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The Perils, Pitfalls, and Pleasures of Writing a New Biography of Lewis

by Devin Brown

Devin Brown is a Professor of English at Asbury University. He has written ten books, including the most recent biographies of Lewis and Tolkien. He has taught in the Summer Seminar program at The Kilns and recently wrote the script for *Discussing Mere Christianity* which was shot on location in Oxford with host Eric Metaxas.

In 2013, I published *A Life Observed: A Spiritual Biography of C. S. Lewis*. The increased interest in Lewis generated in 2013 by the fiftieth anniversary of his death and the unveiling of the Lewis memorial in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey helped make it possible for Brazos, my publisher, to release another book about Lewis. Contrary to what many people think, publishing a book about Lewis is no guarantee of commercial success. As the late Chris Mitchell once noted: "While books by C. S. Lewis continue to sell briskly, books about Lewis (and there are many) sell comparatively sluggishly. The public is far more interested in reading Lewis than in reading books about Lewis" (8).

So I considered myself very fortunate in being offered a contract for a new Lewis biography. Growing up on the south side of Chicago where not many of my neighbors or classmates were particularly literary, I never imagined that one day I would write a book about the author who had come into my blue collar world during my teens when I was in special need of a teacher.

Like most big projects, the challenge of writing a new Lewis biography, which had seemed like such a wonderful idea in the proposal stage, suddenly became filled with many difficulties. In this paper, I will discuss some of the perils, pitfalls, and pleasures faced in trying to write a new biography on Lewis.

As I looked through the Lewis books that take up several shelves in my bookcase—eight previous biographies as well as many books that simply contained some biographical information on Lewis—I perceived the first peril (or pitfall): *A biography cannot be just a collection of facts, however accurate or new: it has to bring the person to life*. A biography cannot (or should not) be just a summary, but an analysis and a synthesis. It cannot be just a list of names and dates, but the story of why they are important.

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Don King points to this first difficulty in his review of *C. S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide* by Walter Hooper. Although King mentions many positive aspects, he also notes a lack of analysis. “There is no section devoted specifically to analyzing Lewis’s achievements as a writer, artist, or apologist,” King observes. “Even in the summaries of Lewis’s books we rarely find Hooper going beyond the obvious” (245).

Of course at the same time, a biography must of necessity include many names and dates in addition to *some* summary. Figuring out when to do this and how much readers will want or need is what makes writing a biography, like all writing, an art and not a science. Too little can be a problem as well as too much. What seemed to me to be the most deadly for a biographer was not to provide something new—fresh insights and analysis as well as some different perspectives. Laura Miller, with whom I often disagree, touches on this problem in her overall description of the plethora of Lewis books that came out in advance of the first Narnia film. She refers to them as, by and large, “a shelf-full of mediocrity.”

Pitfall number one may be extended with the following caution: *Say things that are insightful and valid, not things that are uninteresting or too farfetched.* In the opening section of *A Life Observed*, I wrote this:

Lewis took his title, *Surprised by Joy*, from a sonnet by the English poet William Wordsworth which begins with these two lines:

Surprised by joy—impatient as the wind

I turned to share the transport. . . .

Lewis uses Wordsworth’s first line on the title page of *Surprised by Joy* as an epigraph for the book. Like the wind, this Joy would come and go in Lewis’s life as it wished, sometimes appearing regularly, other times disappearing for long periods. When it did come, its presence was always fleeting, or as the sonnet says, impatient. (3)

In an early draft, I then went on to discuss Wordsworth’s second line “I turned to share the transport” in an effort to connect it to Lewis’s intentions as I did the first line. But an early reader rightly recommended that I cut this second part because it was more than was needed.

As I then turned to looking specifically at some of the previous Lewis biographies, I realized a second mistake biographers are likely to make, namely that *a biography should not be just a vehicle for*

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the biographer to advance his or her own personal ideology. For an illustration of this second pitfall, we need to look at what Lewis had to say about his first experience of boarding school life and then look at how one of Lewis's biographers portrayed it. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis tells us:

But I have not yet mentioned the most important thing that befell me at Oldie's. There first I became an effective believer. As far as I know, the instrument was the church to which we were taken twice every Sunday. . . . What really mattered was that I here heard the doctrines of Christianity (as distinct from general 'uplift') taught by men who obviously believed them. . . . The effect was to bring to life what I would already have said that I believed. In this experience there was a great deal of fear. I do not think there was more than was wholesome or even necessary. . . . The effect, so far as I can judge, was entirely good. I began seriously to pray and to read my Bible and to attempt to obey my conscience. (33-34)

If we now turn to how biographer Michael White interprets this passage, we find a very different story. White tells his readers:

