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Reviews

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Reviews

Abstract

Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times. George Sayer. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.

Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide. Malcom South, ed. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.

Reviews

Further Up and Further In

George Sayer, *Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 278 pp. ISBN 0-06-067072-X

Jack is quite simply the biography C.S. Lewis deserves, appearing in time for the 25th anniversary of his death. Those who came to him early will know how good it is; those who have come late (but it is never too late) will find in the book the best biography available. I was lucky (or more probably, blessed) enough to be present at Wheaton College in 1979 when George Sayer delivered his Wade Lecture there, and have waited nearly a decade for this book; it was worth the wait. Sayer brings maturity, compassion, and the best of a lifetime's acquaintance with C.S. Lewis. He knew him first as an undergraduate who met his tutor, Mr. Lewis, in 1934, and last as one of the few who followed Jack's coffin to its resting place in Headington Quarry Churchyard in 1963: nearly 30 years.

On one of his last visits with Lewis, the two men drove up to the crest of the Chiltern Hills, and afterwards stopped to watch the fading of the light, as the moon and the evening star arose, and Lewis quoted Shelley: "Now having died, thou art as Hesperus giving / New splendors to the dead" (p.251) Lewis' luminous literary works are like stars giving light to the lives of great numbers of people, and Sayer has added new splendor to him in death.

The story, for a life is a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, is one of a child, thought by his parents to have a "weak chest," whose imagination was fired by extended confinement in a large book-filled house. When his mother died (and mothers cannot die at the right time) he was unaccountably sent to the nightmare of all nightmare English schools, a little, chilly, stinking, remorselessly violent school run in the last years of a madman's career. The imaginative child did not, needless to say, emerge unscathed, but he did escape to a series of less terrible schools, at none of which was he a success. Sayer was for much of his life a schoolmaster at Malvern College, one of these schools, and he attempts a mitigation and a defense of them and their denizens against Lewis' passionate school-boy memories. Anyone who had read *Surprised by Joy* (or who has memories, as I expect we all do, of personal suffering even in the best of schools) will see his point, but agree with Lewis that what he remembers is what *he* remembers.

Here Sayer's greatest contribution is an effective

portrayal of the young Lewis brother's father, Albert, whose agony in the loss of his wife produced a long clumsiness in relating to his sons. As for Lewis, this period in the young scholar's life is summed up by Sayer: "To understand Jack's exaggerated account of Malvern, one must consider the miserable state he was in. He had apparently lost his religious faith and had certainly lost his innocence. Prayer had not helped him cope with the intense guilt he felt about his practice of masturbation. He therefore despaired of divine aid and regarded himself as an atheist." (p. 42) This is the pathetic nugget, the poignant nadir, of Lewis' life; it is followed by a glorious emancipation, as he went to spend "the most peaceful years of his entire life" (p. 47) with his father's former headmaster, W.T. Kirkpatrick, preparing to enter Oxford University. This period, which we already know from *Surprised by Joy*, is further illuminated by Sayer from *The Lewis Papers* (a collection prepared by Warren Lewis who typed letters and other materials and had them bound in a series of volumes) and from letters that have been published; the young man had developed side by side in insatiable appetite for the world's greatest literature and a secret life of adolescent sadistic fantasy. In this setting he read George MacDonald's *Phantastes*, which "purified his imagination, making all his erotic and magical perversions of joy appear sordid and unworthy." Anyone who has seen the original silent film *The Thief of Bagdad* with its oriental slave women and its whipping scenes will realize that these "erotic and magical perversions" were really the commonplace imaginings of many adolescents, upon which much popular entertainment is based.

By this time, Lewis was already writing his own poetry. One of the strengths of Sayer's biography in his skillful interweaving of Lewis' literary activities into his life. He is an astute and effective critic, clearly demonstrating the relationship between the works and the life out of which they were produced, while offering sharply delineated interpretations of their meaning and perceptive evaluations of their quality.

So far, the story parallels that of *Surprised by Joy*, with Sayer's telling a combination of harmony with and counterpoint to, Lewis' memories. But with World War I, and particularly with the advent of Mrs. Janie King Moore, we are given a new, convincing, and fascinating picture of what was until now a virtual *terra incognita*; Sayer's portrait of this engaging, hospitable, and generous woman makes it easy to understand why, as his relationship with his father deteriorated and he passed, by no means unscathed, through the crucible of war, Lewis turned to this

woman and took her as his mother. Sayer tells us frankly what he does *not* know: whether these two, who spent the rest of their mutual lives together, began as lovers. He thinks not. The case he makes is carefully argued and convincing. In the end it probably does not matter. Lewis loved her, she filled a central gap in his life, enriching him in many of the most important ways – turning him outward to others and giving him the warm, domestic counterpart of both a mother, and, in her daughter Maureen, a sister, to his largely masculine academic life. Her gradual physical and mental decline at the end of her life is not a result of illdoing nor a punishment but only a sad example of human suffering, and Lewis bore with it and her to the end, when she died in 1951.

