

A letter from Mr Lewis

On the silver screen

For me, visiting the cinema to see *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005, Walden Media / Walt Disney Pictures) was quite an emotional experience. Reviews of the long-awaited film had been positive, but I had been disappointed to hear an argument still raging about whether *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was based on Christianity or not, especially since denials of Christian content were reportedly being made by those closely connected with the film.

I need not have worried. I found the film to be a faithful representation of CS Lewis' book from start to finish. Thanks to recent technological advances, the talking beasts and mythological creatures, both good and evil, were skillfully brought to life on the silver screen.

Aslan was a real Lion, serious and Christ-like, yet I felt I could bury my face in his mane, just as Susan and Lucy did. The two girls seemed to represent the women at the tomb after the death of Jesus; they were looking confused and sad. I felt the scene in which Aslan was sacrificed – appearing helpless in the face of cruelty and evil – reflected some of the dreadful scenes in *The Passion of Christ* (2004, Icon). In contrast there was the joy of his return, in particular the breathing of new life into the cold bewitched statues and the defeat of the witch. I thought that characters such as the beavers provided welcome light relief from what was quite a solemn story.

The Chronicles of Narnia books can be read on two levels:

- as exciting adventure stories; and, for those who are interested
- as 'Christian' stories with a deeper, spiritual meaning.



Treated like celebrities for the day: interviews with local media

Anne Jenkins is a Science Technician in Parmiter's School, a co-educational, all-ability school with 1,250 pupils in Garston, Hertfordshire. Anne says she enjoys doing some 'hands on' science with children and regards it as a privilege to work with and support teaching staff. She has a degree in Applied Biology and has worked as a research assistant in both Denmark and England.

Anne's connection with *ACT Now* began because she attended the same church as Richard Wilkins (former *ACT Now* editor) and his wife, Janet.

This 'deeper meaning' may be patently obvious to many Christians but it is done quite subtly. CS Lewis did not want to force his faith on his readers. Nevertheless, I think denials about the film's Christian content were given out prior to its release in the hope that non-Christians would not be put off by a false expectation that *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* would be overtly evangelistic.

Dear Mr Lewis

I have a particular interest in *The Chronicles of Narnia* – a series of seven novels for children written by Lewis between 1950 and 1956 – because of a letter I received from the author in 1961 when I was ten years old. I had been reading *The Silver Chair* and at the end the dead King Caspian is brought to life by a drop of Aslan's blood. Eustace is startled and says, 'Hasn't he – er – died?' Aslan replies, 'Yes, he has died. Most people have you know. Even I have. There are very few who

haven't.' It was the 'most people have died' that I didn't understand. I asked my parents what it meant and they couldn't answer so they suggested I write to Mr Lewis.

After a few months I was surprised and delighted to receive quite a lengthy reply, although Mr Lewis had misunderstood my question. He had assumed that I had not read *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* and I was asking about Aslan's death rather than the 'most people'. This did not matter to me at all because for some reason that I still don't understand he explained the meaning behind all the Narnia stories and the thoughts in his mind when he wrote the books. He said he had been having strange dreams about lions and decided to write about a land of 'talking beasts' that had 'gone wrong'. Aslan, a Christ-like figure in the form of a lion, came into that world (Narnia) to save it just as Christ came into our world to save us. It couldn't be clearer. The other Narnia books are also explained succinctly. Mr Lewis said *The Horse and His Boy* shows how God can reach into the life of a non-believer, and reveal Himself.

