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## Stories As Friends in C. S. Lewis's Life and Work

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# Stories As Friends in C.S. Lewis's Life and Work

by Andrea Marie Catroppa

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C.S. Lewis made stories his friends from a very young age, as evidenced in his writing from grade school through adulthood. He wrote repeatedly about the importance of stories and the significance of friendship. According to Lewis, “Scenes and characters from books provide [literary people] with a sort of iconography by which they interpret or sum up their own experience.”<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on C.S. Lewis’s writing on stories and friendship and argues that having stories as friends powerfully influenced Lewis’s life and can also enrich ours.

Stories enable us to see our own lives from a new perspective. They help us see people, events, objects, and experiences differently. Very often, we can be so used to or distracted by various things that we do not see people, situations, or even objects as they really are. Stories can help us to “rediscover” the truth about these different things.<sup>2</sup> They can sharpen our vision so that we can see things as they truly are. According to Lewis:

The value of the myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by ‘the veil of familiarity’...By putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. As long as the story lingers in our mind, the real things are more themselves...By dipping them in myth we see them more clearly.<sup>3</sup>

Lewis himself used stories to help his readers see things from a new perspective. Most famously, he did this with *The Chronicles of Narnia* with its Christian undertones. In writing about the Narnia

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1 C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

2 C.S. Lewis, “Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*,” in *C.S. Lewis Essay Collection: Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (Hammersmith: HarperCollins, 2002), 117.

3 C.S. Lewis, “Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*,” 117.

series he said,

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could...The inhibitions which I hoped my stories would overcome in a child's mind may exist in a grown-up's mind too, and may perhaps be overcome by the same means.<sup>4</sup>

Stories enrich our lives. When stories are in our lives, our lives expand. They help us have experiences that we would not have had. They allow us to meet people and go places that we would not have otherwise. C.S. Lewis in writing about stories that contain strong elements of the marvelous in them said, "If good novels are comments on life, good stories of this sort (which are very much rarer) are actual additions to life; they give, like certain rare dreams, sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience."<sup>5</sup>

C.S. Lewis knew that stories also allow us to reclaim a sense of delight. Reading stories awakens in us a sense of wonder and "longing."<sup>6</sup> Sometimes we cannot verbalize what we are longing for, but we are glad that we felt it, because of what a positive experience it was.<sup>7</sup> According to Lewis:

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4 C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," in *C.S. Lewis Essay Collection: Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (Hammersmith: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 119-120.

5 C.S. Lewis, "On Science Fiction," in *C.S. Lewis Essay Collection: Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (Hammersmith: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 51.

6 C.S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," in *C.S. Lewis Essay Collection: Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (Hammersmith: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 103.

7 Ibid.

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It would be much truer to say that fairy land arouses a longing for [a boy] knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: this reading makes all real woods a little enchanted. This is a special kind of longing. . . . [T]he boy reading the fairy tale desires and is happy in the very fact of desiring. For his mind has not been concentrated on himself.<sup>8</sup>

Through stories we can reclaim this sense of delight and can experience greater delight in our day to day lives. This is because stories help us to see ordinary, commonplace things in a new way. Suddenly, a lamppost may seem magical, a picture may be a portal to another world, and opening a door in a wall may lead to adventures, or reunite us with very old friends:

The child enjoys his cold meat (otherwise dull to him) by pretending it is buffalo, just killed with his own bow and arrow. And the child is wise. The real meat comes back to him more savoury for having been dipped in a story; you might say that only then is it the real meat. If you are tired of the real landscape, look at it in a mirror.<sup>9</sup>

Some people might say that viewing life through stories this way might make us dissatisfied and not ready to deal with life's challenges. However, this is not the case. As noted earlier, stories can help us to enjoy life more. C.S. Lewis in writing about *The Wind in the Willows* said,

It might be expected that such a book would unfit us for the harshness of reality and send us back to our daily lives unsettled and discontented. I do not find that it does so. The happiness which it presents to us is in fact full of the simplest and most attainable things—food, sleep, exercise, friendship, the face of nature, even (in a sense) religion. That 'simple but sustaining meal' of 'bacon and broad beans and a macaroni pudding' which Rat gave to his friends has, I doubt not, helped down many a real nursery dinner. And in the same way the whole story, paradoxically enough, strengthens our relish for real life. This excursion into the preposterous sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual.<sup>10</sup>

Lewis understood that some people might think that children's books should be read only by children. C.S. Lewis addressed the issue of adults reading children's books by saying,

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8 Ibid.

9 C.S. Lewis, "Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," 117.

10 C.S. Lewis "On Stories," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, ed. C.S. Lewis (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 100.

