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“Sufficiently Different to Help One Another”: The Central Place of Books in the Friendships of the Inklings

by John Stanifer

John Stanifer holds a B.A. in English from Indiana University Kokomo and a M.A. in English from Morehead State University. His first book, *Virtuous Worlds: The Video Gamer’s Guide to Spiritual Truth*, was published by Winged Lion Press in 2011. John says, “I am a hopeless geek who enjoys reading, coffee, and cosplay.”

“We read to know we’re not alone.” These words, spoken by Anthony Hopkins as C.S. Lewis near the conclusion of the 1993 film *Shadowlands*, may not have been spoken by C.S. Lewis himself, but it might as well have been (Attenborough; O’Flaherty). All his life, C.S. Lewis was a bibliophile, reading just about everything he could get his hands on.” Yet reading, it turns out, was not just a solitary activity for one’s own benefit; for Lewis and his circle of family and friends, it was often a way of forming and cementing friendships that would last for a lifetime. It was never particularly important whether a friend who read the same books got the same things out of them. What mattered was the shared interest, the pursuit of the truth to which books could lead. Using the standard biographies, personal letters, and recollections of Lewis and his friends, readers who are curious about the books that found a central place in the friendships of the Inklings can easily make up a database of titles that helped fuel many a passionate discussion for this group; this essay will focus on a select few titles that are especially significant and are easy to acquire. What makes the exercise so interesting is that it was more often than not the differences in what these friends got out of their favorite books that ensured the passion in that friendship rarely died down.

One of the most natural starting points is Lewis’s friendship with his childhood neighbor Arthur Greeves. Lewis and Greeves had attended Campbell College, a grammar school, at the same time without ever meeting. Later, Arthur made some effort to befriend the two Lewis brothers with little initial success. Finally, sometime in the middle of April 1914, Lewis received an invitation—from whom, the record appears unclear—to visit Arthur while the latter was recovering from an illness (Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* 130; Lewis, *The Collected Letters*

1: 53). By this time, Lewis had already delved deep into the world of literature that his parents Flora and Albert had indirectly opened for him by filling their home with books. Lewis describes this wealth vividly in the early pages of *Surprised by Joy*:

My father bought all the books he read and never got rid of any of them. There were books in the study, books in the drawing room, books in the cloakroom, books (two deep) in the great bookcase on the landing, books in a bedroom, books piled as high as my shoulder in the cistern attic, books of all kinds reflecting every transient stage of my parents' interest, books readable and unreadable, books suitable for a child and books most emphatically not. Nothing was forbidden me. (10)

Within the Lewis household, taste in reading could vary widely. Flora preferred “good novels,” such as those of Meredith and Tolstoy, and Albert gravitated to books with a political bent, books that boasted a fine grasp of poetry and rhetoric, and books by “humorous authors,” like Dickens and W.W. Jacobs (*Surprised by Joy* 4-5). Neither of Lewis’s parents shared his liking for imaginative literature, what Lewis referred to as “the horns of elfland” (5).

Arthur Greeves was apparently the first person, with the possible exception of Lewis’s brother Warnie, who shared Lewis’s taste in literature. When Lewis arrived at Arthur’s sickbed, he spotted a book called *Myths of the Norsemen* on a table beside the bed (*Surprised by Joy* 130). Lewis doesn’t identify the author of this book, but several scholars have identified the author as H.A. Guerber (Wilson 37; Hooper 53; Yuasa 51). Beyond naming the book’s title and author and the fact that it contains an overview of the major Norse myths, most scholars have given little attention to this specific book—hardly the only book of Norse mythology Lewis would ever read, but well worth exploring if for no other reason than its part in breaking the ice between Lewis and the boy who would become one of his closest companions until his death.

Kirsten Wolf, chair of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has been teaching and writing on Norse mythology since the 1980s (Department of Scandinavian Studies). In her introduction to *Myths of the Norsemen*, she describes the author’s background. Helene Adeline Guerber, born in Michigan and educated in Paris, “devoted her life to educating her fellow citizens about European literary and cultural history through the publication of about three dozen books on a vast array of topics ranging from famous operas to Jewish history to Shakespeare’s plays” (9). The edition of

Guerber's book with the title mentioned in *Surprised by Joy* was first published in May 1908, just three months before Flora Lewis died of cancer (C.S. Lewis Foundation), and would subsequently be reprinted numerous times (Guerber). However, as Wolf points out, the book had originally been published with a different title some 13 years earlier (Wolf 9). The 1895 edition, titled *Myths of Northern Lands*, contains virtually the same text, word-for-word, as the later edition that Lewis found at Arthur's bedside (Guerber, *Myths of Northern Lands*).

