

December 4, 2005

Script for *Fabulous Furry Tales* podcast #5

Welcome to *Altivo's Fabulous Furry Tales*, a discussion of furry literature and related arts, presented every week or two. I'm your host, Altivo, the Clydesdale librarian, back again to discuss animal characters and anthropomorphics in literary works.

This week's introductory excerpt is taken from David Arkenstone's album, *The Celtic Book of Days*, and is entitled "In the Ancient Time." The CD is released by Windham Hill, and well worthy of a listen. The words and character of this selection remind me of the way in which Aslan created the world of Narnia by singing, in C. S. Lewis' book *The Magician's Nephew*.

Undoubtedly I'll want to discuss that book at length eventually, but with this week's impending film release, we'll take a look right now at:

The Lion, the Witch & the Wardrobe

Clive Staples Lewis, known to family and friends as Jack, is familiar to us today as a Christian apologist and theologian. However, he wasn't always devoted to the Christian faith, and in fact by his own repeated statement, the seeds of what eventually became the *Chronicles of Narnia* were born long before his ultimate conversion, and had their origins in classical myth and symbolism.

Lewis was born in Belfast in 1898, to parents who were intellectual and intense readers. In his autobiography he recalls the piles and stacks of books that were to be found in every room of the house, from cellar to garret, "some suitable for children and some emphatically not," as he puts it, but none forbidden to him. When his mother died of cancer while he and his brother were still very young, both were left more and more to the hands of governesses and then boarding schools, and to their own devices as to entertainment. Do we detect a pattern here? I would say that Kenneth Grahame, Jack London, and even Beatrix Potter to some extent, had similar childhood experiences.

Because both suffered from a hereditary defect of the thumb that made them clumsy at manual activities such as crafts or modeling, Warren and Jack Lewis turned to writing and drawing. Jack wrote about talking animals, and gave them a complex civilization, populating his country of Animal-Land with soldiers, civilians, and nobles; while Warren wrote of India as a fantastic place of mechanical contrivances and invention. Eventually the two imaginary places were merged into the Kingdom of Boxen, populated by both humans and animals. Indeed, by taking

bits of Lewis' own writing out of context, we could even wonder if he were a closet furry fan. In an essay entitled "On three ways of writing for children," he says:

"When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty, I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up."

The Narnia stories began before Lewis finally adopted Christianity in any sincerity around the time of World War II. He himself often stated that the whole idea began with a picture in his head of a faun carrying an umbrella in the snow, which scene indeed appears very near the beginning of the first book, *The Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe*. Lucy first enters Narnia through the agency of an old wardrobe in the country house of Professor Kirk, where she and her three siblings, Peter, Edmund, and Susan, have been sent to get them away from the Blitz in London. Left largely to their own devices and entertainment in the large and mostly empty house, the children go exploring on a rainy day. Finding nothing but an old wardrobe in one room, they leave it in search of more interesting things and Lewis tells the beginning of her discovery this way:

"...all except Lucy. She stayed behind because she thought it would be worth while trying the door of the wardrobe, even though she felt almost sure that it would be locked. To her surprise it opened quite easily, and two moth-balls dropped out.

"Looking into the inside, she saw several coats hanging up – mostly long fur coats. There was nothing Lucy liked so much as the smell and feel of fur. She immediately stepped into the wardrobe and got in among the coats and rubbed her face against them, leaving the door open, of course, because she knew that it is very foolish to shut oneself into any wardrobe."

Forgive me for emphasizing the little reference here to the smell and feel of fur. This subject is touched upon several times in the Narnia books, as well as in the first book of Lewis' science fiction trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*. I am not suggesting that Lewis had a fur fetish or anything of the sort, but I do find it interesting that he had a lifelong fascination with the fantasy subject of talking, rational animals.

Despite Lewis' own denials, *The Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe* contains a Christian religious allegory. One can hardly read it any other way, and in fact I find it rather heavy-handed in this respect, though the writer greatly redeemed himself in the later volumes. The animals eventually dominated the stories, which combine classical and Scandinavian elements, and, as characters have a way of doing, took over and wrote their own tales. Only in the seventh and last volume, *The Last Battle*, does Lewis return to his Judeo-Christian mythos, with a sleek and almost pretty wrap up that echoes the Biblical Apocalypse. Even here, the writer diverges from simple fundamentalism and creates instead an almost universalist view that

was perhaps influenced by one of his own exemplars, George Macdonald: we find that heaven contains multiple worlds of different sorts, and that all good done in the name of any god, no matter how perverse or evil that god may have been, is accepted as having been done in the name of the true god of light. Myself, I found it rather sad that Lewis had to bring Narnia to an end of fire and ice in order to deliver his message, but the message is nonetheless a good one.

Good and evil, faith and loyalty, truth and justice are primary themes throughout the Narnia tales, but nowhere are they as starkly delineated as in this first book. Narnia as Lucy finds it, quickly followed by Edmund, is under an evil enchantment that makes it always winter, and yet never Christmas. The entire world is blanketed in snow and ice, even though it is high summer in the children's England. When Edmund follows Lucy into the wardrobe, he almost immediately meets the cause of the enchantment, in the person of the White Witch:

“‘Just like a girl,’ said Edmund to himself, ‘sulking somewhere, and won’t accept an apology.’ He looked round him again and decided he did not much like this place, and had almost made up his mind to go home, when he heard, very far off in the wood, a sound of bells. He listened and the sound came nearer and nearer and at last there swept into sight a sledge drawn by two reindeer.

