



# Blind Spot: Snobberies, Sneers and Narnia?

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**Victor Watson** on the narrowness of **C S Lewis**.

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Let me make clear that my blindspot is my blindspot; I would never discourage anyone from reading the seven Narnia stories. And let me begin with what I admire in them, for Lewis is an extraordinary storyteller. To have created a fantasy universe - with evocative suggestions of a distant spiritual reality too - is an astonishing myth-making achievement. As I re-read the sequence, I was delighted by Lewis's narrative inventiveness - the lovely joke explaining how the lamp post came to be in the forest, for example. And then there are the characters - the Dufflepuds, the Marshwiggles, the heroic and ridiculous Reepicheep.

How does it work? Lewis is essentially a 'describer'; his descriptions combine a Chaucerian freshness with a filmic sense of technicolour and depth.

??the newly risen sun was at their backs and, of course, everything looks nicer when the light is behind you. It was a wonderful ride. The big snowy mountains rose above them in every direction. The valleys, far beneath them, were so green, and all the streams which tumbled down from the glaciers into the main river were so blue, that it was like flying over gigantic pieces of jewellery.?

For Lewis, writing is *showing*, and reading is *seeing*. His artistic method was well-served by Pauline Baynes, whose illustrations have a lovely miniaturist and close-focused purity of design, like looking through the wrong end of a microscope and somehow seeing *more* clearly.

Lewis is not just a describer; he carefully provides for young inexperienced imaginations, tutoring them and leading them effortlessly into metaphor and simile. You can see it happening in this passage:

*'Have you ever had a gallop on a horse? Think of that; and then take away the heavy noise of the hoofs and the jingle of the bits and imagine instead the almost noiseless padding of the great paws. Then imagine instead of the black and grey or chestnut back of the horse the soft roughness of golden fur, and the mane flying back in the wind. And then imagine?'*

Lewis's tactic is not simply to 'tell it how it is'. Readers are welcomed into the stories and encouraged-often with quite homely similes - to work their own cinematic magic. He hands over imaginative power so that even inexperienced readers can see the impossible and 'vision the transcendental'. In the next example, the writing comfortably leads the reader into the astonishing conceptual and poetic climax of 'climbing up light itself:

*'But before Jill had time to notice these things fully, she was going up the Waterfall herself. It was the sort of thing that would have been quite impossible in our world. Even if you hadn't been drowned, you would have been smashed to pieces by the terrible weight of water against the countless jags of rock. But in that world you could do it. You went on, up and up, with all kinds of reflected lights flashing at you from the water and all manner of coloured stones flashing through it, till it seemed as if you were climbing up light itself.'*

But in Narnia the vision and vividness arise from a bedrock of complacent prep-school assumptions and prejudices which are at best narrow and sometimes nasty. The children share a self-righteous contempt for anyone who deviates from their code. There is little tolerance of weakness, and being 'in a funk' is regarded as despicable. Lucy's specialness is that she is Aslan's favourite. Aslan is an all-knowing housemaster, God-the-Spy, who sees not only what you do but also the wickedness in your thoughts. The pleasure which the reader is invited to feel when Eustace and Edmund are punished is the satisfaction of a pack of bullies ganging up on the misfit. I find that hateful.

Lewis does not edit out his own prejudice and hatred. There are, for example, those extraordinary gibes against vegetarians, non-smokers and teetotallers in the opening paragraphs of **The Voyage of the Dawntrader**, with for good measure a passing sneer at secondary-modern schools. Elsewhere much is made of the fact that Jill attends an experimental school:

*'I shall say as little as possible about Jill's school, which is not a pleasant subject. It was "Co-educational", a school for both boys and girls, what used to be called a "mixed" school; some said it was not nearly so mixed as the minds of the people who ran it. These people had the idea that boys and girls should be allowed to do what they liked.'*

The jokes about state schools are perhaps not very serious, but the narrow version of Christianity is another matter. In the liberation of Beruna there is an incident in which Aslan comes upon a girls' school:

*'Then [Miss Prizzle] saw the Lion, screamed and fled, and with her fled her class, who were mostly dumpy, prim little girls with fat legs. Gwendolen hesitated.*

*"You'll stay with us, sweetheart?" said Aslan.*

*"Oh, may I? Thank you, thank*

*you," said Gwendolen.*

*Instantly she joined hands with two of the Maenads, who whirled her round in a merry dance and helped her take off some of the unnecessary and uncomfortable clothes she was wearing.'*

Gwendolen, one assumes, is pretty and is allowed to run around in her knickers - but what kind of Christianity deals with such cruel and dismissive stereotypes as dumpy, prim little girls with fat legs? We cannot dodge the Christian comparison, for a couple of pages later Aslan performs a healing miracle. Punishment and pain lie at the heart of Lewis's Christianity, with gloomy battles, the striking off of heads, and the wiping of messy swords. There is race-fear, too; for the Calormenes - cruel dark-skinned worshippers of Tash - express Lewis's hatred of Islam.

That is my blindspot. For all its imaginative vastness, the Narnian universe and the Narnian version of Christianity derive from a closed prep-school world, with its worst snobberies, its sneers, its narrowness, and its love of public punishment.

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C S Lewis's **The Chronicles of Narnia** comprise one of the most popular children's series of all time. They are published in hardback and paperback by HarperCollins, and are also available from them on audio cassette.

In September HarperCollins published Robin Lawrie's abridged and illustrated version of **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe** (0 00 185474 7, £8.99).

Illustrations on this page are taken from Brian Sibley's book, **The Land of Narnia**, HarperCollins, 0 00 1911619, £8.95; 0 00 673591 6, £3.99 pbk.

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