

Rowan Williams, *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia* ((London: SPCK, 2012)), pp. 151, ISBN 978-0-281-06895-1.
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Some of my fondest childhood memories include listening to my father, an Anglican clergyman, read aloud the *Narnia* stories to my sister and me. The writings of C.S. Lewis and the *Narnia* books in particular held a significant place in my own development as a Christian child and adolescent and I have continued to read and enjoy them as an adult. I did not expect to discover that Archbishop Rowan Williams had been so deeply influenced by Lewis's writings when I picked up this highly personal and profoundly engaging book *The Lion's World*. In this 50th anniversary year of Lewis's death many books and lectures on C.S. Lewis are coming out. Although *The Lion's World* does not have the in-depth, detail-laden brilliance of Michael Ward in *Planet Narnia* or the complex overarching big picture of Lewis the man that Alister McGrath's recent biography *C.S. Lewis, A Life: Eccentric Genius Reluctant Prophet* has, what it does give us is an intensely personal, almost tender reflection on Lewis's *Narnia* stories. *The Lion's World* is littered with incisive insights, moments of humour and poignant reflections from the Archbishop. Rowan Williams's public persona as the rather remote, bearded mystic in an ivory tower, disconnected from the daily concerns of real people, is shattered in this book. Clearly Lewis's writing has touched him and his children – as we see in the dedication and introduction of the book.

Although this book is short and easily readable, it quickly becomes apparent that Williams' usual scholarly genius is at work: he is clearly familiar not only with the *Narnia* stories themselves but also with the breadth of Lewis's writing. His insights betray a deep infusion of Lewis, his writings and his world and he quotes broadly from the science fiction trilogy and in particular *That Hideous Strength* as well as the *Letters* and *A Grief Observed* among others.

The Lion's World describes itself as 'a journey' and the destination seems to be discovering: 'the possibility Lewis still offers of coming across the Christian story as if for the first time. Whether for the jaded believer or the contented unbeliever, the surprise of this joy is worth tasting' (p. 7).

Williams shows us that in *Narnia* Lewis gives us fascinating insights into the nature of humanity from the Christian perspective. Quoting a passage from Prince Caspian Williams comments, 'There could not be a clearer depiction of the dual sense of human dignity and human degradation that is central to the orthodox Christian tradition. Lewis is simultaneously puncturing glib humanist confidence in natural perfectibility and protesting against any kind of metaphysical contempt for the actual flesh and blood humanity around us' (p. 23). Williams digs deep into the exploration of this theme in *Narnia* and he draws out Lewis's adept handling of the complexity of human nature within a children's book. He gives the same treatment to Lewis's approach to what today we call the environment, but Lewis would have thought of as creation. His description of the natural order in *Narnia* and the interrelationships between animals and humans shows 'no narrow focus on humanity at the expense of everything else' (p. 22).

Williams does not skirt around the critiques made by detractors of Lewis that he is a misogynist, a little too fond of violence and gore or even a racist in his portrayal of people of colour. Engaging with some of the passages from the *Narnia* stories Williams responds to each critique conceding that Lewis was a man of his

generation and by no means blameless on all of these counts, but concluding ultimately that 'What is interesting is not how Lewis reflects the views of an era but how he qualifies or undercuts them in obedience to the demands of a narrative or a spiritual imperative or both' (p. 46).

At the heart of the book Williams is at his best when exploring Lewis's drawing of Aslan as a character. His exploration of the theme of freedom with regard to the human self in the face of the divine is worth dwelling on and reading more than once: 'The orderliness of a world focused on the self is doomed to be disrupted by grace; and we can't appreciate quite what Aslan is about unless and until we see him in action against this kind of order' (p. 52). Williams grasps a key fact that many critics of Lewis fail to see – Aslan is positioned by Lewis as a rebel against an established order. As Williams puts it for Lewis: 'The truth of God is found in rebellion against oppressive clichés of the world' (p. 51). We also encounter the extraordinary and unsettling intimacy of Aslan's interactions with humans, which Williams describes as almost erotic although he underscores that nothing inappropriate for a children's book is ever there. The powerful force of Aslan's presence, his physicality and his intimacy with those who are loyal to him are brought to our attention as Williams writes: 'Remember that Lewis is constantly trying to get us to sense afresh what it is *like* to be confronted with God' (p. 56).

There is a fascinating section in the book on the concept of truth: we are reminded of 'The Silver Chair' where the children are about to give in to the idea that the Lion is a fantasy and that the underworld is the only reality. Only Puddleglum resists and cries, 'I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it.' Rowan Williams here explores Lewis's commitment to objective truth within the broader context of 'those who cling to it without hope of reward or vindication' (p. 62). It is a revealing commentary by the Archbishop on truth and gives us insight into Lewis's exploration of faith, truth, doubt and reason as well as hints of his own.

The reader's journey leads us to engage with Narnia but ultimately with what Lewis is doing as he writes, which is to show us 'that the traditional Christian world view does not entail some kind of emptying out of familiar material reality in favour of a ghostly substitute: it is this world which is so often a ghostly substitute for the real thing because of our own fear of what is real' (p. 119). Somehow this brings us back to the personal nature of *The Lion's World* – 'The reader is brought to Narnia for a little in order to know Aslan better in this world' (p. 144). In *The Lion's World* that is exactly what happens: Lewis's writings are a platform enabling us to scale greater heights in imagining and even encountering God.

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Stephen G. Parker Tom Lawson, *God and War: The Church of England and Armed Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: (Ashgate, 2012)), pp. x+239. ISBN 9780754666929.
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This is an ambitious volume of nine essays which try to cover aspects of the Church of England's understanding of and involvement in armed conflict through