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It is usual to speak in a playfully apologetic tone about one's adult enjoyment of what are called 'children's books.' I think the convention a silly one. No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty—except, of course, books of information. The only imaginative works we ought to grow out of are those which it would have been better not to have read at all. A mature palate will probably not much care for *crème de menthe*: but it ought still to enjoy bread and butter and honey.<sup>11</sup>

Stories can also help us to better face our own fears and challenges. They can give us examples on how to live and what to avoid. They can encourage us with stories of nobility and honor and help us with our fears. C.S. Lewis dealt with this as follows:

And I think it possible that by confining your child to blameless stories of child life in which nothing at all alarming ever happens, you would fail to banish the terrors, and would succeed in banishing all that can ennoble them or make them endurable. For in the fairy tales, side by side with the terrible figures, we find the immemorial comforters and protectors, the radiant ones; and the terrible figures are not merely terrible, but sublime. It would be nice if no little boy in bed, hearing, or thinking he hears, a sound, were ever at all frightened. But if he is going to be frightened, I think it better that he should think of giants and dragons than merely of burglars. And I think St. George, or any bright champion in armour is a better comfort than the idea of the police.<sup>12</sup>

Also, stories allow us to form friendships. For some of us, this can be a friendship with a particular character. Certain characters can seem as real as people we know. In getting to know these characters, we develop friendships that can enrich our lives. We know more about life through knowing these characters and we share life with them in a powerful way. These characters are our fellow travelers through life, warming our hearts and delighting our hours.<sup>13</sup> They have the inestimable value of giving us joy just by their presence.

Furthermore, we can develop friendships not only with the characters, but also with the authors of certain stories. One of the things that stories help us to do is to pursue truth with authors who

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11 Ibid.

12 C.S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," 104.

13 C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1988), 270.

are concerned about similar issues. We may never actually meet some authors, but we can come to know them in a very deep way through their stories. We may not agree with them as to what the answer to those issues may be, but we can develop a friendship with them because we think certain things are important.<sup>14</sup> C.S. Lewis wrote on friendship and said,

...In this kind of love, as Emerson said, *Do you love me?* means *Do you see the same truth?*—Or at least, “Do you care about the same truth?” The man who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others is of great importance can be our Friend. He need not agree with us about the answer.<sup>15</sup>

When we develop these friendships with authors and characters, this pursuit of truth can become an inner “journey” where we are working together, trying to find answers.<sup>16</sup> It becomes a “collaborative” effort where each one is spurring the other on with new insights and ideas.<sup>17</sup> C.S. Lewis describes this “collaborative” effort in his essay on friendship when he wrote, “The Friends will still be...collaborating, but in some work the world does not, or not yet, take account of; still travelling companions, but on a different kind of journey.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition, having these kinds of friendships in our lives can be very supportive. The encouragement from these friendships can be as significant as our real life friendships. This is because stories and the authors of stories touch our hearts in ways that other pieces of writing may not be able to. The friends that we make through stories and their authors feed directly into our lives and bring such joy to us. Having their encouragement truly is a wonderful thing.

C.S. Lewis started early having books as friends. Part of this was due to the times and location in which he lived. Lewis himself was born at the end of the nineteenth century where medicine was not what it is now. Also, Lewis lived in Belfast, Northern Ireland which “was an unhealthy place to live and children frequently died of illnesses that, today, children rarely catch at all, and others that most children shrug off with scarcely a second thought.”<sup>19</sup> This led to a

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14 Ibid., 269.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 270.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Douglas Gresham, introduction to *Boxen: Childhood Chronicles Before Narnia*, by C.S. Lewis and W.H. Lewis (Hammersmith: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2008), 7.

great concern on the part of Lewis's parents for preventing any illness in him or his brother. One of the things that they were worried about was their sons getting wet by being out in the rain and becoming sick.<sup>20</sup> This led to C.S. Lewis and his brother Warnie spending a great deal of time indoors.<sup>21</sup> Douglas Gresham, C.S. Lewis's step-son wrote, "They [Albert and Flora Lewis, C.S. Lewis's parents] would keep [Jack (Lewis's nickname) and Warnie] indoors when the weather was wild and wet, or still and gently wet ("soft" as the Irish call it), so the boys would have to find some means of entertaining themselves."<sup>22</sup> This in part led to the two boys writing stories and making up the imaginary land of Boxen with its animals that wore clothes and acted like humans. The stories about Boxen were in fact not written for a wide audience.<sup>23</sup> Instead, the Lewis brothers wrote them for each other.<sup>24</sup> Douglas Gresham in talking about the *Boxen* stories wrote, "The stories that make up *Boxen* were not really written for children. In fact, they were not really written for any of us; these stories were written by two boys, Clive Staples Lewis and Warren Hamilton Lewis, when they were about 8 and 11 years old, each writing for an audience of one—his own brother."<sup>25</sup>

Gresham goes on to share that Lewis and his brother began to write about Boxen in 1906. However, in 1908 their mother, Flora Lewis, passed away. Gresham writes, "The boys were shattered by her sudden death and sought solace in the only safe place left to them, their own imaginations, and much was added to *Boxen* in the winter of that year."<sup>26</sup>

