



Home
Current Issue
Back Issues
The Archive
Forum
Site Guide
Feedback
Search

Subscribe
Renew
Gift Subscription
Subscriber Help

Browse >>

Books & Critics
Fiction
Food
Foreign Affairs
Language
Poetry Pages
Politics & Society
Science & Technology
Travel & Pursuits

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Contents | October 2001

In This Issue (Contributors)

More on books and critics from *The Atlantic Monthly*.

From the archives:

"Graham Greene's Vatican Dossier" (July/August 2001)

Documents from the archives of the Holy See reveal the deliberations among papal censors over how to deal with *The Power and the Glory*—and wise counsel from an unexpected source. By Peter Godman

"The Trials of the Tribulation" (January 1995)

In the "Left Behind" novels things get very bad—the

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The Atlantic Monthly | October 2001

NOTES & DISPATCHES

CAIR PARAVEL, NARNIA

In Defense of C. S. Lewis

*A rebuttal of recent denunciations of the classic *Chronicles of Narnia* as racist, misogynist, "poisonous" works*

BY GREGG EASTERBROOK

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The glistening citadel of this dateline does not in fact exist, but to children it can be more real than many an actual place: Cair Paravel is the capital of Narnia, the setting of what was, until Harry Potter, the world's best-selling fantasy series. The seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia*, by the mid-century Irish writer C. S. Lewis, has some 65 million copies in print in thirty languages. In the books several English schoolchildren are transported to a realm where a human society modeled on the Arthurian court coexists with strange creatures, intelligent animals, and magic. Always the young visitors perform some improbable feat to rescue the kingdom from sinister forces. Presiding over events is Aslan, an enormous supernatural lion who called forth Narnia, loves English schoolchildren, and appears whenever hope seems lost.

Although Narnia has survived countless perils, the *Chronicles* themselves are now endangered. On one front they face the dubious honor of corporate marketing. On another literary voices have begun to denounce them as racist and sexist works. What's in progress is a struggle of sorts for the soul of children's fantasy literature.

American readers may already know of the corporate designs on Narnia. *The New York Times* reported in the spring that the publishing conglomerate HarperCollins, which recently acquired the rights to Lewis's work, plans a major marketing push for the *Chronicles*. Toy stores will be inundated with Narnia plush, and HarperCollins will commission new volumes for the series. Any parent who has encountered one of the odious Winnie-the-Pooh movies produced by Disney—sitcom and psychobabble invade

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planet is invaded by "200 million demonic horsemen," for example, and that's before Armageddon and the Last Judgment. By Michael Joseph Gross

Elsewhere on the Web
Links to related material on other Web sites.

Narnia

HarperCollins's Web site devoted to the series. Includes maps of Narnia, profiles of the story's characters, and information about C. S. Lewis and the books' development.

Into the Wardrobe

"A Web site devoted to C. S. Lewis." Includes daily quotes, an index of Lewis's works, message forums, a guide to C. S. Lewis on the Web, a collection of essays, and more.

the Hundred Acre Wood—will gasp at the thought of the HarperCollins marketing department's deciding it knows better than C. S. Lewis did what constitutes *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Besides, Narnia's world was destroyed when its dying sun exploded, in the final volume of the *Chronicles*. This would seem to preclude sequels—but hey, who wants to be a stickler?

Furthermore, HarperCollins intends to soft-pedal the spiritual subtext of the *Chronicles*. Lewis, a prolific writer of Christian commentary, enfolded religious themes into the stories, allowing children to read them as adventure yarns and adults to appreciate the symbolism. In one book Aslan dies and is resurrected; in another he appears as a lamb and serves the children roast fish, the meal Jesus requested after the Resurrection. According to a HarperCollins memo quoted in the *Times*, concerning a proposed documentary, the publisher deems it essential that "no attempt will be made to correlate the stories to Christian imagery/theology."

Only British readers are likely to be familiar with the *Chronicles*' second tribulation: critics attacking the books' reputation. The centenary of Lewis's birth was widely celebrated in England in 1998, but amid the general affection was prominent dissent. The novelist and critic Philip Hensher, a rising figure in the London literary establishment (he's a Booker Prize judge), censured the *Chronicles* as "poisonous" and "ghastly, priggish, half-witted" books intended to "corrupt the minds of the young with allegory." Corruption by allegory? Bailiff, take him away! Never mind that one of Hensher's own books, *Kitchen Venom* (1996), all but glorifies pederasty. What Hensher meant by corrupting the young was exposing them to what he derided as "Lewis's creed of clean-living, muscular Christianity."

