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Miller's "The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia" - Book Review

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The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia. By Laura Miller. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008. ISBN 978-0-316-01763-3. Pp. 311. \$25.99.

The Magician's Book is Laura Miller's unique and intriguing extended essay about her experience as a lifelong reader of C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The idea for the work began with a publisher's assignment to write about the single book that had most influenced her, and, for Miller, that book was *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which she first read as a second grader. As one who makes her living writing about books (for Salon.com, of which she is cofounder, and *The New York Times Book Review*), Miller sets out to explore what she calls her "love affair" with the *Chronicles*.

What makes this book unique and more than just another appreciation of Lewis as an author is the nature of that love affair. As Shakespeare told us, "the course of true love never did run smooth," and this is certainly true of Miller's experience with Lewis' children's fantasy. Miller's title, of course, refers to the scene in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* where Lucy encounters the wonderful Magician's Book, and, from that point on, measures every book she reads against that standard. While Miller compares her first experience with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to Lucy's, much of the book deals with her struggle as a young adult when she discovers the Christian symbolism of Lewis' work. Miller, though raised as a Catholic, is not, by her own admission, a Christian. Strangely, however, Miller found that when she returned to Narnia years later, it had not lost its power

and beauty. This reality leaves her puzzled and, ultimately, leads her to write a book to try to explain it. Miller's approach is not only to reflect on her personal experience as a reader but also to interview friends and other writers about their response to the *Chronicles* and its Christian subtext.

Miller divides the book into three parts. Part One, "Songs of Innocence," explores elements of the *Chronicles* that have caused it to appeal to generations of children. Drawing heavily on her own responses to Narnia in her childhood, Miller identifies key factors including the appeal of entering another world (expansiveness), the appeal of talking animals, the appeal of the private nature of the Narnia experience, the appeal of the absence or irrelevance of parents (adventure), the appeal of "grown-up morality" of Narnia, and the appeal of Lucy as protagonist. Her discussion of the morality of Narnia is interesting, especially in light of Miller's skepticism. She suggests that one of the reasons children respond so positively to Narnia (and do not feel lectured to or patronized by it) is that Lewis presents a "grown-up" morality that takes good and evil seriously (for example, Edmund's encounters with the White Witch). Miller also suggests that readers can absorb this aspect of Lewis' morality without subscribing to the Christianity that inspired it, referring to Lewis' concept of the Tao or natural law in *The Abolition of Man*. Just as Miller's skepticism leads to unique perspectives about the religious elements of Narnia, her experience as a female reader leads to keen insights about Lewis' choice of Lucy as protagonist. Here Miller explores the masculine world that Lewis inhabited at Oxford and proposes that it would have seemed natural for Lewis to choose a boy as the lead character. However, Miller suggests, "Writing about Narnia released something free, lyrical, and tender in Lewis, and none of those qualities fit within the limitations of what he would have viewed as an acceptable boy character" (70).

Part 2, "Trouble in Paradise," will be the most challenging for Christian readers, for here Miller expresses her disillusionment, disappointment, and loss when she discovered, as a teenager, the profoundly Christian nature of the *Chronicles*. Miller writes: "The Christianity that I knew—the only Christianity I was aware of—was the opposite of Narnia in both aesthetics and spirit" (96). Miller balances her strong negative reaction by telling the stories of other readers she interviewed. Pam, for example, a person with strong spiritual feelings but with no interest in organized religion, saw the spiritual elements as universal symbols that transcended any particular religion. Miller's perspective here as a non-Christian leads to insights that may be worthy of further study by Christian scholars, specifically how and in what ways the *Chronicles* may be described as Christian literature.

Miller also treats in this section several negative criticisms about Lewis, including his racism, based on his presentation of the Calormenes, and his misogyny, based on his presentation of females throughout the *Chronicles*. This quote captures the essence of Miller's complaint about Lewis' racism: "For him, the wickedness of the Calormenes was of a piece with their foreignness, which was