At Wynyard House Lewis was introduced to the Anglo-Catholicism that had dominated Capron's own distorted psyche. . . . This was Lewis's first experience of . . . hour-long, largely meaningless sermons delivered by the local rector. And they succeeded in their purpose, terrifying the boy into acquiescence. . . . After this initiation, and thanks to the power of ritual and fear, he began to read the Bible and to engage in earnest religious conversation with some of the other boys who had also been swept up in the heady atmosphere of suffering and salvation. (26-7)

Having decided in advance that despite what Lewis says, fear could not have been good for Lewis's spiritual development, White sees acquiescence where Lewis sees conversion. Where Lewis sees a wholesome and necessary amount of fear which had an entirely good effect, White claims that Lewis was merely swept up in a terrifying atmosphere of suffering and salvation.

We find a similar illustration of a biographer using a biography to advance his own ideology in a section of A. N. Wilson's book on Lewis. There Wilson asserts that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* grew out of Lewis's experience of "being stung back into childhood by his defeat at the hands of Elizabeth Anscombe at the Socratic Club" (220). Wilson then declares: "It is as though Lewis, in all his tiredness and despondency in the late 1940s, has managed to get through the wardrobe door himself; to leave behind the world of squabbles and grown-ups and to re-enter the world which with the deepest part of himself he never left."

Several pages later, Wilson projects even more of his own personal ideology onto Lewis's supposed motivations, claiming: "He has launched back

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deep into the recesses of his own emotional history, his own most deeply felt psychological needs and vulnerabilities. . . . We hardly need to dwell on the psychological significance of the wardrobe. . . . in this tale of a world which is reached through a dark hole surrounded by fur coats” (228).

In evaluating these assertions, Bruce Edwards claims that Wilson “ultimately reduces Lewis to a bundle of quasi-Freudian complexes” and concludes that in writing this biography Wilson the novelist features more prominently than Wilson the historian.

Kathryn Lindskoog makes a similar criticism and argues: “A. N. Wilson substitutes his own ideological Freudian view of C. S. Lewis. Thus the real C. S. Lewis, he claims, was . . . a terrified Oedipal neurotic and a closet misanthrope. The Narnian wardrobe is a symbol of Flora Lewis’s private parts.”

A third, somewhat similar peril for would-be biographers can be stated as *in general, don’t assume you understand your subject better than the subject does*. This is a general principle and certainly need not apply if there is reason to believe that the subject might be lying or deliberately hiding something.

With this rule in mind about not assuming you know more than your subject, consider the following claim that Alister McGrath puts forth in his biography of Lewis:

Why did Lewis spend three chapters of *Surprised by Joy* detailing his relatively minor woes at Malvern College and pay so little attention to the vastly more significant violence, trauma, and horror of the Great War? . . . The simplest explanation is also the most plausible: *Lewis could not bear to remember the trauma of his wartime experience.* (50)

If Lewis had never told us why he says relatively little about his war experience, McGrath’s explanation might deserve to be taken more seriously. However, in *Surprised by Joy* Lewis directly addresses the question raised by McGrath. There Lewis explains: “The war itself has been so often described by those who saw more of it than I that I shall here say little about it” (195). Then a few pages later, he adds, “The rest of my war experiences have little to do with this story” (197).

In an article titled “Does C. S. Lewis Have Something to Hide? Or Is Alister McGrath’s Biography Too Preoccupied with What Lewis Declines to Reveal?” Jerry Root tackles McGrath’s error head on, writing:

In one instance, McGrath begins to question why Lewis spends more time discussing his school days than his war

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years. Had McGrath appreciated Lewis's respect for literary form, he might have made more sense of this. Since Lewis was writing the story of his pilgrimage to faith, extended discussion of his school days enabled him to emphasize his loneliness and isolation. . . . Lewis writes less about his war experiences because they occupied a shorter period of time and . . . were less formative in his pilgrimage to faith.

Root goes on to discuss a fourth peril which is illustrated by this same passage from McGrath, a pitfall which can be stated as *the spotlight should be on the subject, not the biographer*. Root argues that there are moments in McGrath's book when one senses that "the real Lewis has dropped out of the narrative, or been replaced by a figment of the biographer's imagination." Root concludes: "Based on speculations about what Lewis *didn't* write, a repressed Lewis emerges, hidden from all until McGrath draws him out of the shadows."

A fifth pitfall when writing a biography can be expressed as *biographers should proceed cautiously when there are few or no facts*. In an article written for *Christianity Today*, Gina Dalfonzo points out that in *A Grief Observed*, Lewis portrays his relatively brief marriage to Joy Davidman as blissful. Dalfonzo notes that the Davidman whom Lewis depicts is a woman whose strength, faith, honesty, humor, and loyalty made her "the best of companions, and brought out the best in him."

