

THE NARNIA EFFECT

The Deeper Magic

By GEOFFREY MARSHALL-TAYLOR

THE CONTINUING APPEAL OF *The chronicles of Narnia* is baffling to many. Why do C. S. Lewis's stories still entice children to switch off their computer games and to travel through the Narniascape which he created? In 1988 the BBC transmitted two major productions of *The chronicles of Narnia*. For BBC School Radio Brian Sibley adapted *The magician's nephew* and *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*; for BBC children's television Alan Seymour dramatized *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*. Both productions proved immensely popular. The television version regularly had audiences of over ten million and the radio dramatizations very soon became best sellers in the BBC Radio Collection.

At the time some doubts were expressed about the impact the stories would have on young people in the late eighties. It was argued that the worlds which were inhabited by Digory Kirke and Polly Plummer (*The magician's nephew*) and the Pevensie children (*The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*) were too remote and culturally monochrome to engage young people who lived in a society which was changing rapidly in its language, interests and cultural plurality. The doubt is understandable but was proved to be unfounded. A. N. Wilson in *C. S. Lewis: a biography* explores this when he says of the Lewis characters,

They are E. Nesbit children; they jaw rather than talk; they say 'By gum! and Crikey'. They seem no more to belong to the mid or late twentieth century than Lewis did himself. But generations of children can now testify to the irresistible readability of the Narnia stories.¹

The basis for the popularity of both productions lies in the fictional world Lewis invented and in the depth of his engaging narrative. A. N. Wilson's view is that 'Lewis wrote them for the child who was within himself'.² A question I have often considered is which medium is more likely to replicate the experience of reading the Narnia stories, radio or television. I have no doubt that it is radio that is the closer. In 1988, after both productions had been transmitted, a girl wrote to *Feedback*, the programme which enables listeners to voice their comments on BBC Radio 4's output. She had enjoyed both productions but

perceptively observed that she would prefer her younger brother either to hear the radio version or to read the books before seeing the televised adaptation. 'Then', she said, 'he will be able to make up his own pictures.' This underlines a significant aspect of the experience of listening to story-telling on radio: listeners are partners in the creative process, devising their own images for people, places and all the visual detail that is required. Of course, much is provided by the other partners: author, adapter, director, actors and studio managers. The end result is that stories told on radio can bring about a greater sense of ownership for listeners and are more likely to contribute to their inner spiritual journeying.

This became evident in the fieldwork undertaken by BBC Education to investigate the responses by children to the radio versions of *The magician's nephew*, and *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*. In a school in Buckinghamshire, for example, a class of nine- and ten-year-olds made the stories a focus for a variety of activities during a complete term. Their classroom was transformed into 'The Wood between the Worlds' as described in *The magician's nephew*: branches, leaves and creeper draped the walls and ceilings, creating a special atmosphere. In this class a large proportion of the children had very little contact with the Christian tradition, and many were from Muslim or Hindu backgrounds. For several, English was a second language. Here, then, was a good testing ground for the view that Lewis's stories had lost their universal appeal.

Among the observations made by the class teacher about the children's responses two stand out. Firstly, she pointed out that the radio productions, like the books themselves, are in some important aspects culturally neutral. They enable the characters to inhabit the cultural landscape of each listener. Many of the drawings which the class did of the events in the stories reflected their own distinctive backgrounds: Asian features and landscapes mixed with European ones. The children had indeed made the stories their own. Secondly, it was a Hindu boy who first made reference to the fact that there is within *The chronicles of Narnia* what C. S. Lewis called 'a hidden story'. Could the reason for this be that Hindus have not turned their backs on myth in their story-telling? The narrative of Rama and Sita, for example, is well known to Hindu children. It is more than an exciting tale: within it there is conflict between those who represent goodness and those who represent evil. The outcome is the eventual triumph of goodness. The conflict in *The Ramayana* is of importance for individuals, for human-kind and for the cosmos. The story is all the more powerful for these

layers of meaning, but it is not essential to be aware of all these layers all the time or even at any time. Hindus seem not to have fallen into the European misunderstanding which perceives myth as the antithesis of truth, rather than as one of the most powerful means of embodying it.

