

What Hath Disney Wrought? *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

By Scott Moncrieff

I entered Narnia late in life, as a master's student at Andrews University looking for new Sabbath afternoon reading. Each bite-sized chronicle took two or three hours to devour and didn't have the bad aftereffects of Turkish delight, so I read through them a number of times in the next twenty years, by myself mostly, but also aloud with our firstborn and with a C. S. Lewis class.

Although Narnia doesn't compare with Tolkien's Middle Earth as a fully realized imaginative world, the books are very entertaining, well written, good company, fun on the lighter side. One doesn't want to be always plodding toward Mordor. I also appreciated the spiritual insights in Lewis's series, as in Eustace Scrub's dragon phase in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and the redemption story via Aslan's sacrifice for

Edmund in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

So, having reread the book, I eagerly headed off to Chicago for a preview of the new Disney/Walden Media production of *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. After all, if there are going to be seven years of this series, I want to know if the cows are fat or lean.

The book begins quietly, with the four Pevensie children—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and



Lucy—heading off to Professor Kirke’s house in the country to avoid the air raids in World War II London. The film, in contrast, opens to high drama, in the cockpit of a German bomber dropping its load as the children and their mother race for a backyard underground shelter. With crisp cutting and bombs detonating in surround sound, the filmmakers reassure us we are here for spectacle, not some piddly old BBC production.

Additional invented back story shows elder brother Peter tussling with Edmund, who has dashed back into the house to retrieve a picture of his father (away fighting the war). Edmund’s retrieval of the picture nicely sets up the brothers’ competitive relationship, which eventually contributes to Edmund’s betrayal of his siblings.

There’s also a clever match between the cracked picture frame that holds the photo of Mr. Pevensie and a later shot of Mr. Tumnus’s father’s portrait, after Tumnus’s house has been ransacked by the queen’s secret police.

In short, the opening sequence does some of the good things a cinematic adaptation can do. Although staying true to the tenor of the book, it rewrites and adapts to develop the characters and to make things more visual, more cinematic. Even a mundane ride over a dirt road in a horse-drawn cart can create goose bumps, when filmed in the right lighting from a dolly with a rising crane.

There are a number of other good things about the film. The casting of and acting by the children is excellent, particularly with Lucy (Georgie Henley) and Edmund (Skandar Keynes). Lucy is very sweet without being conventionally pretty or sentimentalized; has an engaging smile without Hollywood teeth; effectively expresses wonder, delight, disappointment; and even gets off some decent comic lines. Edmund is quite con-

vincing in his consecutive roles as sneaking little traitor and born-again hero.

The outdoor landscape shots are breathtaking, which could be expected when you can take your pick of locations from New Zealand to Czech Republic. There are lots of nice tracking, crane, and aerial shots—you can compare how this film handles the train-carrying-main-characters-passes-through-lovely-countryside sequence to the same sequence in fifty other films and see that *Narnia* does it pretty well.

And of course the sets, the CGI creatures, the wardrobe (the costumes and accessories as well as the title piece of furniture) are excellent, almost up to the high standards set by the *Lord of the Rings* series.

Douglas Gresham, Lewis’s stepson, was a consultant on the film, and even has a bit part as a radio announcer in the opening sequence, giving the film an authentic Lewis tie. The film is also quite faithful to the book, although one little sequence jumped out as a possible exception.

After Aslan’s secret deal with the witch to exchange his life for Edmund’s, Lucy approaches the solitary lion. In response to a question from Lucy, Aslan says something like “there is a magic more powerful that rules over all of us,” which could imply that he is not a supreme being, merely another—albeit especially powerful—creature. However, it can be taken as just showing that “God” plays by the same rules as his creatures.

Even though *Narnia* is a well-made movie, in following *The Lord of the Rings* I think it suffers by comparison. I say this as one who is at least as much a fan of Lewis’s writings as of Tolkein’s. Tolkein’s created world (in the books and on film) has more depth and consistency, much higher gravitas. Each *Rings* movie is longer than a football game.



