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## Review of A Well of Wonder: Essays on C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and the Inklings

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Clyde S. Kilby, *A Well of Wonder: Essays on C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and the Inklings*, ed. by Loren Wilkinson and Keith Call (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2016). vii + 348 pages, including "A Tribute to Clyde S. Kilby" \$28.99. ISBN 9781612618623.

Read enough scholarship in any particular area and one will eventually come to a work that could be described as essential. In the ever-expanding territory of Inklings Studies—a field sometimes better known by the quantity of its books rather than its quality—essential contributions can be hard to determine. However, when one finally does come across such a work, one is inclined to proclaim, as Lewis once said about a literary discovery, “. . . it is a real book: i.e. it’s not like a book at all, but like a thunderclap.”<sup>1</sup> *A Well of Wonder: Essays on C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and the Inklings* by Clyde Kilby is such a find.

*A Well of Wonder* is one of two recently published essay collections by the late Dr. Kilby, renowned Professor of English at Wheaton College and founder of the Marion E. Wade Center. While the other volume, *The Arts and the Christian Imagination*, features Kilby’s ruminations on literature and aesthetics, *A Well of Wonder* has a more concentrated focus, containing only Kilby’s essays on the writings of Lewis, Tolkien, and the Inklings. It was Kilby’s sustained study of Lewis and Tolkien which would, in fact, dominate his illustrious academic life. Indeed, one feels the weight of experience in Kilby’s criticism with each subsequent essay in *A Well of Wonder*. For almost fifty years, Kilby wrote about the Inklings with remarkable acumen and clarity, bringing a rare expertise to bear on each subject he considered.

Every essay in *A Well of Wonder* aims at an audience whose interest in Lewis and Tolkien hovers between the amateur and the academic. On every page, there is a clarion call for readers to understand Lewis and Tolkien more thoughtfully than they did before. To that end, Kilby’s prose remains in every essay clear and purposed—not a superfluous word as he considers ideas worth further contemplation. For example, commenting on Lewis’s depiction of hell in *The Great Divorce*, Kilby writes, “Lewis’s images of hell suggest the terrible surrealism of Hieronymus Bosch, but his lively pictures

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. by Walter Hooper, 3 vols., (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 1:859.

of heaven are gloriously apocalyptic” (129). While readers will find these kinds of cultured yet accessible statements throughout *A Well of Wonder*, they will not find one dominant thesis or predictable interpretive move. Kilby treats each topic nimbly, offering a balanced reflection or pointed argument when the subject warrants.

Indeed, the range of topics in the volume is met only by the quality of Kilby’s treatment of each. From an insightful look at the theme of music in Lewis’s work titled, “On Music, Worship, and the Spiritual Life” (81–104) to the biographical “The Wade Collection and the Preservation of a Legacy” (292–306), Kilby’s approach remains versatile. There is, though, in each of Kilby’s essays an overarching belief about the task of literary interpretation that might strike contemporary readers as outdated. Kilby employs a traditional model of interpretation that privileges the thematic elements of the text rather than imposing on it the often incongruous markers—those currently fashionable and insistent ideas of race, class, or gender—of poststructuralism. Kilby looks for the themes of the text, careful to bring out only what is contained therein.

If Kilby’s preference for literary analysis doesn’t capture readers, then his perennial tone of appreciation for his subjects likely will. In Kilby’s work, affection undergirds analysis. I began by saying that essential books are hard to find; it is this element of appreciation that partly explains such a rare quality. Almost any writer can objectify, can turn an author or text over for the sake of a rather cold, academic investigation, but writers few can achieve a nuanced, balanced assessment which respects the writer in context. There are undeniable traces of admiration and conviction when Kilby says of Lewis, “...one of the world’s greatest scholars in his chosen field and great-minded in all his thoughts, he was nevertheless a man who rejoiced in the simple things of earth and who from the heart believed that God was alive and really meant what he had said to men” (15). Essays in the volume like “My First (and Only) Visit with Mr. Lewis” (16–9) and “Initial Encounters with J. R. R. Tolkien” (149–153) testify to this particular quality of fond familiarity in Kilby’s work.

I’m convinced that Inkling scholars will find *A Well of Wonder* to be a distinctly personal volume that deepens rather than diminishes appreciation for the quality of Kilby’s scholarship. He cared for his subjects and, therefore, operated with the grace natural of a devoted life. One finds

that same endearing devotion to Lewis and Tolkien in the essential work of Humphrey Carpenter, Walter Hooper, and George Sayer. Clyde Kilby, as evidenced in *A Well of Wonder*, should doubtless be mentioned alongside them.

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Corey Latta, *C. S. Lewis and the Art of Writing: What the Essayist, Poet, Novelist, Literary Critic, Apologist, Memoirist, Theologian Teaches Us about the Life and Craft of Writing* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016). ix + 239 pages. \$24.00. ISBN 9781498225342.

The twin *foci* of this volume—the writing life of C.S. Lewis and his dedication to the writer’s craft—are subjects as enticing as they are rich with promise. As such, they amply warrant detailed exploration. In the opening pages of this book, the author justly suggests Lewis had a deep and abiding “writerly desire,” which shaped “the life of his craft” (2).

That is a salutary place to begin: with the recognition that Lewis was once a young man who aspired to be a writer, but that there was a time when he had yet to become one. It was, Latta tells us, Lewis’s life as a young reader that opened this world of possibility. Rightly, we are told that he “read himself into the writing life” (13).

This felicitous phrase opens a window on the prime merit of this book: it charts the journey of a greatly gifted writer, in prose that is often finely burnished and well considered. Latta’s detailed description of Lewis’s reading life is no less a benison. In youth, and after, he lingered over books in ways we too seldom know in our time, and could recall:

I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tiles. Also, of endless books.<sup>1</sup>

It’s little wonder that with such memories of quiet, unhurried sojourns,

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 10.