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# What Makes Literature Truly Subversive? Alison Lurie Looks at C. S. Lewis

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In the February 9, 2006 edition of *The New York Review of Books*, [Alison Lurie](#) of [Cornell University](#) reviews *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* movie and two books about C. S. Lewis. Along the way, she also offers her critique of Christianity, especially as related to children.

Lurie, author of *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups: The Subversive Power of Children's Literature* and *Boys and Girls Forever: Children's Classics from Cinderella to Harry Potter*, clearly prefers children to read literature that is relatively feminist and generally secular.

In her review of C. S. Lewis and his most popular children's story, Lurie begins by suggesting that "the Narnia books have always been popular with conservative Christians, perhaps not only for their partly concealed religious message, but also for their underlying social and political implications."

Her assumption is that children's literature should be unpoluted by Christian themes. "Many critics who first read *The Chronicles of Narnia* as children report being unaware of its Christian meanings or of any other hidden messages, but several complain that when they reread the books as adults they were shocked and dismayed," she asserts.

Interestingly, Lurie largely hides behind the criticism of others, especially the assault undertaken by Philip Pullman, whom she identifies as "the immensely gifted and popular" author of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy (a work that represents something like a reversal of Lewis and his Christian themes).

In the end, she offers her own critique, well summarized in these two paragraphs:

*It is no surprise that conservative Christians admire these books. They teach us to accept authority; to love and follow our leaders instinctively, as the children in the Narnia books love and follow Aslan. By implication, they suggest that we should and will admire and fear and obey whatever impressive-looking and powerful male authority figures we come in contact with. They also suggest that without the help of Aslan (that is, of such powerful figures, or their representatives on earth) we are bound to fail. Alone, we are weak and ignorant and helpless. Individual initiative is limited—almost everything has already been planned out for us in advance, and we cannot know anything or achieve anything without the help of God.*

*This is, of course, the kind of mindset that evangelical churches prefer and cultivate: the kind that makes people vote against their own economic and social interests, that makes successful, attractive, and apparently intelligent young men and women want to become the apprentices of Donald Trump, or of much worse rich and powerful figures. This mindset could even be called deluded, since in this world a giant lion does not usually appear to see that the right side wins and all the good people are happy. In Narnia faith in Aslan, who comes among his followers and speaks to them, may make sense: but here on earth, as the classic folk tales have told us for generations, it is better to depend on your own courage and wit and skill, and the good advice of less than omnipotent beings.*

So, the gospel makes sense only in Narnia. Here on earth, we are left to "depend upon [our] own courage and wit and skill," along with advice from purely secular authorities.

Like so much of what is styled as review and criticism these days, Alison Lurie's essay on C. S. Lewis tells us more about her own worldview than about Lewis and his famous work. She comments positively about the *Harry Potter* books and the Lemony Snicket series, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, noting that, in these stories, children are freed from the authority of adults. "The implicit lesson of such tales is subversive: they suggest that though some adults may wish you well, and may give you the knowledge or skills that will help you through life, essentially you are going to be on your own."

The fact that the children of Narnia are not really alone seems to bother Ms. Lurie a great deal. "Behind everything that happens is the power and wisdom and intention of Aslan," she complains. "Usually disaster can only be avoided by Aslan's visible or invisible intervention. With his aid battles are won, souls saved, and enemies defeated. Even when he does not seem to be there, he is: in *The Horse and His Boy* Shasta learns that Aslan has already preserved his life four times when he thought that chance, luck, or his own skill had done so. Without Aslan's help, all seven books tell us, we would fail and evil would conquer."

On that point, she gets it just about right — at least in understanding the substance of the story. Without Aslan's help, we would fail and evil would conquer. Of course, this is the great truth that adults, as well as children, desperately need to hear. Furthermore, it is a message that is far more subversive than anything the world of "subversive" children's literature has to offer. We do well to remember that.

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