Bruno Bettelheim in *The uses of enchantment* emphasizes that conflict and horror in stories could be therapeutic for a child. He argues that, since children often feel excessively dominated by adults, it is beneficial for them to identify with characters in stories who survive and succeed against adversity.³ It follows that the more closely children are able to immerse themselves in a narrative, the more likely it is that these beneficial effects will be felt. Because radio listening is close to the experience of reading or the oral transmission of stories, it is more likely to achieve this sort of effect than television viewing, in which one is often a spectator rather than a participant.

Yet, could it be damaging to build up children's hopes in their fictional adventuring, only to have them dashed in their return to reality? For Lewis himself, elements of the Narnia stories became expressions of his own wish that some of the unhappy moments of his own life might have been different. He was deeply affected by the death of his mother and he longed that there might have been a cure for her. More than this, at the time he was deeply upset that God did not answer his prayers for his mother's recovery. In *The magician's nephew*, Digory finds a magical Narnian apple which he takes to his mother, who is unwell. After eating it she recovers. In fiction, at least, Lewis's wish came true. Is such unreality damaging to young readers? Here is a narrative in which injustice is corrected, wrong-doing is quelled and destruction is turned into re-creation. Is this sort of story-telling unhelpful to young people who have to face real injustice, wrong-doing and destruction? Apparently not, for young people seem to accept that in a great many respects the land of Narnia is not their land: in it things may occur which are unlikely to be replicated in their own lives. In her Reith lectures *Managing monsters*, Marina Warner does not decry authors who enable children to escape into the worlds created by fiction, but she is critical of those adults who devise such worlds because they want to make children stay as children for ever. She speaks of grown ups who:

want them to stay like that for their sakes, not the children's, and they want children to be simple enough to believe in fairies too, again, for humanity's sake on the whole, to prove something against the evidence.⁴

Among the important means used by Lewis to achieve a certain distance from our world is the inclusion of numerous anthropomorphic animals and mythological creatures. They, as Walter Hooper points out in *Past watchful dragons*, 'are not human, but . . . behave in various degrees humanly'.⁵ Lewis believed that they are the 'expression of certain basic elements in man's spiritual experience . . . the words of a language which speaks the else unspeakable'.⁶ These creatures are often a convenient means of conveying character without the need for defining motivation or for justifying their presence in the plot. They enable the human beings in the stories to have numerous encounters in a short space of time, so giving an intensity to the meetings. Again, radio is more able than television to maximize the impact of these creatures: whatever their character, shape or size, they develop further and uniquely in the fertile imagination of each child who hears or reads of them. Screen depictions of fantastic creatures, unless in animation, are frequently unconvincing and prescribe the limits of that imagining.

Brian Sibley, a biographer of Lewis and expert on the Narnia stories, has expressed concern at the way stage and television productions can limit the 'Narnia effect'. 'You lose something', he states,

when you simply dress up a human being in an animal costume. The beavers in *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* are described in this book as being beaver size. When an actor puts on an animal head a certain effect is created, but not the magical, layered effect, which Lewis is seeking to achieve.

There is no doubt that the television production of *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* made a significant impression on a significant number of children, including my own family. The dramatization was an undoubted success and much acclaimed. Brian Sibley's contention, however, is that radio has the potential to make an even greater impact on the imagination and the inner world of the spirit. 'The result', he argues, 'is closer to the outcome which Lewis intended.'

In another important dimension, the televised version of *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe* had difficulty in achieving what Lewis hoped: he wanted the stories to enable us to sense in some way the 'deeper magic'. Lewis wanted his readers to take from the encounter with Aslan, the Lord of Narnia, a profound encounter with the numinous, to which the only appropriate response is awe. Walter Hooper is categorical in *Past watchful dragons*. 'If I had not read the Narnian Chronicles, I could not have believed an author could concentrate so much goodness into one being . . . here in this magnificent lion,

is absolute, thrilling goodness beyond anything we could imagine.⁷ Aslan's unique grandeur is so beyond human experience that it defies representation whether in illustration, on stage or on screen. Writing about *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, Brian Sibley says, 'It started as just an adventure about four children drawn into another world, but "suddenly Aslan came bounding in" and changed everything'.⁸

Lewis was more anxious that Aslan should produce this sort of affective response than that someone should specifically be told that Aslan represents Jesus. It was his dismay at the eagerness of Christians to provide theological explanations and answers for children that was the very reason he wrote *The chronicles of Narnia*. The Christian Church has often failed to understand how to use its own stories. It is worth recalling that Jesus himself frequently left his hearers puzzling over an unexplained story, assuming, no doubt, like many Jewish storytellers, that people would grow into understanding in the due course of time. Conversely, in Christian education, it has often been regarded as pointless if children remember a story or illustration but forget the theological or moral point behind it.

