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Review of The A-Z of C. S. Lewis: An Encyclopedia of His Life, Thought, and Writings

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Gregory S. Cootsona, *C. S. Lewis and the Crisis of a Christian* (Louisville, 2014). 169 pages. \$16.00. ISBN 9780664239404.

Even to the casual observer, C. S. Lewis' life story has a certain fascination. Lewis was acquainted with grief and loss, faith and doubt, and the joy and sorrow of relationships and (eventually, after being a long-term bachelor) marriage. His life moved from lonely rooms filled with an endless supply of books to writing books of his own as an academic and popular author. Few lives have had his breadth of experience: from atheist to Christian apologist, from medieval scholar to novelist for children. But what may resonate most with his audiences is the way Lewis endured and described the crises that are a part of so many lives, including his own.

Rev. Gregory Cootsona has written a thoughtful and deeply personal book that reflects on the common calamities that Lewis experienced personally and remembered imaginatively in his books. For Cootsona, Lewis has remained so popular because "his crises and their resolutions in his work reflect our own crises and guide us toward resolution." (1)

While this work is not a biography in the strict sense, there is a brief overview of the Oxford don's life that will suffice for non-Lewis readers and may inspire them to dig deeper. Cootsona writes with a pastor's sensitivity, drawing theological insights from these biographical reflections on the life of "St. Clive" (Cootsona's affectionate nickname for Lewis). Topics that Christians perennially ponder are addressed one by one: the Lordship of Christ, the nature of good and evil, and the challenge of grief and loss. Each chapter is brief and would work well in a group reading-and-discussion setting.

The first and longest section deals with the "crisis" of atheism and how Lewis' experience of *sehnsucht*, the sense of a "poignant longing," framed his discontent with the things of this world. Themes of materialism, naturalism, and the longing for meaning are discussed at length. Also, included here is a gentle critique of Lewis' unresolved Platonic leanings: "My quibble with Lewis," writes Cootsona, "is that, from Scripture, we read that God created *this world*, and not from some copy of another world. It is this world that God called 'very good'" (81).

The second section wrestles with the relationship of Jesus to other myths or religions and Lewis' move to accept and interpret the Biblical witness. In perhaps the best section of the book, Cootsona examines Lewis'

embrace of the Lordship of Christ and the necessity of the cross. While Lewis affirmed their importance and centrality to the Christian faith, he viewed atonement theories as secondary, pointing out that there has not been ecumenical consensus to date. In regard to Biblical interpretation, Cootsona argues that Lewis believed "the Bible has flaws but carries the word of God." Here, Lewis is quoted as describing himself as "an intelligent fundamentalist." Cootsona claims that "Lewis does not believe in the necessity of inerrancy and historical facticity in all its parts for the Bible to be true" (97). These discussions and reflections will be an important addition to our postmodern dialogues and debates in regard to authority and consensus.

Lewis became a leading "apologist" for the faith because he dealt with issues that are common to humans—questions about suffering and meaning. He wrote with clarity and a keen insight into our longings and desires. He offered rational, reasonable answers. We may not agree with all of Lewis' answers, as our author admits, but through these writings we find common ground and a wise guide in matters of the faith. This book will be a helpful addition to both veterans and newcomers to Lewis' writings, as well as a valuable encouragement to one's journey of faith.

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Colin Duriez, *The A-Z of C. S. Lewis: An Encyclopedia of His Life, Thought, and Writings* (Oxford, 2013). 352 pages. \$24.95. ISBN 9780745955865.

"Eating and reading," writes C. S. Lewis in his autobiography *Surprised By Joy*, "are two pleasures that combine admirably."¹ He adds that "what one wants is a gossipy, formless book which can be opened

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York, 1955), 142.

anywhere.” The application of this dictum to Colin Duriez’ *The A-Z of C. S. Lewis* should not be understood to denigrate a work of serious scholarship. Instead, the observation praises it as that rarest of achievements: a page-turning work of serious scholarship. A reader might open it purposefully to track down specific information or haphazardly just for the pleasure of discovery. Though not a perfect work, Duriez’ book offers Lewis lovers and Lewis scholars the gift of a highly informative guide that merits reading in its own right.

Duriez comes to the task well qualified. He has written extensively on Lewis and the Inklings and has published previous encyclopedic works, including *The C. S. Lewis Handbook*, *Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings: A Guide to Middle Earth*, and *Field Guide to Harry Potter*. He provides an extensive bibliography of works both by and about Lewis that will assist the scholar seeking to cover all sources and the fan who may not realize the breadth of Lewis’ work.

A massive tome consisting of discrete articles defies detailed analysis, but several general observations apply. A-Z provides helpful introductions to various works; brief descriptions of specific characters, locations, and events in Lewis’ life and fiction; helpful treatments of major elements of Lewis’ thought; biographical snapshots of some key players in Lewis’ life; and a useful but unobtrusive cross-reference system.

Duriez supplies introductions that give the novice a frame of reference. Taken at a venture, one may turn to articles on *The Abolition of Man*, *Studies in Words*, and *Till We Have Faces*. These are perhaps among Lewis’ less-accessible and thus less-read books. Duriez’ introductory criticism offers the new reader an overview. Lewis himself said that in reading a book, “I begin by making a map on one of the end leafs.”² Duriez’ aerial view performs this service for those who lack Lewis’ prowess as a literary cartographer.

Lewis excelled in the invention of fictional characters and Duriez helps keep the players straight. His character cameos run the gamut from Ahoshta to Zardeenah and, without bogging down, give the reader sufficient information to take greater pleasure in reading Lewis. This holds for descriptions of significant places in Lewis’ actual world (Abingdon, for

² Letter of February, 1932 in C. S. Lewis, *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914-1963)*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York, 1973), 438.

instance, where he delivered his first talk on Christianity during the Second World War) and important events (like the founding of the Socratic Club). The entry on Elizabeth Anscombe makes short work of the hydra-headed myth of Lewis’ “crisis of faith” as a result of their debate.

