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Review of C. S. Lewis for Beginners

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Perhaps it will encourage readers to proceed to primary sources and inspire scholars to compose a biography of Arthur Greeves.

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Louis Markos, *C. S. Lewis for Beginners*, illus. by Joe Lee (Danbury, CT: For Beginners, 2022). viii + 192 pages. \$15.95. ISBN: 97819399940806.

A nonfiction graphic book series, “For Beginners” is designed to introduce young adults to various writers, thinkers, and subjects in a straightforward and accessible manner. Originally, its target audience was disadvantaged or struggling readers; its aim is to help them delve into complex topics with the hope of converting those near non-readers into readers. More recent additions to the series have focused on such writers as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Toni Morrison, Ayn Rand, and J. R. R. Tolkien. *C. S. Lewis for Beginners* is the latest addition to this growing collection.

After a brief biography of Lewis in the first chapter, Louis Markos moves chronologically through the writings of C. S. Lewis, devoting one chapter each to exploring his various books. As Markos explains in the introduction, this pattern is broken in chapter three where four of his books on literary criticism are discussed in a single chapter: *The Allegory of Love*, *The Personal Heresy*, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, and *Studies in Words*. Although “brilliant,” these four “are a bit technical for the average reader” (6). Markos does not devote individual chapters to the essays, poems, or letters written by Lewis but draws upon all these while commenting on his other books.

Chapters two through twenty-eight each begin with a series of bullet points to help orient readers to the particular work or works being discussed. Through this staccato method, Markos not only explains the basic facts about each book, but also summarizes a surprising amount of scholarly discussion. For example, while examining *The Great Divorce*, Markos explains, “Lewis condenses the full weight of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* into the space of 100 pages. His guide, George MacDonald, combines Dante’s

Virgil and Beatrice” (92). On the composition of *Miracles*, Markos clarifies how:

After Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe bested Lewis at a meeting of the Oxford Socratic Club on issues raised by *Miracles*, he revised Chapter three for the second edition (1960). Anscombe was satisfied by the changes, but the chapter is arguably the most obscure and difficult chapter in all of Lewis’s work! (99)

Such information is followed by further prose commentary in an easily readable style. Over one hundred drawings by Joe Lee are particularly effective in illustrating various points in the text. These chapters conclude with what is perhaps the greatest virtue of *C. S. Lewis for Beginners*: “Suggested Pairings.” Lewis’s books are paired with essays by Lewis which are thematically connected. These are designed to spur beginning readers forward, but avid readers of Lewis will also find them useful. Likewise, the included annotated bibliography will be appreciated by both sets of readers.

In such a swift and condensed overview of the Lewis corpus, it is to be expected that the author occasionally makes misstatements. Lewis is praised for his supposed “thorough knowledge” of Hebrew (39) whereas Lewis was always dependent on others for insights into that language.¹ Markos retells the old myth that, during World War II, “Lewis’s voice was the second most recognizable one on the radio after Winston Churchill’s!” (22). However, any viewer of the 2010 movie *The King’s Speech* would question the veracity of such a statement, plus an examination of the actual wartime ratings kept by the BBC Listener Research Department do not support such a claim.²

These minor flaws do not distract from Louis Markos’s remarkable achievement of producing a short and reliable entry to C. S. Lewis for complete beginners. Introductions to Lewis and his writing are often

¹ “I have often wished I had time to learn Hebrew, but I think it would be for more an indulgence than a duty.” Letter of 24 April 1936 to Dom Bede Griffiths, in C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. by Walter Hooper, 3 vols. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004-7), 2:186.

² See Bruce R. Johnson, “C. S. Lewis and the BBC’s *Brains Trust*: A Study in Resiliency,” in *SEVEN: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, 30 (2013), 80.

lacking in either quality, accessibility, or brevity. Markos has avoided all these pitfalls in a succinct and wide-ranging volume.

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John Rosegrant, *Tolkien, Enchantment and Loss: Steps on the Developmental Journey*. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2022). 220 pages. \$58.99. ISBN 9781606354353.

John Rosegrant's *Tolkien, Enchantment, and Loss* is an excellent and highly recommended book for readers wanting to delve into the psychological depths of J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium. Using an "approach" (8) influenced and guided (6, 8) by psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud, D.W. Winnicott, and Julia Kristeva, Rosegrant carefully and thoughtfully considers how themes of enchantment and loss pervade the Legendarium while suggesting some connections with Tolkien's own history.

Rosegrant's writing is exceptionally accessible. Although a desire to learn about Tolkien and psychology is required to enjoy the work, knowledge of either is not required to engage the text as Rosegrant succinctly summarizes both psychological concepts and story plots. In fact, *Tolkien, Enchantment, and Loss* could serve as a Rosetta Stone for Tolkien enthusiasts aspiring to explore developmental psychology as well as for students of psychology desiring to engage Tolkien. Rosegrant masterfully weaves both psychological concepts and illustrations from the Legendarium together in a cohesive and convincing manner while engaging other scholarly works. His knowledge of Tolkien's Legendarium and other works is laudable and Rosegrant's treatment of the text is exemplary; Rosegrant never forces concepts upon the text or reads the text in a flippant manner, but rather takes the stories written by Tolkien seriously, referencing them in a way that demonstrates integrity and a thorough understanding of the text.

Chapter one discusses Hobbits as symbols of childhood as the halflings are plunged into the more enchanting world of Middle-earth