The transmission of doctrine rules supreme. As a result very little thought has been given in the Church about ways of shifting the knowledge-heavy emphasis of Christian education and of cultivating children's existing spirituality. It is invariably assumed that this is a one-way process: children have always to be the recipients of adult wisdom. Adults generally react with incomprehension to the suggestion that they might have something to learn from the spiritual insights of children. C. S. Lewis never patronized the children in his stories. They have to cope in a world where they are on an emotional roller-coaster: on one occasion responding in wonder at the singing of Aslan (*The magician's nephew*); on another confronting the full depravity of cruelty in witnessing Aslan's death (*The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*). The pathways walked by children in society are no less varied, encountering as they do the full gamut of experiences from joy to sorrow. Sadly their insights are often unspoken and, when spoken, are often unheard.

C. S. Lewis wanted the stories of Narnia to assist children on their spiritual journeying. He put it this way:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason

was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.⁹

A. N. Wilson comments:

In the Narnia stories C. S. Lewis is deeply and unselfconsciously engaged in the stories he is creating. He has abandoned here a cerebral and superficial defence of religion . . . He has launched back deep into the recesses of his own emotional history, his own most deeply felt psychological needs and vulnerabilities. It is this surely which gives the books their extraordinary power. They are written white-hot.¹⁰

It is not essential for readers or listeners to sense the ‘deeper magic’ to enjoy *The chronicles of Narnia*. Pauline Baynes, who illustrated the stories, was greatly moved by the sacrifice of Aslan but only realized who he was meant to be after she had finished illustrating *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*. Nevertheless, these are stories with meaning. ‘I’m so thankful that you realised the “hidden story” in the Narnia books,’ C. S. Lewis wrote to a young reader. ‘It is odd, children nearly always do, grown ups hardly ever.’¹¹

At the end of his book *The land of Narnia* Brian Sibley addresses his young readers:

When you next read *The chronicles of Narnia* you may begin to . . . understand something of the hidden story behind the creation of Narnia, the betrayal and death of Aslan, and the last days before Narnia comes to an end. If you do, then you will have seen beyond the Deep Magic that C. S. Lewis put into his books to a Deeper Magic before the dawn of time.¹²

Brian has always shared my wish that the radio versions of the stories would help to make this possible, and so play a small part in the search for meaning which will engage young people for the rest of their lives.

NOTES

- ¹ A. N. Wilson, *C. S. Lewis: a biography* (London: Collins, 1990), p 221.
² *Ibid.*
³ B. Bettelheim, *The uses of enchantment* (Harmondsworth, 1978).
⁴ M. Warner, *Managing monsters* (London: Vintage, 1994), p 42.
⁵ W. Hooper, *Past watchful dragons* (London: Collins, 1980), p 87.
⁶ C. S. Lewis, *A preface to Paradise Lost* (OUP, 1942).
⁷ Hooper, *Past watchful dragons*, p 99.
⁸ B. Sibley, *The land of Narnia* (London: Collins, 1989), p 92.
⁹ Hooper, *Past watchful dragons*, p 9.
¹⁰ Wilson, *C. S. Lewis: a biography*, p 228.
¹¹ Sibley, *The land of Narnia*, p 89, quoting C. S. Lewis.
¹² Sibley, *The land of Narnia*, p 92.

THE BBC RADIO COLLECTION

The following dramatized stories, all adapted by Brian Sibley, are available in double audio cassette packs (£7.99 each):

The magician's nephew
The lion, the witch and the wardrobe
The horse and his boy
Prince Caspian
The voyage of the Dawn Treader