Scenes from the movie (left to right): Aslan and the children; the battle; Lantern Waste, and the witch’s castle.



I was amused to hear of a colleague who had a *Rings* party last year, at which guests watched the whole series in one sitting, about twelve hours. That was too much of a good thing for me, but this length is well used by Peter Jackson and company, with more space devoted to character development, while not omitting spectacle. *Narnia* is not short—at two hours and fifteen minutes—but it doesn't develop its characters in the way that *Rings* does.

Narnia (movie and book) has an odd menagerie of animals, freely mixing those from our world with mythical creatures, leading to anomalies like polar bears (in springtime) drawing the witch's chariot into battle alongside minotaurs and ogres, and on the good side centaurs and unicorns teamed up with cheetahs and rhinoceri. I'm not quite sure whether to expect Aslan or Marlin Perkins around the next corner

Middle Earth sticks with woodland and Northern European mythic creatures, which go together, and the incongruities of *Narnia* are more jarring on screen than in print.

A few more words are in order about the difference between book and movie experience. Lewis names a number of the species that surround Aslan on the Stone Table, and refers to "other creatures whom I won't describe because if I did the grown-ups would probably not let you read this book."

The chummy relationship between narrator and reader doesn't translate to film, nor does the book's ability to stimulate the reader's imagination. Film literalizes. Every creature must be created, down to the last bone and muscle, and no matter how well Weta Workshop does the job, some of us still like to imagine.

Lewis himself, in his essay "On Stories," says "nothing can be more disastrous than the view that the cinema can and should replace popular fiction," because "there is death [to the imagination] in the camera." Whereas in books, the author's and reader's imaginations work in partnership, in film the viewer sees the representation of the imagination of another.

Furthermore, although film can operate at both the subtle and spectacular level—some fine close-ups of Lucy's changing expressions illustrate the former—spectacle causes a more immediate reaction, seems to sell more tickets. Why else does every movie ad on TV seem to have the same scenes of door-opening-to-blazing gun, car-or-body-crashing-through-large-window, and woman-starting-to-slip-out-of-sweater? Personally, my nerve receptors shut down when these clichés

appear, but the people who promote and make movies are still way too attached to fireworks.

In the movie, for instance, there's an invented scene (not in the book) where the children cross a river. The ice is breaking up and they have a dramatic confrontation with the wolf pack. The wolves are snarling, the ice is cracking, Peter is waving his sword around, the frozen waterfall shatters and the burst of water hurtles everyone downstream.

Technically it's an interesting scene, but emotionally it left me cold, just so much machinery calculated to push my anxiety buttons. Danger-on-the-ice-floes was really gripping back in *Way Down East* (1920)—partly because it climaxed two hours of really slow action, but also because a lot of groundwork had been done to make the viewer care greatly about the two characters out on the ice floes.

But this is not just a film to discuss in its aesthetic and technical aspects. It's being reviewed in this magazine primarily because of its spiritual angle. "Is this a film," you ask, "to which to take my unchurched son/neighbor/dentist?" Let's not place limitations on the Holy Spirit, but humanly speaking, *Narnia* does not portray a moving religious experience on the order of, say, *Places in the Heart*, *Babette's Feast*, *A Man for All Seasons*, or even *It's a Wonderful Life*.

There's something about thundering hooves in surround sound that is inimical to the contemplative setting often conducive to authentic religious experience. In that respect, Lewis's original story far outstrips the movie. One can follow the impulse to lay down the book and think about Aslan's sacrifice on the stone table, rather than being dragged across the sky and back into battle.

It's interesting to compare the small part graphic description of the battle takes in the book to its expanded role in the movie. *Narnia*, I think, works better as a pretty well-made entertainment film than as something to applaud for profundity or spiritual insight.

"So, bottom line, are the cows fat or lean?" you ask. You should know by now that the one creature not living in Narnia is a cow!

Scott Moncrieff is a professor of English at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, and a regular contributor to *Spectrum* online.