

C.S. Lewis reached out and touched faith

By Peggy Fletcher Stack

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C.S. Lewis smoked 60 cigarettes a day between pipes and enjoyed the pleasures of alcohol and, shall we say, colorful language. He developed his theology in the pub among writers, not in the seminary among theologians. The atheist-turned-Anglican rarely left the halls of Oxford and was more interested in Norse mythology than biblical infallibility.

So why is this British college don disdained by Christians who see the Gospels as metaphors and revered by those whose believe in the literal reality of walking on water and resurrection from the dead?

The answer is simple: Despite his academic sophistication, Lewis saw the stories of Jesus as what he called "true myths."

He clothed these tales in allegory and easily dismissed critics as misguided, even stupid. He defended Christianity with wit, passion and elegant prose. He was intellectual and real. Few other writers can transcend theological boundaries so easily.

"All the arguments between sects, especially doctrinal hobbyhorses, left him cold," says Trix Dahl, a former English instructor at the University of Utah who has read and studied Lewis for more than 30 years. "For people who don't want some incomprehensible explanation of Christianity, he's your man."

Catholics claim him as a spiritual brother and some, especially conservatives, puzzle over why he never joined their church. Mormons quote his books in speeches, sermons and even Sunday school. Anglicans named a November feast day after him. And almost everyone loves his Screwtape Letters, with its saga of the apprentice devil working to seduce humankind.

But Lewis has a special appeal to certain kinds of Protestants.

In 1947, Time magazine called him "one of the most influential spokesmen for Christianity in the English-speaking world." Fifty years later, Christianity Today dubbed him "the Aquinas, the Augustine and the Aesop of contemporary Evangelicalism," and a poll of its readers found him to be their most influential writer. His books are hot items in Christian bookstores, selling millions every year. Many of his journals, manuscripts, essays and letters are housed at Billy Graham's Wheaton College in Illinois. Wheaton even has Lewis' family wardrobe (sans magic) and writing desk.

Now all these Christians are marshaling their forces in a campaign to promote Disney's new film, "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," the first in Lewis' seven-volume Chronicles of Narnia.

Like their counterparts in other states, Utah churches are sponsoring screenings of the film, as many did with Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." Catholic schoolchildren are going with their classes. Standing Together, a consortium of Protestant churches, has offered pairs of tickets to any Evangelical who brings a Mormon to the movie and vice versa.

Some pastors are offering classes and workshops on spiritual themes in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. Several rooms at the First Presbyterian Church in Salt Lake City have been transformed into scenes from Narnia. And its pastor, the Rev. Mike Imperiale, used his Advent sermons - the four Sundays before Christmas - to discuss such things as the battle between good and evil as represented by Aslan and the White Witch. He has explored Edmund's attraction to Turkish Delight (enchanted candies) and Aslan's parallels with Christ. He is looking at the horn Aslan gives to Susan when she's in trouble, which is an analog to Christ's invitation to call upon God for help. On the last Sunday, Imperiale will talk about the thrones of Narnia as a type of the royal priesthood of believers.

Imperiale has read and re-read Lewis' series and finds himself in some of the characters, especially Susan, the oldest.

"She's the responsible one who wants to keep everybody together when they are falling apart," he says. "That's maybe why I'm a pastor."

Lewis would find himself in many of the characters, too.

Although he was no clergyman, Clive Staples Lewis - "Jack" to friends and family - had an instinct for spirituality from his earliest days in Belfast, Ireland. He and his older brother, Warren, created an imaginary universe in their nursery and filled it with talking animals and made-up languages.

Tragedy struck when Lewis was 9 - his mother died, leaving him bereft of faith and angry at God. He drifted from the Anglican faith of his youth into a kind of atheism. But he retained a belief in the ineffable moments of longing that he called "joy." In other words, he never lost his capacity for wonder.

While teaching at Oxford in 1929, Lewis turned again to a vague belief in a supernatural power. "I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed," he wrote in his 1955 autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, describing himself later as "the most reluctant convert of all time."

Two years later, he and colleagues Hugo Dyson and J.R.R. Tolkien walked and talked about mythology through a September night. It was Tolkien, a Catholic

literary scholar and future author of Lord of the Rings, who persuaded Lewis that the stories of Jesus were "true myths."

Lewis' intellectual conversion was soon complete. Riding to the zoo in the sidecar of his brother's motorcycle, Lewis had what Christians would call "a mighty change of heart."

"When we set out I did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did," he wrote.

From that point on, Lewis began pouring out his newfound faith in fanciful children's books as well as Christian apologies such as *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, *Miracles*, *The Pilgrim's Regress* and *The Great Divorce*. He was a popular speaker in British assembly halls and on the radio.

Soon his work caught the eye of Clyde Kilby, an American Evangelical who taught English at Wheaton. Kilby compiled the first anthology of Lewis' work and started collecting his books and papers, which became the nucleus of the college's holdings.

Lewis died Nov. 22, 1963, a loss overshadowed by the assassination of President Kennedy.

But his legacy has been kept alive by Christians everywhere and will be revisited by the release of this film.

"Hollywood is certainly convinced that Lewis is hot. How long he remains so will depend on the box office take," Bob Smietana wrote in *Christianity Today* last month. "Yet whether Lewis sells will be beside the point for most Evangelicals. The Oxford don with a mixed pedigree is not likely to go out of favor with a movement that stands for classic Christian faith and loves a good story."

A sampling of books about C.S. Lewis

John Beversluis, *C.S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*. Eerdmans, 1985.

George Sayer, *Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times*. Macmillan, 1988.

A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. W.W. Norton, 1990.

Bruce L. Edwards, *Not a Tame Lion: The Spiritual World of Narnia*. Tyndale, 2005.

Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian*, HarperSan Francisco, 2005.

Colin Duriez, *The C.S. Lewis Chronicles*, Bluebridge, 2005.

Art Lindsley, *C.S. Lewis's Case for Christ*, InterVarsity Press, 2005.

Leland Ryken and Marjorie Lamp Mead, *A Reader's Guide Through the Wardrobe: Exploring C.S. Lewis's Classic Story*, InterVarsity Press, 2005.

Douglas Gresham, *Jack's Life: The Life Story of C.S. Lewis*, Broadman & Holman, 2005.

'Narnia' events

Churches sponsoring screenings or holding classes on "Narnia"
include:

Salt Lake City: First Presbyterian, Southeast Baptist, Good Shepherd Lutheran,
Calvary Chapel

Sandy: Sandy Ridge Community Church, The Rock Church

Draper: The Adventure Foursquare Church

Standing Together: A Consortium of Protestant Churches

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