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THE LION'S WORLD  
Rowan Williams, SPCK

The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis, the series of children's books about a magical world overseen by the elusive lion Aslan, sharply divides people: they love them with a passion or frankly loathe them. The former party have usually encountered Narnia as children and the early love affair has got into the blood. It is rarer for people to come to the books later in life and fall under their spell. But this was the case for Rowan Williams – and indeed myself - and 'The Lion's World' is the result of his mature reflections on his reading.

Anti-Narnians are usually put off by the undeniable Christian orientation of its author. C.S.Lewis was not only a shrewd literary critic and brilliant lecturer but a remarkable theological writer. He found Christianity for himself and wrote about it copiously, if unevenly. At its best, Lewis's theological writing gives a flavour of what is peculiar to Christianity, which has nothing to do with caution, self-righteousness or conformism. Indeed, quite the reverse. Neither is it any kind of advocate of control which, as Williams argues, is why the Narnia haters are wrong in suggesting that the books are no more than Christian propaganda designed to lure innocent readers with the sugaring over of a rattling epic tale.

Williams' deft defence of Lewis's Christian principles, which certainly permeate the books, is founded on his grasp of what those principles really were. They were not matters which could be taught by precept but only arrived at by the same faculty which involves, and allows for, the expansive workings of the imagination. Rather than a set of ideological tenets they propose radical life attitudes - receptiveness, a mistrust of cynicism, a recognition of our propensity to disavow truth, a readiness to discard, as Williams puts it, 'the oppressive clichés of the world' - which can lead to a deeper, and ultimately more joyful, experience of being human.

In this sense, the Narnia books have affinities with the great nineteenth century novels, where the characters' experiences take them, and us, into new moral dimensions and the presentiment of other, somehow more salient, worlds. The difference, of course, is that these books are written for children but, as Williams rightly suggests, children are no less alive to moral possibility and choice and are certainly more likely than adults to respond to the promise of alternative worlds and attendant ways of being.

As Williams identifies, a key theme of the Narnia books is the insight that what is commonly called 'the real world' is a whole lot less real than we are encouraged to suppose – and that a far *realer* reality lies about us if only we will recognise it. The magic of Narnia is not 'magic' in the sense of an escape from responsibility. It is rather a realm where consequences of actions are made unnervingly patent and where 'evil' consists in the turning away from acceptance of those consequences. One example, which Williams returns to, is when Peter, the elder boy in 'The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe' acknowledges that his young brother Edmund's defection to the witch's camp is in part due to Peter's own failure of sympathy for his brother. The emotional climate of Narnia permits the perception that there is an important sense in which he *is* his brother's keeper.

'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' (the best known of the seven books) also presents the series' informing image – the containment of a larger world (Narnia) within a smaller one (the wardrobe). As an image it needs no spelling out but Williams is surely right to underline its significance. 'We go through a door into a reality that is bigger than the one we have left behind; the world opens out, it shows itself to be "bigger on the inside than the outside"'(Williams). And this is of a piece with another central thread of his response: the unpredictability and strangeness, yet at the same time naturalness, of Aslan, the wild animal that rules Narnia.

It is hard not to suspect that this pungent and illuminating book expresses something of the retiring Archbishop of Canterbury's own disappointment with the milk-and-water brand of Christianity (often associated with Anglicanism)

which muffles the disruptive voice of its inspirational central figure against the tyranny of order and the 'human lust for control'. Aslan, who, as he tells the children who encounter him, goes by another name in our world, is 'no tame lion'. Neither Lewis nor Williams want children fobbed off with the notion of a universe whose deepest creative principle could - or should - be tamed.

**Salley Vickers' latest novel THE CLEANER OF CHARTRES (Viking penguin) will be published in November.**