Hensher's broadside is part of a fad of anti-Narnia writing in Britain. The offensive has been led by Philip Pullman, whose *The Golden Compass* (1996), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000)—the *His Dark Materials* trilogy—are the most important recent works in the English fantasy tradition (*The Golden Compass* won the Carnegie Medal, Britain's top award for children's literature). Pullman has deplored the "misogyny" and the "racism" of the *Chronicles*, which, he claims, reek of a "sneering attitude to anything remotely progressive in social terms or to people with brown faces." He has called Lewis a bigot, his devotees "unhinged," the *Chronicles* "appalling" and "nauseating drivel"; and he went so far as to complain that Lewis made a technical error in a joke about how centaurs eat breakfast. A technical error about an imaginary creature?

Both Lewis's and Pullman's series take place on earth and in a parallel world; both have as protagonists astonishingly capable children; and the subtext of both is the search for the divine. But in Lewis's books children seek the divine in order to experience happiness and perfect love, whereas in Pullman's trilogy they seek it in order to destroy it. The plots of *His Dark Materials* are driven by the premise that God is evil—a celestial impostor who pretends to have created the universe and who so intensely hates flesh and blood that he wants people to live a repressed, joyless existence followed by hell, even for the righteous. Christian illusions about God are to blame for all the world's miseries; Christianity is "a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all," one character declares. The protagonists in the books strive to acquire ancient, mysterious objects they can use to bring about God's death. Along the way children are tortured and murdered, often with Church approval.

Perhaps we'd rather not know what it says about the postwar literary drift that 1950s fantasy concerned children who make common cause with a loving divine, and today's presents children who engage in grim battle against an immoral God bent on oppression. Moreover, this change occurred over a period in which Western children's living standards, education, health, and freedom improved dramatically. Still, good questions remain about whether the *Chronicles* really are racist, sexist, and overbearing about religion.

There's no denying that Narnia is an Anglo Anglican's fantasy. The realm is forested and cool—"Narnia and the North!" is a rallying cry—and threatened by encroaching southern cultures. The principal bad guys, the Calormenes, are unmistakable Muslim stand-ins: bearded desert dwellers who spread oil rather than butter on their bread. The sociological structure of Narnia is aristocratic and favors British imperialism. Aslan decrees that the Golden Age of Narnia will begin when "Sons of Adam and Daughters of Eve" sit on the thrones at Cair Paravel; because the portals to Narnia are in England, this means, in effect, that Brits must rule. The *Chronicles* record the deeds of two fearless heroines, Lucy and Jill, but they also contain numerous digs at feminism. When Lewis spoofs the postwar anti-traditionalist movement by having Jill attend a school called Experiment House, he gives the school a headmistress, which is supposed to signal its absurdity.

I have three children, aged six to twelve, and a few months ago I finished reading the *Chronicles* to them. Even as a fan I must admit that certain passages made me wince. For example, the wicked dwarfs ridicule the Calormenes as "darkies"; I skirted the word, because I don't want it in my kids' heads. But does having

characters say "darkies" make Lewis racist? He was, after all, employing language then in common parlance—and placing it in the mouths of the wicked. "Many older books contain race or gender references discordant to modern ears," John G. West Jr., a co-editor of *The C. S. Lewis Reader's Encyclopedia*, told me recently. "We don't stop reading Twain or Darwin because they used racial terms no author uses today."

While reading aloud I also reworded what is to Narnia's detractors the most objectionable passage, which occurs near the end of the series. In it Susan, a heroine in early books, does not ascend directly to heaven with the other children, because she is "no longer a friend of Narnia ... she's interested in nothing now-a-days except nylons and lipstick and invitations." Lewis, a bachelor until late in life, when he married a Jewish-born divorcee (hardly the choice of a Christian bigot), had conflicted views about women and seems to have held his character's sexual independence against her. But does leaving Susan back in London attending dull parties make him sexist? It's hardly unrealistic to craft a character whose priority is socializing. Recently Pullman cited the Susan passage in denouncing the Narnia books to a reporter for *The Washington Post*, saying that for Lewis, a girl's achieving sexual maturity was "so dreadful and so redolent of sin that he had to send her to Hell." But the *Chronicles* don't send Susan to hell. She just doesn't participate in the special ascension that other characters experience. Instead she continues with normal life and, presumably, joins her companions in paradise later.

In Narnia, after all, heaven has an open-door policy. In the final book of the *Chronicles*, Emeth, a noble Calormene, dies trying to save others. Emeth ("Truth" in Hebrew) then finds himself in heaven, being praised by Aslan, and asks why he has been permitted to enter when in life he worshipped in a rival faith. Aslan tells Emeth that the specifics of religion do not matter: virtue is what's important, and paradise awaits anyone of good will. This seems an up-to-date message—and a reason the Narnia books should stand exactly as they are.

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