The siege of Narnia: What reviewers are saying

by Carol Zaleski in the January 24, 2006 issue

My class on the Inklings (C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and their circle) met on Tuesdays and Thursdays last semester, just in time for elevenses. A master baker in the class provided Lembas, which we found remarkably sustaining. Turkish delight was selling out all over the country, but we managed to locate a supply and discovered we were immune to its sticky spell. The class linguist instructed us in Quenya and Sindarin. The class geologist taught us to identify glacial moraines in Middle-earth. We discussed pre-Inklings like Spenser, Milton and Dante. We sang the songs of Tom Bombadil, studied the social hierarchy of Malacandra, and saw how the deception theory of the atonement might account for the downfall of Sauron and the White Witch. All the while we were blissfully unaffected by the *Narnia* controversies raging around us.

Blissfully unaffected, but not blissfully unaware, for no one who has been reading the papers could fail to notice that *Narnia* is once again under a wintry siege, this time by the arctic winds of secularist culture criticism. While Christopher Hitchens was lamenting in *Slate* “the compulsory infliction of joy” that Christmas brings, other critics were complaining about acts of Christian allegory perpetrated by *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Keep your sick bag handy, British columnist Polly Toynbee told readers of the *Guardian*, and keep your children home lest they be taken in by the story of a lion king whose irresistible power crushes human dignity and responsibility. In a more subdued critique in the *New York Times*, Charles McGrath observed that “the books are better when read without the subtext. Aslan, for example, is much more thrilling and mysterious if you think of him as a superhero lion, not as Jesus in a Bert Lahr suit.”

Readers who dislike Lewis dislike him with a passion. Philip Pullman, the post-Inkling Oxford fantasist, called the *Narnia* septet “one of the most ugly and poisonous things I've ever read.” The message of *Narnia*, according to Pullman, is that “death is better than life; boys are better than girls; light-colored people are better than

dark-colored people; and so on." My Inklings students love Pullman's fantasies, despite his crude anti-Narnian and anti-Christian rhetoric, for the simple reason that he is a gifted storyteller. As a critic, however, he appears to belong to what Lewis once called the "Vigilant school" of literary witch-finders. According to Pullman, British columnist Philip Hensher, and other critics of the Vigilant school, Lewis was a racist, misogynist, sadistic prig who, for transparent psychosexual reasons, adopted Christianity as his personal myth, became a pandering apologist, and turned to children's literature as a last resort only after Elizabeth Anscombe demolished his case against naturalism in a humiliating public debate.

During the weeks leading up to the film debut, it seemed that everyone with a stake in books and culture was taking it in turn to attack, defend, psychoanalyze, venerate, reinvent or second-guess C. S. Lewis. Lewis was ably defended by Alan Jacobs in his new biography, *The Narnian*; by Richard Jenkyns in the *New Republic*; and by Michael Nelson in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, among others. Yet many critics remained unswayed.

Even Adam Gopnik, an accomplished staff writer for the *New Yorker* who recently published his own children's fantasy novel, depicted Lewis as a "prisoner of Narnia" who betrayed his artistic conscience by injecting a puerile, muscular Christianity into imaginative fiction. If Lewis must have a Christ figure, said Gopnik, better it should be a donkey than a lion. Writing in the *New York Times*, Peter Steinfels corrected this typological error. Christ is at once lion and lamb, king and servant, whose entry into Jerusalem on a donkey signals his royalty in the line of David as much as it symbolizes his sacrificial humility.

Gopnik evidently prefers Tolkien to Lewis, arguing that "there is no way in which 'The Lord of the Rings' is a Christian book, much less a Catholic allegory." Yet Tolkien himself stated that *The Lord of the Rings* is "a fundamentally religious and Catholic book," and maintained, in "On Fairy-Stories," that all great fantasy is evangelical, bearing witness to "joy beyond the walls of the world." Tolkien was the superior mythographer, and his mythological material was as Germanic as it was Christian; but his subject, no less than Lewis's, was the gospel.

The Inklings were Christian Romantics—Romantics without rebellion—who sought to awaken the modern imagination from its antimetaphysical slumber. They were realists about the supernatural (Lewis wrote, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was

made for another world”), and this disturbs some critics even more than the Inklings’ purported escapism. “Everyone needs ghosts, spirits, marvels and poetic imaginings,” said Toynbee, as long as no spiritual truth claims intrude. For Gopnik, “poetry and fantasy aren’t stimulants to a deeper spiritual appetite; they are what we have to fill the appetite.” What great poet of the past, what great reader of poetry, would accept such a confinement?

Fantasy isn’t meant to satisfy the longings that it awakens, but to intensify them. Reading is itself a way of entering other worlds. To reject that privilege, which belongs to reason as well as to faith, is to exchange heavenly manna for Turkish delight.