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# Myth Made Truth: Origins of the Chronicles of Narnia

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# Myth Made Truth: Origins of the Chronicles of Narnia

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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ON

**C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS**

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**Myth Made Truth:  
Origins of *The Chronicles of Narnia***

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**Myth Made Truth:  
The Origins of the Chronicles of Narnia**  
by Mark Bane

In the process of writing the Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis gradually expanded the breadth and scope of his literary ambitions. What was foreseen from the outset as a collection of stories for children developed into a complex depiction of an entire moral universe. As the seven books progress, Lewis unfolds the whole Divine plan for this universe from its creation to its apocalypse. However, the uniqueness of Lewis' literary achievement stems from the fact that Lewis manages to do two things at once. That is, he remains faithful to his original intention to write stories for children while adding in subtle moral and spiritual complexities. These complexities do not seem like authorial intrusions or editorializing. They are instead woven into the very fabric of Lewis's creative universe. Thus, the Chronicles of Narnia are a series of books that can delight the

senses as they challenge and stir the soul.

To understand the above statement, it is necessary to examine the circumstances under which these books were written. During the Second World War, Lewis took in a number of children who had been evacuated from their homes due to the Nazi air raids on London. Having no children of his own, he decided that the best way that he could entertain his young guests would be to tell them stories. A very short fragment of one such story survives. In it, four children (two girls and two boys) are evacuated from their home, separated from their parents, and sent to live with a strange old professor. Not only is this fragment nearly identical to the opening passages of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, but also it is a predicament very similar to the one Lewis's own real-life houseguests faced. After all, Lewis himself was (by the

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children's standards) a "very old professor," and no doubt, a bit intimidating to his young lodgers. Given that the author sought to make art imitate real life in this fashion, it is highly possible that Lewis's original intention in writing the Chronicles was to entertain these young evacuees with a fantasized version of their own stories.

For whatever reason, C.S. Lewis chose to begin his tale in rural England, at the house of the aforementioned old professor. But what was to happen next? This was to be a children's story, so Lewis drew on the sort of things that delighted him as a child. He had an enduring love of "fairy stories," so that particular genre immediately. Also, it was a perfect format for a children's book — it requires no romance, nor does it need much authorial intrusion.

Thus, it was decided that his book would be a tale of magic and fantastic adventure. But what sort of magical adventures could be had in the musty old house of an equally old and musty professor? Not many — which is why Lewis found it necessary to expand his setting. From his earliest childhood days, he had been occupied with the creation of his own imaginary country: Animal-land, which was later assumed into the larger state of Boxen. Lewis's young imagination was meticulously detailed — he even plotted out his nation's steamship routes and railway timetables. Though no steamships or railways exist in Narnia, that country beyond the wardrobe reflects the same great imaginative detail present in the author's earlier creations. Soon Lewis's fairyland developed its own history, geography, myths, legends, and prophecies. The loving care he addressed

to the minutiae of Narnian life reveals that Lewis was not just intending to write a children's story anymore; he was also participating in that powerful magic that Professor Tolkien calls "sub-creation."

One of the most distinctive details of the young Lewis's world of Boxen was its inhabitants. Many of the most illustrious Boxonians were, in fact, walking, talking "dressed animals." These anthropomorphized beasts quickly found their way into Narnia in the form of such memorable characters as the swordwielding mouse-at-arms Reepicheep, the skeptical horse Bree, and of course, the great Lion, Aslan. However, the use of animals as main characters was not just a continuation of Lewis's boyhood fantasies. It was a deliberate, calculated decision on the author's part. By using animals, Lewis could communicate very subtle shades of human personality without taxing his young audience's level of comprehension or interest. What better way to show royal majesty and glory than by making Aslan "the King of the Beasts?"

It was always Lewis's intention to write the sort of books that he himself would want to read. In fact, he wrote his celebrated space trilogy because there were not enough science fiction stories of the kind he wanted to read being written. Therefore, Narnia became a place where Lewis could showcase some of his own literary interests. He had always enjoyed ancient mythology, so he added to his kingdom of talking animals many characters from the classical tradition, including fauns, satyrs, centaurs, dryads, naiads, and many other mythical creatures. Even Bacchus, the Roman god of wine made a special appearance. From the

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Norse mythologies, Lewis incorporated giants and dwarves and the World Ash Tree.

Next to classical mythology, the medieval tradition of chivalry and knights in armor was dearest to Lewis's heart. Narnia developed into a realm where courtly ideals flourished under its stately kings and queens. There was knighthood to be won on the field of battle, and a strict code of honor one breached at his own peril. Lewis even added a form of "Saracens" for his Narnian knights to contend with: the Persian-like Calormenes under their vulture-god Tash. Also, Lewis borrowed the medieval ideas of the belle dame sans merci and the Arthurian Morgan Le Fay in creating his own villainesses: the White Witch Jadis, and the Lady of the Green Kirtle.

C.S. Lewis borrowed these elements because they were things he enjoyed and identified with himself. He sought to communicate his love for the heroic tales of antiquity, and perhaps to cultivate that same love in a new generation of readers.