In his later years, C.S. Lewis himself was a prolific author. However, he would rarely read over his books.<sup>27</sup> Walter Hooper in his "History of *Boxen*" wrote, "Jack seldom re-read any of his published works. There is, however, much to suggest that of all he wrote, published and unpublished, it was the Boxen stories that he and Warnie read most often. It was a door into one of the most pleasant parts of their lives."<sup>28</sup>

20 George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 39-40.

21 Douglas Gresham, 7.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 8.

27 Walter Hooper, "The History of *Boxen*," in *Boxen*: 239.

28 Ibid.

C.S. Lewis himself entered into the world of Boxen. It became for him this other “reality” that seemed real and alive to him.<sup>29</sup> Walter Hooper wrote about this saying, “Finally, when the grown-up C.S. Lewis re-read the stories [of *Boxen*] in preparation for beginning his *Encyclopedia*, he wrote to his brother saying, ‘I suppose it is only accident, but it is hard to resist the convictions that one is dealing with a sort of reality.’ Perhaps he was. Perhaps we are too.”<sup>30</sup> The characters and stories of *Boxen* were truly friends to Lewis.

This practice of having stories as friends continued throughout C.S. Lewis’s life. George MacDonald’s book *Phantastes* was a significant story in Lewis’s spiritual journey. In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis writes that when he read *Phantastes* his “imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer.”<sup>31</sup> Also, in his book *The Great Divorce*, Lewis made MacDonald and himself characters and had MacDonald be his friend.<sup>32</sup>

I [Lewis] tried, trembling to tell this man all that his writings had done for me. I tried to tell how a certain frosty afternoon at Leatherhead Station when I first bought a copy of *Phantastes* (being then about sixteen years old) had been to me what the first sight of Beatrice had been to Dante: *Here begins the New Life*. . . . [H]ow hard I had tried not to see that the true name of the quality which first met me in his books is Holiness.<sup>33</sup>

Lewis also enjoyed reading ancient and medieval story poems like *The Aeneid*<sup>34</sup> and *The Faerie Queene*.<sup>35</sup> When C.S. Lewis was staying at the Acland Nursing Home at the end of his life, he told Walter Hooper to bring him among other things, *The Aeneid*.<sup>36</sup> Hooper wrote that *The Aeneid* was Lewis’s favourite of all books.<sup>37</sup> In his writing on *The Faerie Queene*, Lewis spoke of how wonderful it was.<sup>38</sup> He said,

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29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1955), 159.

32 C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 337.

33 Ibid.

34 Walter Hooper, foreword to *C.S. Lewis’s Lost Aeneid: Arms and the Exile*, ed. A.T. Reyes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), xii.

35 C.S. Lewis, *Spenser’s Images of Life*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 140.

36 Walter Hooper, foreword to *C.S. Lewis’s Lost Aeneid*, xi.

37 Ibid., xii.

38 C.S. Lewis, *Spenser’s Images of Life*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Cambridge:

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“Perhaps this is why *The Faerie Queene* never loses a reader it has once gained. . . . Once you have become an inhabitant of its world, being tired of it is like being tired of London, or of life.”<sup>39</sup> Stories like these were part of his work as an academic and a literary critic. He wrote numerous books and essays discussing them.

The stories of J.R.R. Tolkien also became Lewis’s friends. Lewis greatly encouraged J.R.R. Tolkien’s writing of *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>40</sup> Tolkien writes that “He [Lewis] was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my ‘stuff’ could be more than a private hobby. But for his interest and unceasing eagerness for more I should never have brought [*The Lord of the Rings*] to a conclusion.”<sup>41</sup>

Having stories as friends was a significant part of C.S. Lewis’s life and work. This can be seen in his early life with his friendship with his brother Warnie in creating *Boxen*.<sup>42</sup> As he grew older, Lewis’s friendship with stories continued in the writing his own stories and in his friendships with the Inklings. One of the many authors that C.S. Lewis liked was Anthony Trollope.<sup>43</sup> Trollope wrote, “Book love, my friend, is your pass to the greatest, the purest, and the most perfect pleasure that God has prepared for His creatures. It lasts when all other pleasures fade. It will support you when all other recreations are gone. It will last until your death. It will make your hours pleasant to you as long as you live.”<sup>44</sup> Like Lewis, we too can have stories as friends and they can be as significant in our lives as they were in his.

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Cambridge University Press, 2013), 140.

39 Ibid.

40 Diana Pavlac Glyer, *The Company They Keep: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as Writers in Community*. (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2007), 48.

41 Ibid.

42 Walter Hooper, “The History of *Boxen*,” 239.

43 Sayer, 101.

44 Terry W. Glaspey, *A Passion for Books*. (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 12.

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