What was it about the contents of *Myths of the Norsemen* that so enraptured Lewis and Greeves and led to their immediate and enduring friendship? As soon as the boys realized they were both devotees of Guerber's work, Lewis writes, "we were pointing, quoting, talking—soon almost shouting—discovering in a torrent of questions that we liked not only the same thing, but the same parts of it and in the same way; that both knew the stab of Joy and that, for both, the arrow was shot from the North" (*Surprised by Joy* 130). To Lewis, "North" meant far more than just a direction on a compass; it meant the renewal of the spiritual ache called "Joy" that he had experienced when his brother Warnie had showed him a beautiful toy garden some years before. The ache had faded in the interim, but Lewis claims that his "Joy" returned in full force when he picked up the December 1911 issue of a literary magazine called *The Bookman* and opened it to an article that mentioned, among other things, Arthur Rackham's illustrated edition of *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*. The article's sample illustration featured Siegfried and Mimir, two of the key characters in Norse myth (Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* 73-74; Griffin 34; Tassin 383-385). The effect of simply reading the phrase "twilight of the gods" and experiencing the force of Rackham's artistry, which the article described as worthy of "competition with some of the finest and most adequate stage realisations ever witnessed" (Tassin 385) filled Lewis with awe: "Pure 'Northernness,' engulfed me," he wrote; "A vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity" (*Surprised by Joy* 74). Almost as soon as the longing engulfed him, it was gone, and Lewis claims that he knew having this longing again "was the supreme and only important object of desire" (74).

From the way Lewis describes his first encounter with Arthur, it would seem the two shared more than just an appreciation for Norse mythology in general and for Guerber's work specifically. In *Myths of the Norsemen* and its Northern brethren, the boys found the expression of a cold, hard spiritual longing marked by simultaneous joy and

sadness. Given this, Guerber's original title, *Myths of Northern Lands*, may be an even more appropriate summary of what the friends found in the book than its revised title, *Myths of the Norsemen*.

Of course, Lewis's friendship with Arthur did not simply begin and end with Norse mythology, nor did their similarity of taste in this one area mean they never had a disagreement. On the contrary, Lewis says that he and Arthur were "sufficiently different to help one another" (*Surprised by Joy* 150). Elaborating, Lewis mentions several writers whose value he had failed to appreciate until Arthur convinced him to give them another try or a first try in some cases:

Under Arthur's influence I read at this time all the best Waverleys, all the Brontës, and all the Jane Austens. They provided an admirable complement to my more fantastic reading, and each was more enjoyed for its contrast to the other. The very qualities which had previously deterred me from such books Arthur taught me to see as their charm. What I would have called their "stodginess" or "ordinariness" he called "Homeliness"—a key word in his imagination. (151-52)

Lewis's gratitude to his friend fairly leaps off the page as he confesses that Arthur's taste for the "good, solid, old books" of what he calls "the classic English novelists" was a taste "with which, to my great good, he infected me for life" (151). Lewis's attempts to influence Arthur's literary taste, at least those attempts recorded in *Surprised by Joy*, were not as successful. Lewis claims that Arthur's "great defect was that he cared very little for verse. Something I did to mend this, but less than I wished" (151).

When it comes to verse, there are few literary works that had a wider influence among the Inklings and their circle than the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. One of Lewis's attempts to sway Arthur to the beauties of poetry came about in a letter dated November 1916. Apparently, Arthur had complained that *Beowulf* was too different from the English novelists he so enjoyed, as Lewis responds to this with, "I know what you mean by that 'crampy' feeling: you mean there are no descriptions in *Beowulf* as in a modern book, so little is told you & you have to imagine so much for yourself" (Lewis, *The Collected Letters* 1: 244). He goes on to explain to Arthur his belief in the importance of reading literature outside the more contemporary productions of one's own language and culture and making an effort, not just to read the work from the viewpoint of a twentieth-century reader, but to appreciate what the work meant to its original audience

(244). In this early letter, readers of Lewis's book *The Discarded Image* should recognize the argument he makes in that book's preface, almost 50 years after the letter to Arthur, suggesting his views on the topic changed little over the course of his life. In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis is approaching medieval literature in the same way he wanted Arthur to approach *Beowulf*. He says that there are English tourists who carry their Englishness with them all over Europe and "have no wish to realise what those ways of life, those churches, those vineyards, mean to the natives" (x). He does not mean to write for those who are interested mainly in "the impression, however accidental, which an old work makes on a mind that brings to it a purely modern sensibility and modern conceptions" (x). He is writing, he says, for "the other sort" (x).

Lewis would meet and befriend a number of this "other sort" among the students and faculty when he arrived at Oxford. After joining the faculty at Magdalen College, Oxford, he discovered that one of its ex-presidents had outlawed student societies out of a belief that they were "savagely exclusive clubs of rich dipsomaniacs" (qtd. in Poe 49). Lewis quickly found a way to get around this by inviting students to his rooms for literary discussions. For example, Wednesday evenings saw students gathering with Lewis for informal readings of Anglo-Saxon poetry (Poe 50). Walter Hooper writes, "During these sessions [Lewis] introduced his pupils to mnemonic devices he invented for learning Old English, they chanted *Beowulf* aloud, and the beer-jug was passed around" (732). Hence Wednesdays became known as "Beer and Beowulf Evenings" (Poe 50; Hooper 732).