Against this backdrop, in this newly-imagined world of Narnia, Lewis would write the stories themselves. He did this in a unique way, relying on pictures that he would see in his mind. Certain pictures, he said, would organize themselves together as a story. It was then the author's job to "fill in the gaps," so to speak. One picture, a faun with an umbrella, resolved itself into Mr. Tumnus. A snow queen on a sledge became the White Witch. Lewis formed these pictures into stories as a way of "exorcizing" them from his mind. The picture of the faun had resided in his head ever since his teenage years. Before he wrote Aslan into the story, Lewis was

visited for a number of nights with dreams of lions. These haunting pictures came to him from an unknown source, but many of them all but demanded to be voiced in his stories. An interesting parallel to this phenomenon occurs in the third book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Here, a picture of a ship at sea grows and expands until it actually becomes a ship at sea, and a doorway into Narnia. It is a fine illustration of Lewis's own intention to make his inner pictures come alive and act as windows opening in on his created world of imagination.

Up to this point, little has been said about the spiritual, the religious, well why not say it: the *Christian* element of the Narnia books. This is because that element was not present at the birth of the narrative. Lewis has emphatically denied that he sat down to write a series of stories that were encoded depictions of Christian truth, or moral lessons sugarcoated to appeal to children. Nevertheless, the Christian element of the Narnian mythos is unmistakable. So how did this element find its way into the stories? Well, in a sub-creative fashion, Lewis saw his handiwork — the Lion Aslan, and he saw that it was good. Immediately the author recognized the potential of his character. A lion had come "bounding" into the story, and He was obviously one of great importance. Lewis quickly noted the numinous awe in which the other characters held him. Also, it was not lost on him that the lion was a recurrent Biblical symbol for the Christ. Here the author asked "what if the Son of God entered into a world of talking animals in the form of a lion?" If Lewis could present a Narnian version of the Incarnation, he would have a forum to

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articulate some of his most precious feelings about his God. And he could do so without the Law, without religious duty and hypocrisy entering into the equation. It had been Lewis's personal experience that what made it hard to feel the way one ought to feel about one's God was the sheer fact that there were feelings one *ought* to have. With Aslan, Lewis had a tabula rasa. He could enjoin the reader to feel love and devotion without that suffocating sense of duty. He could convey his own great gratitude and love for his God without sermonizing. He could, as he once put it, "steal past those watchful dragons."

In the first two books, Aslan is a clear-cut figure. He inspires fear in his enemies and love and devotion in his friends. He makes the four children from our world high kings and queens, and banishes all traces of evil from his kingdom. Here Lewis is speaking of the first glorious days of one's spiritual experience.

However, with the advent of the third book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis takes the reader into deeper theological waters. Here Aslan seems more distant; he appears in other forms, such as a lamb and an albatross. Lewis deepens the spiritual experience of his characters by making Aslan harder to find. Faith now enters into the equation — belief without seeing. This is best embodied by the mouse Reepicheep, who is determined to find Aslan's Country, even if he has to swim to the end of the world to do so. Also in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis introduces the idea of the skeptic, the non-believer, in the form of Eustace Clarence Scrubb. Eustace is turned into a dragon through his own greed and ignorance.

However, Aslan peels away the layers of dragon skin until the real boy underneath is revealed. By this, the reader comes to understand the process of conversion and sanctification.

The next two books, *The Silver Chair* and *The Horse and his Boy*, reveal some of Aslan's "wilder" aspects. He is after all, "not a tame lion." In *The Silver Chair*, when Jill and Eustace first get into Aslan's country, Jill pushes her companion off a cliff. For this piece of grave mischief, Aslan comes between her and a stream. He warns Jill that he has eaten small girls before, "and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms." However, even in this fearful aspect, Aslan wants the girl to come and drink. The fear of the Lord should not prevent us from coming to Him. Later, Aslan gives Jill a number of signs to follow, which she promptly forgets. When she despairs about this in a dream, the Lion exhorts her to take courage. "I will not always be scolding," Aslan says. Lewis is illustrating the fact that God's correction is from love, not austerity. But God is a just God, as shown in *The Horse and his Boy*. Aslan scratches the Calormene princess Aravis, so that she will remember how it feels. Also, Lewis portrays Aslan as a Divine hunter, a hound of heaven, in this novel. The Lion pursues Shasta throughout his quest, driving him on to his destination and his destiny.

Having revealed God's divine nature in the previous books, Lewis uses the last two Chronicles to address eschatological points — namely, the beginning and end of Narnia. *The Magician's Nephew* gives us Narnia's Genesis account. Here Aslan is established as the Creator — he *sings*

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Narnia into existence, and gives the animals the gift of speech. Evil enters the young world through a fallen creature: Jadis, queen of the dead world Charn. Like the story of Eden, Lewis incorporates a garden with very peculiar and powerful fruit. He even depicts man's role in the creation by establishing Narnia with a human king and queen. *The Last Battle* shows the end of Narnia. First we see its descent into wickedness, and its rejection of Aslan's authority. Next, the last few faithful Narnians are persecuted. Just when things look darkest, Aslan returns to save the day, but he does so by making it the Last Day. All worlds have their ends, according to Lewis, except Aslan's own country. All of the faithful friends of Narnia enter into Aslan's country, where they are reunited with old friends. But this is not the end. Aslan's guests are invited to go "further up and further in" to glorious adventures too beautiful to describe. Lewis ends his last Narnia story by giving the readers an imaginative foretaste of what heaven is like.

In the final analysis, it is difficult to seize upon any one thing as Lewis's sole intention in writing the Chronicles. His purposes were built on top of one another. He proceeded up from children's fairy tales and took them into the realms of intense theology. However, neither side enjoys success at the expense of the other. It is the fact that the Chronicles *are* fairy stories that makes their spiritual richness shine out, and it is that richness that makes them the sort of fairy stories to be enjoyed by everyone — both children and adults.