

## Book Reviews

Peter J. Schakel, *The Way Into Narnia: A Reader's Guide*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005. 202 pp. \$14.00

*The Way Into Narnia* is a reading guide to the Chronicles of Narnia. There are problems with that. One is that only the reading impaired need a reading guide to Narnia; further, even if such a guide were necessary, this one is basic to the point of insult. Reading guides are frank, blue-collar commentary, of course, with few intellectual aspirations and no frenchified pretensions to the rarified air of the higher echelons of literary criticism. But *The Way Into Narnia* depresses that lower-the-level tendency to unprecedented depths.

This guide seems determined to go out of its way to be simplistic, as in the embarrassingly obvious quality of its annotations: “*shoal*: a school of fish” (142); “*cataract*: waterfall” (162); “*duffer*: an incompetent or inefficient person” (152). Definitions such as the last one deftly manage to provide the reader both too much and too little, adding to the insult of pedantry the injury of inaccuracy. Schakel’s *duffer* misses what are probably the most pertinent implications of Lewis’s term—the wild haplessness, the golf etymology with its windmill flailings, the implications of stiff-jointed agedness. But the fundamental problem with much of the information provided by *The Way Into Narnia* is the way it misses the point in the opposite direction: this reading guide is simplistic, telling readers more about what they already know

than they want to be told.

Thus, the bad news is that this guide is sometimes sophomoric. The good news is that Schakel is no sophomore. He stands among a handful of the most recognized C. S. Lewis scholars in the world, one of the very best on Narnia. Additionally, for all the obviousness of his book, it proves ultimately a helpful guide, even a valuable one. The value resides almost entirely in the book's central insight: Schakel reads the Chronicles of Narnia as myth. His mythic reading, like his annotations, could be deeper, more penetrating, more thorough. But myth is so precisely the essential mode of the Narnia books that Schakel's critical reading, for all its limitations, opens up fruitful avenues into Lewis's literary world. *The Way Into Narnia*, however weak in its details, nails the essence: Lewis's approach to Narnia clearly is mythic, so his series is best read as myth.

Schakel reminds readers that Lewis claimed, "I wrote fairy tales because the fairy tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say" (25). That "stuff" in the mature Lewis's fiction is Christian myth. Schakel sees the mythic aspect as the essence of Narnia both in its substance and its inception; he is convinced that the catalyst for that marriage of mythic narrative and Christian image was Lewis's newfound Catholic friend, J. R. R. Tolkien, particularly Tolkien's ideas on *faerie* as set forth in his "On Fairy-stories."

The mythic dimension is as crucial to Lewis as it was to Tolkien and their mutual literary hero, George MacDonald—all three of these titans of Christian fantasy shared the conviction that myth accesses truth. "What flows into you from the myth," according to Lewis, "is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is)" (35). The juncture of myth and history is thus for Lewis in a kind of practical miracle "Myth Bec[ome] Fact": "The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history" (350).

That actualizing myth may be what allows Lewis at his best, despite his inveterate allegorizing, to reach beyond allegory—"into an allegory a man can put only what he already knows; in a myth he puts what he does not yet know and [coul]d not come to know in any other way" (36). Echoing that respect for myth, Schakel is appropriately careful in his own tracing of Christian themes in the Narnia Chronicles to leave implications symbolic, rich emana-

tions of mythic story rather than canned allegorical meanings.

Schakel analyzes those large-scale Christian implications chronologically through the consecutive volumes of the Chronicles themselves. That approach is of course artificial—Lewis’s mythic themes, in no way restricted to a single volume, pervade the series. Some themes appear more dramatically or even more widely in books other than the ones where Schakel locates them. But even though the mechanistic analysis makes the thematic implications seem more restricted than they in fact are, Schakel’s book-by-book approach has the considerable advantage of clearly demarking major aspects of Lewis’s Narnian themes.

The “Christian significance” (44) of Narnia begins to emerge in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950) at the point when Aslan volunteers to stand in for condemned Edmund. Lewis himself called Aslan’s sacrifice “‘not allegorical but suppositional’” (44)—his passion and resurrection are the kind of experience Christ might have had in this “supposed” Narnian environment. Lewis, quicker to concede the complexities of atonement than Schakel, struggles with the atonement concept, wrestling it into finite understanding: “‘If you think of a debt, there is plenty of point in a person who has some assets paying it on behalf of someone who has not’” (46). And Lewis’s Christian myth can work at subtler levels, as when Edmund is redeemed, not simply physically but spiritually, so that, no longer “thinking about himself,” Edmund and his life now focus on Aslan.

In *Prince Caspian* (1951) Schakel notes how Narnia characters move from “seeing is believing” to a new faith-based perception: “Believing is seeing” (55). *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952) is preeminently for Schakel an exploration of the theme of how yearning for the numinous leads to learning. *The Silver Chair* (1953) becomes in Schakel’s mythic terms a disquisition on freedom and obedience with a typically Lewisian Christian twist: “Obedience is the road to freedom” (71). *The Horse and His Boy* (1954) examines issues of personal identity from a Christian perspective. *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955), in its playing upon endings and beginnings, establishes in the Narnian sphere “something like creation” (94). *The Last Battle* (1956) is most theologically interesting for its “transcendings” (103): in this climactic volume readers encounter most invitingly, particularly after the darkness and death pervading this apocalyptic novel, that Lewisian heaven which is even better than man

has a right to hope it will be.

Still, Schakel's mythic analysis, as unfortunately as its annotations, suffers, as previously indicated, from both too little and too much evidence; it manages simultaneously to be both sweeping and pedantic. Yet *The Way Into Narnia*, for all its limitations, establishes persuasively that "the most important effect of the series as a whole is to make room for the spiritual" (117). Lewis's fiction clearly rewards mythic reading. Through the Chronicles of Narnia, itself sometimes as simplistic as its interpretation by Schakel, Lewis achieves some remarkable effects, notably his "recovery of moral law" (117). Lewis's absolute refusal to succumb to modern relativism, his deep mythic allegiance to ultimate values, "achieves in the stories a moral perspective" (117) profoundly meaningful for all Christians. It is a meaning well worth being reminded of, however simplistically.

Steve Walker  
Brigham Young University

Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon, eds. *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965*. Baylor UP, 2006. 1002 pp. \$44.95

In *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965*, editors Davis W. Houck and David Dixon have compiled a massive anthology of speeches, prayers, sermons, and funeral orations from the crucial years of the struggle for civil rights. Many of these works have been recovered and transcribed from the Moses Moon Collection, housed at the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. Other speeches were uncovered through tireless efforts of the editors who combed papers from coast to coast, looking for works to include in this important collection. They ultimately settled on 130 speeches covering over a decade. The judicious selection process and meticulous transcriptions have resulted in a superb document of one of the most turbulent times in American history.

As a work of historical documentation, *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement* is a first-rate anthology. Beginning with an "Emancipation Day Speech" by then Howard University president Mordecai Johnson, delivered a few months before the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*,