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By Karen Long

C.S. Lewis–Oxford professor, Christian apologist and author of beloved children's stories–continues to defy easy categorization.

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WASHINGTON (RNS)–At a desperate moment in the book The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, as the lion's tortured, lifeless body lies on a stone table, the writer pauses over the stricken child characters, Lucy and Susan.

Then C.S. Lewis turns to the reader directly: “I hope no one who reads this

book has been quite as miserable as Susan and Lucy were that night; but if you have been–if you've been up all night and cried till you have no more tears left in you–you will know that there comes in the end a sort of quietness. You feel as if nothing was ever going to happen again."

Something in that passage–its directness, its knowingness, its complete lack of irony and its kind regard–conveys why both the books and their author still matter to millions of readers.

Now this children's story from the pen of a childless, middle-aged Oxford don, whose characters say "By crikers" and "Bless me," is the fodder for a $200 million film. Narnia has entered the maw of Disney, and a whole cast of stakeholders–book lovers, Lewis despisers, evangelical Christians, Lewis acolytes, academics and cultural commentators–are twitching with dread and expectation.

"There are rooting interests," said Bruce Edwards, a Bowling Green State University professor and Lewis scholar. "And as in all important contests, … you not only want your team to win, but win in a certain way."

The new movie, therefore, arrives at a culturally pregnant moment.

Detractors are hoping it tanks. Some believers are praying the bliss Lewis found in Christianity–he was the last century's most famous convert from atheist to Anglican–begets a new come-to-Jesus momentum.

Both outcomes are unlikely, but anxiety about the place of religion in public life has fired up the chattering classes.

No less an institution than the Times of London describes the movie as a referendum on Christianity, while "C.S. Lewis Superstar" blazes across the cover of the current issue of the evangelical magazine Christianity Today.

Meanwhile, the New Yorker derides Lewis as a fellow who took "a

controversial incident in Jewish history as the pivot point of all existence, and a still more controversial one in British royal history as the pivot point of your daily practice."

Pity the man baptized Clive Stapes Lewis, who, like his friend J.R.R. Tolkien, was a tweedy, pipe-smoking Oxford professor, literary critic and lover of old myths.

More than a half-century later, with Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings pressed into cinematic form, it is Lewis' turn. But unlike Middle Earth, the Narnia that Lewis drenched with Christian themes has propelled its creator smack into the culture wars, circa 2005.

At least that's the opinion of Alan Jacobs, author of the new book, The Narnian.

"Disney is marketing separately to the Harry Potter people and to the Christians who love C.S. Lewis," said Jacobs, a professor at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Ill.

"This arrives on the heels of the contention over The Passion of the Christ, the worry around the role of evangelicals in the last presidential election and the furor over intelligent design. It makes it hard to talk about Lewis."

The divisions are so pitched, the movie soundtrack comes in two versions–rock-tinged music for the secularist and Christian-influenced tunes for the believer.

So far, the clear loser is Macmillan Publishing, which calculated 20 years ago that Lewis had sold about as many books as he ever would. So HarperCollins stepped in to buy up the copyrights. Today, it owns 170 different titles from and about the titan of British letters.

The publishing house expects Mere Christia-nity–a paperback edition of

radio essays Lewis dashed off while riding the train into London–to ring up more than a million sales since 2001. And the seven books of The Chronicles of Narnia, available in 35 languages, should surpass the 90 million mark by year's end.

HarperCollins has no monopoly, however. Wiley has rushed to print 50,000 copies of C.S. Lewis and Narnia for Dummies in the series' familiar yellow-and-black cover.

Behind the commercial whirl are the spiritual and intellectual ones.

Philip Pullman, an arch anti-Narnian, has called the chronicles loathsome and their emphasis on an eternal life in Narnia to be a form of death-dealing. Yet Pullman, creator of the compelling children's Dark Materials trilogy, begins his story with a girl in a wardrobe.