Duriez also gives the reader insight into some of Lewis’ most important intellectual concerns. The article “literary critic” is worth the price of the book not only for its specific insights into Lewis, but also as a summary of the major critical trends with which he was in conversation and debate. Similar articles introduce formative individuals in Lewis’ life. Among Lewis’ personal acquaintances, Owen Barfield, Nevill Coghill, and Ruth Pitter (a random list) receive helpful treatment, as do George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton (along with others) among his literary mentors.

Not least among Duriez’ accomplishments is an extensive yet unobtrusive system of cross-references. In any given entry, people, books, characters, or concepts that appear in discrete articles are marked with an asterisk. This allows the reader to move from idea to idea and begin to limn the complex weaving of Lewis’ thought. It also allows the reader to stay with a single entry and not have the flow of thought interrupted.

J.R.R. Tolkien once warned George Sayer regarding Lewis that “You’ll never get to the bottom of him!”³ Since biographer after biographer and reader after reader has discovered this to be true, it seems churlish to find fault with such a valuable and careful effort. Perfection is unobtainable, however, and there are a few quibbles. One is disappointed, for instance, to find no articles on *hнау*, Lewis’ highly useful concept from *Out of the Silent Planet*: rational beings as a category that includes but transcends the human. Given Duriez’ perceptive analysis of Lewis’ “fascination” with the gap between animal and human (“talking animals [talking beasts],” 296), and the concept of making the brutes “older” in *Perelandra*, such an omission jars. Also absent is *hнаkra*, the deadly beast whose existence in the unfallen world of Thulcandra adds what Lewis felt was a necessary element of danger, even tragedy, to paradise. While Duriez refers to the helpful work done by Michael Ward in understanding *The Chronicles of Narnia*, he offers no entry on Lewis’ idea of “Donegality,” so central to Ward’s thought. Biographically, it is a little surprising to see no entry on

³ George Sayer, *Jack: C. S. Lewis and His Times* (San Francisco, 1988), xvii.

Christopher Tolkien, and more surprising to find nothing, either in the biographical article on Lewis or in a discrete entry, on Lewis' conversion. Of course, this book appeared before Alister McGrath's biography on Lewis and Andrew Lazo's groundbreaking publication of "Early Prose Joy" made this issue of historical as well as theological significance.⁴ Perhaps a second edition would find the topic worth inclusion.

"I will not always be scolding," Aslan assures Jill at the end of *The Silver Chair*.⁵ That spirit suits a review of a book that has done the work it set out to accomplish. *The A-Z of C. S. Lewis* provides the entire spectrum of Lewis and Inklings readers a tool that will deepen both understanding and pleasure, or perhaps more accurately, will deepen the latter by means of the former.

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Elizabeth Baird Hardy, *Milton, Spenser and The Chronicles of Narnia: Literary Sources for the C. S. Lewis Novels* (Jefferson, NC, 2007) vii + 188 pages. \$33.25. ISBN 9780786428762.

C. S. Lewis is one of the most well-read authors who "looked for [literary] sources as he looked for friends" (C. N. Manlove). His works, and even his biography, are highly literary, and his fiction is not just full of literary influences, but in a way is built from them. His fiction reveals an excellent mix of imagination and rational design. *The Chronicles of Narnia* are not an exception—*Planet Narnia* by Michael Ward, which studied the

⁴ Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis, A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL, 2013). Andrew Lazo, "'Early Prose Joy': A Brief Introduction," in *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, 2013, 5-12.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York, 1994), 236.

series as a set of allusions to Medieval and cosmological concepts, is the best illustration of this point.

The analysis of *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost* as sources for the Narniad is the scope of Elizabeth Baird Hardy's book. There are at least two reasons for analyzing this pair of poems in search of influences. First, these poems are the works that Lewis studied in greatest detail. Lewis was the most eminent Spenser scholar of his time. The last chapter of *The Allegory of Love* provoked a new interest in *The Faerie Queene*; his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, essays in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, and *Spenser's Images of Life* developed and increased this interest. His *Preface to Paradise Lost* shed a new light on Milton, was intensely disputed and partly refuted, but still remains the incontestable foundation of all recent Milton criticism. Few literary works and authors were more or equally important for Lewis (Homer, Plato, Virgil, Dante and MacDonald may be named) and none more profoundly studied. The second reason is that the *Chronicles* are the work of a mature Lewis who had already written most of the abovementioned studies (the idea of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* first came to him in 1939, but the real work began in the late 1940s). Additionally, *Perelandra* was greatly and directly influenced by the *Paradise Lost*.

Considering all this, it is rather strange that there are so few studies on the influences of these poems on the *Chronicles*, and no thorough analysis of them. Thankfully, this book by Hardy rectifies this oversight.

Hardy traces parallel images and motives through the three works, dividing the material into several groups according to what she considers the most relevant areas of resemblance. These are "the depiction of evil, of female characters, of fantastic and symbolic landscapes and settings, and of the spiritual concepts central to all three texts" (15).

Although Hardy suggests many parallels between the *Chronicles* on the one hand, and *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost* on the other, not all of them are equally plausible. For instance, Jadis the White Witch resembles Spenser's Duessa; she offers Turkish Delight and a share in her power to Edmund and the Apple of Protection to Digory, just as Duessa offers to Redcrosse herself and the knight's shield (notably, both witches have bells on the harness of their carriages). The Green Witch resembles Error, Acrasia, and Lucifera, and all of them in turn resemble Milton's Satan.