

Lewis's gifts

by [Gilbert Meilaender](#) in the [September 23, 1998](#) issue

*By Lionel Adey, C.S. Lewis: Writer, Dreamer, and Mentor. (Eerdmans, 307 pp.)*

The making of books about C. S. Lewis's life and thought shows no signs of diminishing in this, the centenary of his birth. We are only beginning, it seems, to appreciate the wide range of his influence. In this helpful book, Lionel Adey surveys Lewis's writings in almost every conceivable genre: literary history, criticism and theory; fiction (for adults and children), essay and apology; poetry; and even letter writing. In each genre Adey's aim is to give some sense of the content and style of Lewis's writing and to assess its significance and likelihood of enduring.

An introductory chapter discusses Lewis's "almost dual personality" as "dreamer" (the romantic, marked by longing for his lost mother who died when he was young) and "mentor" (the rationalist, unwillingly identifying with his father, a lawyer). This framework is not used consistently throughout the book, however, and that may be good. It is not especially new. It is, in many respects, the framework Lewis himself used in his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy*, and it was successfully applied to Lewis's writing almost 25 years ago by Corbin Carnell in *Bright Shadow of Reality*. Moreover, it shows at places perhaps too much influence of A. N. Wilson's rather skewed biography of Lewis. Adey is at his best when eschewing larger theoretical frameworks and discussing the writings themselves.

Especially helpful are the three chapters treating Lewis as, respectively, literary historian, critic and theorist. Adey is a knowledgeable guide through the works of scholarship that made Lewis's reputation within the academy--works such as *The Allegory of Love*, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, *The Discarded Image*, *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* and *An Experiment in Criticism*. In every case Adey attempts to show how subsequent scholarship has concurred with or dissented from the positions Lewis took. He judges how well Lewis's academic writings have worn over the years, and at some points brings Lewis's views into conversation with recent (deconstructive and reader-response) approaches to literature. Sometimes those of us who do not know the scholarly literature (on, say, *Paradise Lost*) will feel that Adey has not said quite enough to take us inside the arguments. Nevertheless,

these chapters are an invaluable contribution to the study of Lewis.

The chapter on Lewis's poetry is also illuminating. Lewis wanted and tried to write epic poetry. To some degree his attempt was doomed because he lived in an age not much interested in such poetry. But perhaps Lewis simply was not a great poet.

Throughout his life, however, Lewis continued to write--and sometimes publish--shorter poems on various topics, and many of these have been collected and published by Walter Hooper. Adey discusses the worth of Lewis's poetry and directs attention to a few of the poems that seem to him among Lewis's best. His analysis makes clear that Lewis's and his editors' later revisions of the poems are often not improvements. Chad Walsh, himself a poet who wrote two books about Lewis's work, once suggested that "whatever Lewis said in verse he said at least as well in prose." Adey challenges this judgment in particular cases but on the whole agrees with it.

Adey's evaluation of Lewis's fiction for adults (a category that includes not only the space trilogy and *Till We Have Faces*, but also *Pilgrim's Regress*, *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*) is mixed. He considers Perelandra to be Lewis's most successful space fantasy, and he writes that *Till We Have Faces* "is now widely recognized by academics as Lewis's best novel for adults," an assessment that he himself appears to share even though he argues that the novel's plot "comes unglued at its central injunction." This claim seems to me simply mistaken. Adey also undervalues the theological insight and inventiveness of *The Screwtape Letters*, even while overvaluing the last of those letters, which he describes as "among Lewis's finest pieces of writing."

Not surprisingly, Adey thinks the *Chronicles of Narnia* are among Lewis's most successful achievements. He notes the differences that might arise from reading the seven stories in the order Lewis wrote them, the order they were actually published, and the order (internal to the completed series) of Narnian chronology. Here again Adey is strongest when discussing the structure of the stories and less helpful when assessing their content. A few of his claims seem almost bizarre. For example, considering whether the Chronicles will continue to be relevant to children's lives, he writes: "Whether future generations of children will enjoy battles with swords and bows and arrows may be doubted, but they will unquestionably condemn clear-cut logging and slavery." Perhaps it is not surprising to find that the author of such a sentence regards *The Silver Chair* as "dated by its author's prejudice against 'progressive' schooling and parenting."

Adey's chapter on Lewis as "Essayist, Pleader, and Speaker" is too sketchy to do justice to the wide range of writing that it treats, and Adey is not at his most insightful when discussing Lewis's religious writings. Here again he seems least penetrating when he steps onto theoretical ground. Moreover, he perpetuates a view (developed especially in Wilson's biography) that I regard as largely mythical--namely, that after a 1948 Socratic Society debate in which Elizabeth Anscombe seemed to have shown a defect in Lewis's argument that naturalism is self-contradictory, Lewis's confidence was so shaken that he turned completely away from writing Christian apologetic works and "confined himself to writing fiction, criticism, and expository or devotional books for fellow believers." This view fails to reckon with Anscombe's own quite different recollection of the debate and with the fact that Lewis continued to participate in Socratic Society debates and subsequently revised and tried to correct his argument. He published a revised version of it in a later edition of *Miracles*, and he continued his earlier role as apologist.

Along the way, Adey offers occasional Lewisian insights worthy of reflection. For example, noting that Lewis regarded the literary interpreter's chief task as "to begin analyses and to leave them unfinished," Adey writes, "Here speaks a tutor content to let insights form in the minds of pupils." He recounts Lewis's advice to would-be writers "to test a draft by reading it aloud. To him, good writing resembled fluent and lively speech." He suggests--a suggestion I wish he had developed--that the tone of Lewis's own apologetics is "akin" to that of the Book of Common Prayer.

Most of all, Adey succeeds in showing the Lewis who was a compulsive reader and writer; who made his readers want to read the books he had read; and whose approach to literature was marked by a fundamental generosity toward authors, finding and noting the passages that made them seem interesting, displaying his own sense of wonder and enjoyment in everything he read. These are great and rare gifts, and they should not go without notice and praise.