communism in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, yet ignores the hero's quest for the island, supposed source of the visionary experiences Lewis called "Joy," the mention of which would have added meaning to several episodes in the Narnia stories and to the chapter "And Joy Came In." During that feelingful chapter, Coren fails to mention Joy's collaboration in the novel many critics think Lewis's best for adults, *Till We Have Faces* (1956), or to link its female narrator with the discussion of possessiveness in *The Four Loves*. While mentioning two recent biographies, he repeats Walter Hooper's now widely-disputed claim to have been appointed Lewis's secretary, and to have met him regularly at a pub and at church (118).

A sceptical editor could have made this a more reliable as well as enjoyable book. Was Lewis really among "England's greatest writers" (23)? Did he "concentrate on children's literature" (67) after losing a Socratic Club debate in 1948, or was his incentive the campaign to defeat his bid for the Professorship of Poetry in 1951? Did the inception of the Narnian chronicles ensure that the "world of children's literature would never be the same again" (4)? Can we yet adjudge *A Grief Observed* "one of the most remarkable books of all time" (113) on mourning? Young readers have much to gain from Coren's biography — most notably an urge to read the *Chronicles of Narnia* — but will in time have much to unlearn.

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