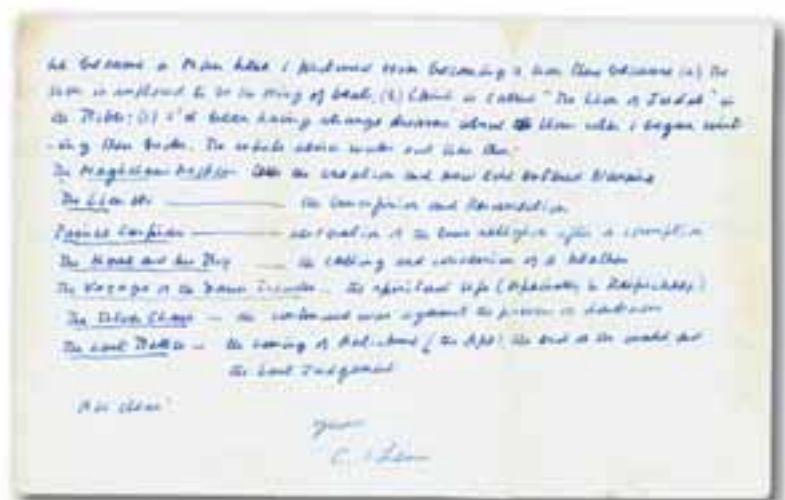
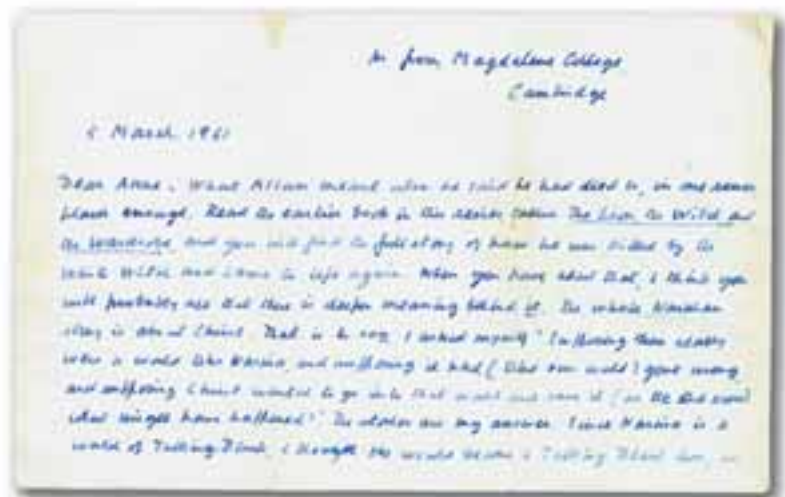
It took me a long time to realise the significance of this letter. It is, apparently, the only one to spell out the true Christian meaning of the stories. Douglas Gresham, Lewis' stepson, showed great interest in it and this led to the creation of the Lewis Centenary statue in Holywood Arches, Belfast, which has a copy of my letter engraved in bronze on the back!

The toast of Ireland

When the film came out in December 2005 and I read about the reopening of the debate about the story, I felt something had to be done. I decided to donate my letter from Lewis to Queen's University, Belfast so it could enter the public domain and be properly cared for.

Why Queen's University, Belfast, you may be wondering? Why not Oxford University (Lewis graduated from University College in 1925 with a triple-first and lectured at the university for three decades) or Cambridge University (Lewis was a professor at Magdalene College from 1955–1963)? The answer is simple: CS Lewis is Irish, not English; he was born in Belfast in 1898; to this day, he remains the toast of the city; and his mother, Flora Augusta Hamilton, graduated from Queen's with First Class Honours in Logic and Second Class Honours in Mathematics in 1885.

For this reason, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* had its Irish premiere in Belfast with a gala dinner at Queen's University, which was decked out to look like a forest.



The letter Anne received from CS Lewis explains the meaning behind all the Narnia stories

“Supposing there really were a world like Narnia and supposing it had (like our own world) gone wrong and supposing Christ wanted to go into that world and save it (as He did ours) what might have happened? The stories are my answer.”

Letter from CS Lewis, March 1961



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Anne Jenkins and Professor Ken Bell in front of Queen's University

Delivered by hand

On 14 June 2006 Gwyneth (my daughter) and I were met at Belfast City airport and taken to Queen's where we were treated as celebrities for a day. There was a BBC outside broadcast van and after brief refreshments we were taken to be interviewed by a crowd of assembled media folk. There were reporters from BBC, Sky, UTB and various newspapers from both sides of the border. It felt strange doing a recorded interview in Belfast with my own local BBC radio station from home, Three Counties.

Then we had lunch with various guests including the Pro Vice Chancellor, Ken Bell, who is a member of St Mark's Dundela, Lewis' local church; Dr Alan Gillespie, Chairman of Ulster Bank; and Derick Bingham, author of *A Shiver of Wonder: A Life of CS Lewis* (2004, Ambassador-Emerald International).

Over lunch we heard that Queen's University had just raised 40 million pounds for a new library that will include a reading room named after CS Lewis. The new library is scheduled to be ready by 2009. My hosts kindly invited me to the opening ceremony. In the meantime, like millions of other Lewis fans, I eagerly await the release of *The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*, the second instalment of Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy's adventures.

■ Anne Jenkins

Aslan was a real Lion, serious and Christ-like, yet I felt I could bury my face in his mane, just as Susan and Lucy did

"They will follow the Lord, he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west."

HOSEA 11:10 (NIV)



In *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (2002, Harvest Books; originally published in 1966) CS Lewis writes:

"Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument; then collected information about child-psychology and decided what age group I'd write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out 'allegories' to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn't write in that way at all. Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord."
(page 36)