

Narnia author's stepson describes the real C.S. Lewis

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Author
C. S.
Lewis

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By **Sarah Price Brown**

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LOS ANGELES (RNS)-When 8-year-old Douglas Gresham met C.S. Lewis, the man who would become his stepfather, he was disappointed.

The American boy had expected the British author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* fantasy books "to be wearing silver armor and carrying a sword with a jeweled pommel."



Douglas
Gresham

Instead, Lewis "was a stooped, balding, professorial-looking gentleman in shabby clothes, with long, nicotine-stained fingers," said Gresham, now 59.

More than 40 years after Lewis' death, people still have their own ideas about him. Depending on whom you ask, Lewis was a scholar, fantasy writer, Christian saint—or all that and more.

As Disney prepares to release its much-anticipated movie version of The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe Dec. 9, more people than ever are asking: Who was C.S. Lewis? And what is his legacy?

To many, Lewis is an icon of orthodox Christianity. Despite growing up believing there was no God, Lewis turned to Christianity as an adult.

He then dedicated himself to promoting the faith and did so, his admirers say, using simple language and logical reasoning anyone could understand.

Lewis' Christian devotees find meaning in his religious works such as *Mere Christianity*, a collection of radio addresses Lewis gave in the early 1940s that explains the common beliefs among Christians of different denominations.

Christians also see symbolism in Lewis' children's books. For instance, Aslan—the great lion in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* who sacrifices himself for a human sinner and ultimately is resurrected—represents Jesus Christ.

In some evangelical circles, Lewis is revered. On the 100th anniversary of Lewis' birth, the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* published a piece calling Lewis "our patron saint" and citing a poll in which the magazine's readers chose Lewis as the most influential writer in their lives.

"It is a bit of a paradox that C.S. Lewis, an Anglican, has emerged as a virtual 'saint' among American evangelicals," said Mark Sargent, provost of Gordon College, a Christian school in Wenham, Mass. "But it was Lewis, more than any other author, who rekindled the life of the imagination within the evangelical community."

Gresham, who became Lewis' stepson when his mother, Joy Davidman, married the professor, cautioned against any such interpretation of his stepfather.

"If you want to remember him, remember him as a man with all the foibles and difficulties and dark times in his life that men have ... not as some kind of plaster saint," said Gresham, whose book about Lewis, *Jack's Life*, was released Oct. 1. "He was a man of great humor, great warmth. He was a fun bloke to be around."

Nobody is saying Lewis was perfect, said Bruce Edwards, evangelical author of the new book *Further Up & Further In* about the spiritual messages in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

"Is there hero-worship involved in how people admire Lewis?" Edwards asked. "Sure."

But Edwards warned against linking evangelicals' admiration for Lewis to a naivete about the world.

"It's a convenient caricature to say, 'Oh, they've got their Bibles, and they've got C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, and they've got *Narnia*, and they don't need to look outside their window anymore,'" Edwards said. "I've never met anybody like that, who has such an ostrichlike view of the world."

Hero-worship of Lewis is not isolated to evangelicals.

“He's very popular among people who keep the old faith, and not so popular among the modernists,” said Richard Purthill, Catholic author of the book, C.S. Lewis' Case for the Christian Faith. Purthill praised Lewis as a Christian apologist, one who gave people a rational basis for believing in Christianity.

Stan Mattson, president of the C.S. Lewis Foundation in Redlands, Calif., which encourages Christians to openly participate in scholarship and the arts, said the group chose Lewis as its mentor because Lewis was a respected scholar who “was not prepared to check his faith at the door.”

Describing himself as a “mere Christian,” Mattson said he, like Lewis, belonged to the wider world of Christianity.

Lewis “wouldn't be comfortable, really, being co-opted by any one group,” said Mark Tauber, vice president and deputy publisher of HarperSanFrancisco, the division of HarperCollins that publishes Lewis' nonfiction books.

Tauber said he continually was surprised by the broad appeal of Lewis, who wrote more than 30 books. Recently, Tauber received a call from a Mormon leader who mentioned that religious school teachers were using Mere Christianity in the classroom. “We had no idea that the Mormons were into Lewis,” Tauber said.

For Gresham, all this talk about his stepfather and his legacy is misplaced.

“People should not be trying to remember C.S. Lewis at all,” Gresham said. “They should be trying to remember the Jesus Christ whom he represented and whom he preached.”