Likewise, elements of Lewis are evident in the work of J.K. Rowling, who has acknowledged the influence, and Neil Gaiman, who has satirized him brutally.

Lewis has amounted to something of a thorn in intellectual history for decades now–partly because his contributions were formidable in two fields often at odds–literary scholarship and Christian apologetics.

Lewis' direct, accessible and winsome writings about Christian questions landed him on a 1947 cover of Time magazine, a year before he began scribbling a few pages about Narnia.

Born into a prosperous Belfast Protestant family in 1898, little Jack was a clever and precocious boy, deeply attached to nature, who spent hours alone with books.

The major hemorrhage in his life occurred when he was 9. He was reading Paradise Lost and jotting his reflections on Milton in a diary that summer

when his mother died of cancer. His father shipped him off to a British boarding school, a place of beatings and rages so hideous the headmaster eventually was carted off to an institution for the criminally insane.

In counterpoint to those grim months were the weeks spent in a refuge that Jack and his older brother, Warnie, called “The Little End Room.” The two escaped for many hours tucked far from adults in their Belfast home sanctuary. Part of their play featured an imaginary world called “Boxen,” for which Jack–smitten by Beatrix Potter and Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows–provided the talking animals.

In 1944, just as Lewis was becoming famous in America, Macmillan Publishing asked the author for an autobiographical sketch. The professor responded that he had no interest in the “rot about 'self-expression.'”

But Lewis finally gave in, tossing off a paragraph that he assumed Macmillan would edit: “I gave up Christianity at about 14. Came back to it when getting on for 30. An almost purely philosophical conversion. I didn't want to. I'm not the religious type. I want to be let alone, to feel I'm my own master; but since the facts seemed to be the opposite, I had to give in. My happiest hours are spent with three or four old friends in old clothes tramping together and putting up in small pubs–or else sitting up till the small hours in someone's college rooms talking nonsense, poetry, theology, metaphysics over beer, tea and pipes. There's no sound I like better than adult male laughter.”

The nature of that conversion, at the elbow of Tolkien and another friend during a long walk in 1931, is important to Doris Donnelly, theology professor at John Carroll University.

“For him, conversion was a struggle,” she said. “That carries a note of authenticity for me. He wasn't knocked from his horse; he wasn't visited by angels. His conversion happened slowly, thoughtfully, and carried forward

throughout his life."

Lewis' relation to some evangelicals remains uneasy. Lewis' years were well-marinated in drink and tobacco, and his ecstatic, late-life marriage to a divorced American was accomplished in defiance of the Anglican bishop of Oxford.

Still, no less a fiery fundamentalist than Bob Jones–who once described Billy Graham as a limb of Satan–met Lewis and pronounced him a Christian.

Jacobs credits the writings of Lewis, alongside the Graham crusades, for bringing the various wings of Christianity closer.

Nearer the concerns of everyday life, however, are the many thousands of bereaved readers comforted by Lewis' beautiful book A Grief Observed, written in the wake of his wife's cancer death, just four years after their marriage. Joan Didion, no devotee of the Christian afterlife, refers to it in her own The Year of Magical Thinking.

One woman who had a challenging childhood mentioned in a discussion that reading Lewis' book The Screwtape Letters was the first time she can remember wanting to be good.

Such testimony makes sense to Lewis admirers. Detractors see Narnia as the man's escape from a pinched Christianity. One who scoffs at that interpretation is Bruce Edwards, the Bowling Green professor who maintains a well-regarded Lewis website.

"Lewis was profoundly influenced by Tolkien, who saw fantasy not as escape, but a recovery," Edwards said. Lewis had a rare capacity to write in a way that made goodness desirable, even radiant. Arguments about the uneven Narnia books–whether they were imperialistic, racist or sexist–showcase the preoccupations of the times.

For the long haul, folk as diverse as Mormon theologians and John Updike will continue to claim Lewis as their own.

Karen Long writes for The Plain Dealer in Cleveland.