integral to their wrongness; the dark skin and strange smells were all tangled up with the slaveholding and the tyranny and the devil worship" (124). Miller raises serious questions about the arguments of those who defend Lewis against charges of racism (e.g., he was a man of his time; he was ignorant rather than malicious; he was being politically incorrect, not racist) by such Christian critics as David Downing and Alan Jacobs. In addressing the misogynist charge, Miller looks both at the presentation of females in the *Chronicles* and at Lewis' experience with women, especially Janie Moore. She finds a connection between Susan, the White Witch, and the Lady of the Green Kirtle (from *The Silver Chair*) in that all three use their beauty and desirability to lead men astray. She dismisses the argument that Susan was excluded from Narnia because of her vanity and excessive regard for social acceptance and traces the problem to Lewis' own discomfort with beautiful women and his fear that they lure men from nobler pursuits to the trivial. She points out that while girls are not excluded from the adventures of Narnia, they must learn to be less "girly" first and notes that the heroines of Narnia are those whose sexuality and physical allure have yet to emerge (Lucy, Jill Pole) or those, like Aravis, who have rejected feminine ways. I found Miller's treatment of these controversial points about Lewis to be surprisingly even-handed and fair, certainly more so than those of Philip Pullman and John Goldthwaite, both of whom Miller quotes and whose remarks come off as strident and, at times, mean-spirited.

In Part 3, "Songs of Experience," Miller deals with those aspects of Narnia that have continued to fascinate her as an adult reader. Chief among these attractions is that of Narnia as a place, which she attributes largely to Lewis' considerable talents as a descriptive writer, enhanced by his love of walking and observing the landscapes of his native Ireland and adopted England. Miller recounts her travels to search for places that remind her of Narnia, places that Lewis knew intimately, the real places upon which Narnia must have been at least partly based.

Her explorations lead her to reflect on a number of interesting subjects, most notably the personal and literary friendship of Lewis and Tolkien. Miller seizes on a happy analogy to help explain the relationship of the two writers that provides fresh insights into an often-discussed subject. She compares the friendship of Tolkien and Lewis to that of Coleridge and Wordsworth, pointing out that while Lewis shared some traits with Wordsworth (Romanticism, for one), Lewis often played Coleridge to Tolkien's Wordsworth. Lewis, for example, was a renowned talker; was a precipitator, who liked to pull like-minded groups of friends together to see what happened; and was an enthusiastic promoter of Tolkien's writing. Miller also addresses Tolkien's dislike of Lewis' *Chronicles*, pointing out that while Lewis praised Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" with its idea of a self-enclosed and consistent secondary world, Lewis himself was more interested in the medieval practice of mixing pagan mythology, science and theology, history and poetry in his creation of Narnia.

In spite of Miller's skeptical perspective, Christian readers and critics of Lewis' works will find much of value in *The Magician's Book*. While at several points she negatively criticizes Lewis the man, her tone is never sarcastic or condemning.

Rather her obvious enthusiasm and love for the works she critiques consistently come through. Perhaps because Miller emphasizes the personal nature of her work, I was pleasantly surprised with the depth of scholarship that undergirds the book. Her knowledge of Lewis' canon is impressive, as demonstrated by her frequent references to his literary criticism, such as *The Allegory of Love*, *The Discarded Image*, and *An Experiment in Criticism*. She has obviously read widely about the life of Lewis (not surprisingly, she favors A. N. Wilson, the biographer who is most skeptical in his treatment of Lewis, over Hooper and Sayer). While Miller is well-versed in works by and about Lewis, she does not appear to have read much of the literary criticism on the *Chronicles* by writers like Schakel, Myers, and Howard. Thus, some of her critical analyses of specific *Chronicles* repeat observations that have already been made and supported more extensively by other critics (for example, the medieval romance elements in *Dawn Treader* and the fairy tale aspects of *Silver Chair*).

While I agree that Miller's non-Christian perspective leads her to emphasize aspects of Lewis' works that may have been undervalued or missed by Lewis' Christian critics, this stance also prevents her from seeing value in the more overtly theological aspects of the *Chronicles*. At times, Miller handles this problem well. For example, she appreciates the picture of Aslan, not for its theological symbolism, but because of his physical nature; she cites the description of Lucy and Susan's post-resurrection romp with Aslan as one of Lewis' most exhilarating. At other times, however, Miller's perspective seems limiting, as when she writes off *The Last Battle* as the weakest of the *Chronicles*, quoting approvingly the novelist Jonathan Franzen's assessment that the story is "overwhelmed by its preacherly and philosophical elements" (302). It is also puzzling that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* remains Miller's favorite *Chronicle* in spite of its containing some of the most obvious (or *blatant*, as Miller might say) Christian symbolism. Finally, the omission of endnotes will be disappointing to Lewis scholars since Miller does not always identify the source of quotes, even those from Lewis, in her text.

Miller has made a valuable contribution to the discussion of the *Chronicles*. Her book celebrates reading and the uncanny ability of authors like Lewis to create works of mythic power that influence us as readers, whether or not we agree with their underlying philosophical and religious assumptions.

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