



*A review of*  
**Paths in the Snow:  
A Literary  
Journey through  
*The Lion, The Witch and  
The Wardrobe***

Katherine Langrish

When we encounter a Classical faun, an ice-witch, talking animals and Father Christmas in the same story, we can either write it off as a flaw or minor quirk of the author, or we can explore what it means to have placed those disparate figures within the same fictional landscape. (11)

*Paths in the Snow* is an indepth reading of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* which examines the ways in which the Narnia stories function as literature. As Assistant Professor of Literature at the University of Nottingham and a Reader in the Church of England, the author is well placed to recognise and discuss the layered complexity of Lewis's innumerable allusions, theological, literary and contemporary. The genesis of this book was a weekly online discussion group set up by Bloomfield for parishioners during lockdown; he chose *The Lion* as a text likely to be familiar to most of them. A year or two later this evolved into a regular reading group for his students at university. 'Some were Christians, some were not. The weekly discussions took us down lines of thought I could not have anticipated.' (9)

The result is a fascinating and eclectic mixture. It's still relatively unusual to find critiques of the Narnia stories which take seriously both their literary and theological elements. Chapter by chapter Bloomfield picks 'details and connections which strike me as worth investigating' (26) and his commentary on these is never less than thought-provoking. An example is his comparison of William Dunbar's 14th-century poem *Done is a Battell on the Dragon Blak*, in which Christ harrows Hell, with the moment Giant Rumblebuffin destroys the White Witch's castle gates. Dunbar writes, 'The yettis of hell ar brokin with a crack' (The gates of hell are broken with a crack): Lewis writes,

'The gates creaked at the first blow, cracked at the second, and shivered at the third.' The reference is clearly deliberate. Each involves a rescue: Christ redeems the prisoners of Hell, and Aslan restores life to the prisoners the Witch had turned to stone.

The book is full of such insights. J.W. Dunne's *An Experiment in Time* – influential in the 1930s, it inspired J.B. Priestley's play *An Inspector Calls* – may have prompted the idea of Narnian time running differently to that of our world. Edmund's greedy desire for Turkish Delight is linked to the scarcity of sweetmeats during wartime and post-war rationing. Via a 1947 translation of the *Epistle to the Romans*, we learn why shaking hands could be understood as a sign of forgiveness. We consider differences between the faun Mr Tumnus and Pan of *The Wind in the Willows*, and discover Pentecostal references in the moment when Aslan breathes on the White Witch's statues. There is even a comparison between Lucy's meeting with Mr Tumnus, and Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* – though *The Tale of Mrs Tiggly-Winkle* is an even closer fit. Its heroine, little Lucie, drinks tea in the house of hedgehog-cum-washerwoman Mrs Tiggly-Winkle, and like Lucy Pevensie's, her experience is not without a frisson of unease: 'all through [Mrs Tiggly-Winkle's] gown and her cap there were *hair-pins* sticking wrong way out; so that Lucie didn't like to sit too near her'. Though few of these references would be noticed by children, they nevertheless bestow upon the world of Narnia a depth and richness to which, as a child who adored the *Chronicles of Narnia*, I can wholeheartedly testify. And they are there for adult readers to interpret and enjoy.

Some have dismissed the Narnia stories as obvious allegories, blatant Christian propaganda in which, quite simply, Aslan = Jesus. Bloomfield disagrees. 'Lewis's borrowings from the Bible are by no means straightforward, and the artistry with which he selects and interweaves details is a central part of the novel' (25). He shows that even at moments such as the death and resurrection of Aslan, Lewis's narrative often diverges from the Gospel accounts.

Lewis's allusive technique in these chapters is remarkable: he repeatedly seems to make allusions which insist we read the story in terms of the Gospels, and then alters or entirely reverses the expected image. (228)

Whereas Peter and the disciples fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus prays, Lucy and Susan cannot sleep: they go with the sorrowful Aslan to the Stone Table. When Mary Magdalene meets the risen Jesus at the empty tomb, Jesus warns her, 'Do not touch me' – 'Noli me tangere' in the Latin Bible. When Aslan returns to life, he invites the two girls to play 'catch me if you can' with him and a joyful romp ensues, full of 'the delight and pleasure of the physical' (247).

The turning of the ‘noli me tangere’ into ‘catch me if you can’ is probably the boldest and most outrageous rewriting of an image from the Gospels in these chapters. It follows the same pattern of entirely reworking a significant symbol from the biblical texts, but using it to shape a theological meaning which ... is framed for the emotional world of a young reader. (248)

‘I think it is too simplistic,’ Bloomfield writes, ‘to swap in Jesus’ name for Aslan’s’ (241). Since Aslan has knowledge of the ‘deeper magic before the dawn of time’, he must have existed then, and ‘is the Logos, the Word which begins the Gospel of John’ (242). Aslan is not (at least, not until the dénouement of *The Last Battle*, which as a child I cordially detested) Jesus in disguise. He is at once a great divine power and a lion – a child’s dream, a majestic talking animal whose golden mane you can bury your face in. As Bloomfield reminds us: ‘One meaning does not replace or overwrite the other’ (35).

A thing I particularly like about *Paths in the Snow* is its insistence on the texture of Lewis’s writing. Far from carefully mapping out one-to-one allegorical correspondences, Lewis himself wrote in his essay *Three Ways of Writing for Children* that ‘everything in the story should arise from the whole cast of the author’s mind.’ And so, if Lucy’s passage through a dark wardrobe into the frozen Narnian woods has resonances of the ‘dark wood’ of Dante’s *Inferno*, Bloomfield is clear this need not mean Lewis was conscious of planting such an allusion. He was remarkably well read, and such things sink deep and rise up in other forms. Jem Bloomfield proves himself a reliable, erudite and fascinating guide as we follow him down the twisting Narnian byways, and *Paths in the Snow* is a delightful book.

Author: Jem Bloomfield.

Publisher: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd (2023), 256 pp.

.....

**Katherine Langrish**