In general, the story is not a sad one, but a warm, humorous, and comprehensible one which makes a great portion of Lewis' life more accessible to its readers. The other side of his life, that of an aspiring academic and scholar who gradually became not only and eminent figure in these spheres but one of the greatest fantasists and apologists of the twentieth century, is also told here in new detail, carefully interpreted as to its development and meaning, and illuminated by an author who shared Lewis' world.

A great strength of this book is the careful aim it takes toward North American readers, with useful (and never condescending) explanations of Irish and British life, practice, and history, whenever it is needed. Sayer's aim is perfect; one feels one has visited, in the company of an intelligent, graceful, and generous guide, a world not altogether familiar but becoming more hospitable and comprehensible in this very good company. This does not mean that he forces his own persona to the foreground, let alone dominates, but that he writes like a courteous host for readers whom he treats as honored guests, as he welcomes us into the close company of Lewis.

The life of Lewis at The Kilns, which we learn was always held in Mrs. Moore's name, with his sweet-hearted brother Warren, whose wounds are obvious and whose qualities are warmly delineated even while his alcoholism is clearly described, and Lewis' long academic and literary career, form the bulk of the book, not as a long string of details, but as a coherent, carefully analyzed, and richly depicted structure.

The final portion of the book, which details Lewis' marriage to Joy Helen Davidson Gresham, is superb. Their robust, complex, deeply intellectual, supremely sensual relationship is delineated with extraordinary conviction. Were they lovers? Of course! Did he grieve when she died, and did he record his grief precisely and specifically in *A Grief Observed*? Of course! Was his work influenced, even enhanced by his marriage to her? Indeed it was! And did he continue to work after she died until illness rather than grief finally closed in at the very end of life? Yes.

All biographies end alike in the death of the protagonist. In *Jack* the death of Lewis becomes a peaceful seal upon a long and increasingly well-lived life. Lewis' religious conversion, which Sayer describes perceptively not as a sudden thunderclap but as the gradual development of spiritual maturity, growing through an entire lifetime, yielding rich and lasting fruit in his writings, had been fulfilled in his private life through his marriage. He died, Sayer shows us, as a whole man, a brother, scholar, friend, husband, father, and servant of God.

Jack is a book which deserves to be, and I think, will be, read not only once but over and over again. It is likely to become the definitive biography. Sayer says that in the figure of Aslan in the Narnian Chronicles, we have a portrait of God as Lewis Understood Him. The Jack Lewis whom Sayer presents is a convincing portrait of the man we meet in his books, in whose company we can lie down in safety between the paws of Aslan, in that country where all Lewis readers long to go.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

On Beyond Unicorn

Malcolm South, editor, *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 393 pp. ISBN 0-313-24338-7.

If you would like to read in a single volume a series of scholarly essays about the origins, meaning, and literary usages of the Unicorn, the Cragon, the Phoenix, the Roc, the Griffin, the Chimera, the Basilisk, the Manticora, Mermaids, Sires, Harpies, the Gorgon Medusa, the Sphinx, the Minotaur, the Satyr, the Centaur, the Vampire, the Werewolf, Giants, and Fairies, this excellent book is for you. Unlike the many gorgeously illustrated but textually meagre compendia published in the past few years for fantasy fandom, this series of essays by eighteen scholars, complete with 23 copious bibliographies, is a feast for readers of every degree of sophistication and will become an essential handbook for readers of mythopoeic literature.

The index includes not only C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien but Aristotle, Frank L. Baum, Peter Beagle, E. Nesbit, Jorge Luis Borges, Lewis Carroll, and Geoffrey Chaucer (to name only a few), and not only Aslan, Ents, and Hobbits, but Androids, Bigfoot, Cyborgs, Psammead, Robots, Sasquatch, and Yeti (also among others, and I was happy as a Canadian to see Windigo). With this very fully developed research Guide and access to a good library, anybody from the most devoted fan to the most accomplished scholar (frequently inside the same skin) can find a lifetime of reading here.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

In the next issue looks for reviews including *The Return of the Shadow* by Tolkien, *Lenten Lands: My Life with Joy Davidman and C.S. Lewis*, and *The C.S. Lewis Hoax*.