"That's why I found Alister McGrath's new biography of C. S. Lewis rather jarring," Dalfonzo goes on to state. "For anyone familiar with Lewis's loving portrait of her—or the other portraits we have from her friends, her son, and her biographers—the Joy Davidman Lewis of McGrath's book is virtually unrecognizable. . . . McGrath paints her as an unlikable, determined seducer and money-grubber."

In his biography, McGrath objects to what he sees as our romanticized reading of Lewis's marriage, and he claims that Douglas Gresham, Davidman's youngest son, has gone on record stating that his mother had gone to England with one specific intention which was "to seduce C. S. Lewis" (323).

But, as Dalfonzo points out, this is not what Gresham said. She quotes the newspaper report that McGrath cites, and she notes that what Gresham actually said was: "She was not above telling nosy friends that she was going to England to seduce C. S. Lewis." The tone of this remark, Dalfonzo rightly points out, suggests a joke—the kind that the blunt Davidman was fond of making. Dalfonzo also explains that McGrath's claim also stands in direct contradiction with what

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Davidman herself, in a letter to Chad Walsh, explained her intentions were—to soothe her shattered nerves and give her the strength to go on with her marriage.

A sixth peril I encountered, one that takes a different tack, is that *the writing must do the subject justice*. A book about a great writer who inspired millions of people should be (or should attempt to be) inspiring and great. A biography about someone who had an amazing ability to bring clarity to complex issues and to engage all kinds of readers should itself be clear and engaging. Anyone who has read anything by Lewis will understand the difficulty in producing writing about him that will seem fitting or can in some small way measure up.

One final pitfall I tried to avoid is that a *biography must present new material for those who have read other biographies and at the same time must cover previously covered ground for those who have not*. Certainly I was not entirely successful in balancing this paradoxical demand. In his Goodreads review of *A Life Observed*, HaperOne editor Mickey Maudlin—who has certainly read many other Lewis biographies—complains, “I was expecting more.”

Having covered a number of pitfalls in writing a new biography of Lewis, I should make it clear that they were vastly outweighed by the pleasures. Here are a few of them.

One of the greatest pleasures in writing a new Lewis biography was discovering something new. As an example of one new discovery, in my book I point out the following previously undocumented connection with George MacDonald. Lewis opens chapter eleven of *Surprised by Joy* with this line from the medieval poem “Sir Aldingar”: *When bale is at highest, boote is at next*. Lewis’s epigraph may be paraphrased as *when evil is at its greatest, help is at its closest*.

What was this help Lewis alludes to? If we turn to chapter four of MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, we find that before Lewis used this epigraph, MacDonald used it himself, though in a slightly different variation: *When bale is att hyest, boote is nyest*—which may be paraphrased as *When evil is greatest, help is nearest*. By repeating MacDonald’s epigraph in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis leads us to believe that the help he is referring to came from MacDonald’s book.

Besides discovering something new, another pleasure I found in writing a new Lewis biography was simply to write something new. For example, in the research I did I turned up very little written about the final line of *A Grief Observed*. Believing that it warranted more attention than it had received, I wrote the following:

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After telling us, “She smiled, but not at me,” Lewis chooses to end *A Grief Observed* with a sentence taken from one of the final cantos of the *Paradiso*: “Poi si torno all’ eternal fontana.” Here Dante’s beloved Beatrice turns away from him and towards the glory of God. *Then she turned back to the Eternal Fountain*. Jack finally lets go of his Helen Joy. But how is he able to do this? How is this even possible? Jack can let go because he knows, truly knows, that he is letting her go into the hands of God, who is the eternal fountain of living water.

Earlier Lewis commented that his notes had been about himself, about Joy, and about God—in an order and proportion that were exactly the opposite of what they ought to have been. *Then she turned back to the Eternal Fountain*. Jack does not include himself in the final sentence at all. It begins Joy and ends with God. Jack finally has the order right. And now that he has the order right, he can let go. This letting go, this acceptance of Joy’s death, will not be an end to the burden of grief. But now the burden is bearable. (*A Life Observed* 215)

Two pleasures remain. The first was the unforeseen opportunity of getting to work with Lewis’s stepson Douglas Gresham who, after some emailing back and forth with me from his home in Malta, agreed to write a foreword—one which turned out to be extraordinarily gracious and generous.

The final pleasure of writing a new biography of Lewis was the pleasure that comes with creating anything: the sheer pleasure of holding something in your hands that you made yourself. Yes, there was help from many other sources along with a large measure of good fortune, but it is and always will remain your own creation—your chance to join the conversation.

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