All of these literary and intellectual threads in Lewis's life would converge in his friendship with his fellow faculty member J.R.R. Tolkien. Lewis met Tolkien at a faculty tea party of sorts in May 1926 and would write of Tolkien: "no harm in him: only needs a smack or so" (qtd. in Zaleski 173). But as Philip and Carol Zaleski have so aptly summarized it, "it was Tolkien who would supply the smack, jolting Lewis—with the help of other friends and Lewis's own desperate yearning—into Christian faith" (173).

Though Lewis was by this point an atheist and Tolkien a Catholic, the two found that they had many points of agreement in literary taste and in their attitude to academics. In 1926, Tolkien founded a literary club "devoted to intensive study of Old Norse literature," a club that not only included Lewis but several other members of the more well-known group the Inklings (Zaleski 176). This club and the others that would follow gave Lewis the chance to indulge his love

for the ancient characters and stories he had encountered as a youth in books like *Myths of the Norsemen*. Late, late nights with Tolkien and other members of the Kolbítars were common as they discussed their mutual literary obsessions (Zaleski 177).

What happened at these somewhat private clubs would sometimes spill over into their members' professional lives. In the Oxford of the '20s and '30s, debates raged over how much room—if any—should be made in the curriculum for the study of modern English literature. A number of faculty, including Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, feared that this debate would result in a lessening of interest in the study of the classics, including *Beowulf*. Lewis went so far as to argue that it was impossible to understand modern English literature without the close study of *Beowulf* with its “sense of language . . . native to us all” (qtd. in Zaleski 175). Together with Tolkien and other like-minded individuals, Lewis formed yet another club called The Cave that would set itself the task of ensuring the classics remained at the forefront of the curriculum (Zaleski 175-76). Tolkien would go on to be one of the most passionate voices in this movement, conducting a now-famous series of lectures on *Beowulf* that convinced many the poem was more than a quaint literary artifact (Zaleski 216); it is, in fact, “a fundamentally Christian myth, revealing the truth that ‘a Christian was (and is) still like his forefathers a mortal hemmed in a hostile world’” (qtd. in Zaleski 216). In speaking of the literary output produced by Lewis, Tolkien, and other Inklings, Diana Glycer observes that scholars “have found many common sources [in the work of the Inklings], including the Orpheus myth, Norse tales, *Beowulf*, children’s books, and fairy stories” (35). On every side, it is clear that these writers took their enjoyment from the level of merely reading and appreciating their favorite books to imitating them and adding their own flourishes to once-familiar fables while trying to persuade the world around them to take note of such books, too.

Yet, as critical as Norse myth, *Beowulf*, and the rest may have been to these friends' professional lives, the impact this literature would come to have on them spiritually was even more significant. Tolkien helped Lewis to see that the longing for something indefinable that Lewis had felt when he encountered Norse myth as a boy was not just a longing for something fictional that had never and would never exist. In September 1931, Lewis took a late stroll with Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, another mutual friend who also happened to be a Christian. Through the persuasions of these two companions, Lewis began to see that all of the books and stories he had most admired,

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including the Norse myths and *Beowulf*, were really pointing to the “myth” of Christ, the one myth that had actually come true in history. Lewis came to see this conversation as one of the turning points of his spiritual life and would credit these friends as helping him to re-accept the validity of the Christian story for himself (Duriez 53-59; Zaleski 187-89).

It would be all but impossible to catalog more than a fraction of the books that had an influence on the Inklings and their friendships, and here only a handful that cover both ancient myth and modern English literature have been mentioned. Will Vaus, in his introduction to a multi-volume work exploring just ten of C.S. Lewis’s favorite books, asserts, “Given a reading life as rich as that of C.S. Lewis, the man probably had a hard time paring down his list to the top ten books that influenced him. An adequate account of all Lewis’s literary influences would require numerous thick volumes” (n.p.). The same might be said of Tolkien or any of the other Inklings who would write book after book amidst busy lives, and obviously a short essay is a world away from the “numerous thick volumes” envisioned by Vaus.

Still, whether they were influencing each other in literary taste or in the far deeper matters of faith, several things are clear from even the most superficial survey of the Inklings’ reading lists: they loved to read, they loved many of the same books and often in the same way, their tastes—while similar in many points—were different enough so that they could open each other’s eyes to new authors and even entirely new genres, their shared tastes overlapped with their academic careers to impact the environment of their university at large, and—arguably the most important point of all—they led each other down new roads of spiritual enrichment. This is a powerful example and a legacy that has been carried on through the work of dedicated Inklings readers, collectors, and scholars around the world, among them the late Dr. Frances Ewbank, Dr. David Neuhouser, Dr. Ed Brown, and Dr. Bruce Edwards—each of whose passion for Lewis and friends has inspired us in multiple ways and will continue to inform the field of Inklings studies for many years to come. May they all rest in peace until we join them “further up and further in” and experience “the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before” (Lewis, *The Last Battle* 228).

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