“The reindeer were about the size of Shetland ponies and their hair was so white that even the snow hardly looked white compared with them; their branching horns were gilded and shone like something on fire when the sunrise caught them. Their harness was of scarlet leather and covered with bells. On the sledge, driving the reindeer, sat a fat dwarf who would have been about three feet high if he had been standing. He was dressed in polar bear’s fur and on his head he wore a red hood with a long gold tassel hanging down from its point; his huge beard covered his knees and served him instead of a rug. But behind him, on a much higher seat in the middle of the sledge sat a very different person – a great lady, taller than any woman that Edmund had ever seen. She also was covered in white fur up to her throat and held a long straight golden wand in her right hand and wore a golden crown on her head. Her face was white – not merely pale, but white like snow or paper or icing-sugar, except for her very red mouth. It was a beautiful face in other respects, but proud and cold and stern.”

We can contrast the appearance of the Witch with that of the Lion, Aslan, who is much whispered about before we finally see him. Narnian legend says that the power of the Witch will be broken only when a son of Adam and a daughter of Eve are enthroned as king and queen in the castle of Cair Paravel. When the children are taken into the protection of an elderly beaver couple, we meet the first anthropomorphic animals in Lewis’ tale, but far from the last. And as they travel in the company of the beavers, signs of spring start to appear. We are told that this heralds the coming of Aslan, the king from over the sea, and the end of the Witch’s power. Sure enough, Father Christmas puts in an appearance. (Christmas in a non-Christian place? Well, some will say this symbolizes the birth of Christ, whose ultimate sacrifice will also be echoed by Aslan before the end of the book.) Then Aslan himself arrives thus:

“Aslan stood in the centre of a crowd of creatures who had grouped themselves round him in the shape of a half-moon. There were Tree-Women there and Well-Women (Dryads and Naiads as they used to be called in our world) who had stringed instruments; it was they who had made the music. There were four great centaurs. The horse part of them was like huge English farm horses, and the man part was like stern but beautiful giants. There was also a unicorn, and a bull with the head of a man, and a pelican, and an eagle, and a great Dog. And next to Aslan stood two leopards of whom one carried his crown and the other his standard.

“But as for Aslan himself, the Beavers and the children didn’t know what to do or say when they saw him. People who have not been in Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time. If the children had ever thought so, they were cured of it now. For when they tried to look at Aslan’s face they just caught a glimpse of the golden mane and the great, royal, solemn, overwhelming eyes; and then they found they couldn’t look at him and went all trembly.”

I will not spoil the story for those listeners who have not yet read it. By all means, see the film, which from the previews I’ve seen appears to be worthwhile. But do not fail to read Lewis’ own account. It is a short book, less than 200 pages, and goes quickly. Aslan saves Narnia from the White Witch for all time, but only by drastic means that fill the story with heavy Christian symbolism. However, as can easily be seen from the excerpt I just quoted, this is not entirely a Christian story. It is filled with the exuberance of old pagan myth, and free flights of fantasy that encompass more than just the intelligent and honest animal folk who appear as characters throughout.

Some critics have called the starting mechanism of the wardrobe, through which the Pevensy children discovered Narnia, a hackneyed contrivance. Enchanted doorways, caves, or other such entrances (for instance, Lewis Carroll’s rabbit hole and looking glass) are common points of entry for alternate world fantasy, of course. Lewis eventually gives a plausible explanation for the wardrobe’s mystical connection in the sixth book, *The Magician’s Nephew*, where at the end we learn that it was made from the wood of an apple tree that in turn had grown from an apple seed brought out of Narnia by none other than Digory Kirk, the elderly professor in whose house the children find it.

This brings me to a point that I feel is important. For a first reading at least, I strongly suggest that the seven Narnia books be read in the order in which Lewis published them. Recently the publishers have renumbered the series to put the story in chronological order, with *The Magician’s Nephew* telling of the creation of Narnia at the very beginning. But this was not the author’s intention, nor does it fit with the style and complexity of the stories themselves. The simplest tales should be read first, and the increasingly complicated and interleaving stories saved for last, when they have a meaningful context. In fact, I don’t believe that *The Magician’s Nephew*, which is a flashback explaining how things came to be as the

children find them in the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe*, makes as much sense if it is read in isolation, with no knowledge of the Narnian context.

As a point of interest to those who live in my area, or come to visit here, I will mention that the archives at Wheaton College, in Wheaton, Illinois, contain a very substantial collection of materials related to C. S. Lewis as well as J. R. R. Tolkien. I have been there, and you can not only see but actually touch the original wardrobe that Lewis said was incorporated into the stories. Other artifacts include Lewis' pipe and bedroom slippers, and a desk upon which Tolkien did much of the editing of his manuscript for *The Hobbit*. For researchers, many papers belonging to Lewis are stored there, as well as most of the books from his library, complete with his marginal notes and insertions. It's a very interesting place to see, and not well known.

Now, turning to the mailbox, I thank you all for your encouragement and the suggestion that I should be on the radio or reading audiobooks. For those of you who are interested in audiobooks, I plan to try a brief experiment in the next few days, so watch for details.

That brings me to the conclusion of this week's discussion. Thanks for listening, and let me once more ask you to contribute your thoughts and suggestions. You can send your e-mail to altivo@livejournal.com. Until next time then, good reading to all.

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