



mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 23
Number 2

Article 2

4-15-2001

The "Correct" Order for Reading The Chronicles of Narnia?

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Recommended Citation

Schakel, Peter J. (2001) "The "Correct" Order for Reading The Chronicles of Narnia?," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 23 : No. 2 , Article 2. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol23/iss2/2>

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Abstract

Discusses the advantages and disadvantages of reading the Chronicles in the order of date published or internal chronological order, as they are often currently packaged; and what Lewis had to say about how they should be read.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia—Reading order

The “Correct” Order for Reading The Chronicles of Narnia?

Peter J. Schakel

A NEW book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, appeared on booksellers' shelves on 16 October 1950 in Britain and about three weeks later in the United States. It turned out to be the first book in a series of seven written over the next few years, which came to be referred to as The Chronicles of Narnia. The book was well received and read widely because of its intriguing title and because its author, C. S. Lewis, was well known as a writer and radio broadcaster. Fifty years later the book continues to be widely read—or should one say that a similar book of the same title is widely read? For, half a century later, the book has become the second, not the first, of The Chronicles of Narnia. Does that make it a different book? In physical terms, no: the words of the text and Pauline Baynes's drawings remain the same. But when read as second in the series instead of first, the imaginative experience of engaging with the text—the book received by the reader—is very different indeed. Significant though this change is, it has been hidden, editorially, so readers first encountering the Chronicles now may never know about the renumbering of the series and the difference the rearrangement makes in the imaginative experiencing of the stories.

For those who read the stories in the 1950s as each book appeared, one per year from 1950 to 1956, there was only one order in which to read and experience them, the order of publication. Most reprintings of the books in the mid-1960s, mid-1970s, and mid-1980s numbered them in that order:

1. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: A Story for Children*
2. *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia*
3. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*
4. *The Silver Chair*
5. *The Horse and His Boy*
6. *The Magician's Nephew*
7. *The Last Battle: A Story for Children.*

So they were listed in the Geoffrey Bles and Bodley Head editions in Britain and the Macmillan editions in the United States once *The Last Battle* was completed, as well

as in the later Collins clothbound reprints in Britain, the Puffin paperback edition in Britain until the mid-1970s, and the Collier paperback edition in the United States until the mid-1980s.

At the same time quiet but persistent voices began urging that they be renumbered in the order in which events occur in the stories (or nearly so: the events of *The Horse and His Boy* actually occur during, not after, those of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*):

1. *The Magician's Nephew*
2. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*
3. *The Horse and His Boy*
4. *Prince Caspian*
5. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*
6. *The Silver Chair*
7. *The Last Battle*.

These voices have won out, at least to the extent that the uniform, worldwide edition of the Chronicles issued in 1994 is arranged in that order.

The books are listed in the new order opposite the title page of the Puffin paperback edition of *Prince Caspian* (1974 reprint), with this intriguing heading: “All seven stories of Narnia are published in Puffins, and the correct reading order is [. . .]” Other Puffin reprints from the mid 1970s on list this ordering, but without the explanatory statement. What does “correct” mean here? Correct by what criteria? The 1994 uniform edition includes this statement on the copyright page: “The HarperCollins editions of The Chronicles of Narnia have been renumbered in compliance with the original wishes of the author, C. S. Lewis.” Again the wording is puzzling. Why “original wishes”? Does original mean from the time *The Magician's Nephew* was completed? If so, why did Lewis not request The Bodley Head to include this renumbering in the new book, or in *The Last Battle* the following year, or have Geoffrey Bles change the order in later reprints of the other books? If it had been a matter of importance to Lewis, surely his publishers would have complied with his wishes, or included the renumbering in the paperback editions that appeared a few years later. Thus the strongest evidence that these were deeply held wishes of the author is missing.

The renumbering presumably has grown out of a sincere respect for Lewis and desire to follow his wishes. But the attempt to dictate a “correct” way to read the Chronicles reflects an inadequate understanding of the reading process, and an

approach to literature that is generally rejected by literary scholars. That approach assumes that the “correct” way to interpret a literary work is to find and follow what the author intended, the way the author said it should be read. Walter Hooper, in *C. S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide*, follows that approach when he calls the new ordering “the sequence in which Lewis meant for them to be read” (408). Most literary scholars challenge authorial intent on two grounds. The first points out the difficulty of determining what an author intended. Often an author does not tell us what he or she intended; authorial intent in such cases is read into the work by arguing that the author must have intended this or that because of the structure or effect of the work. And even when authors do tell us what they intended, the question arises of whether they actually achieved what they intended, or really understood themselves what they achieved. The second asks if what the author intended makes any difference. What really matters is the effect of the work, which could go far beyond what the author expected or sought to achieve. The unconscious dynamic of the writing process can lead a writer to achieve more than, or something different from, what he or she consciously set out to do.¹

Lewis gave qualified approval to the chronological arrangement in a letter to a young boy, Laurence Krieg, dated 23 April 1957. Laurence believed, after publication of *The Magician’s Nephew*, that it should be read first, but his mother believed the books should continue to be read in order of publication. Laurence wrote to Lewis to ask whether he or his mother was right. Lewis replied, “I think I agree with your order for reading the books more than with your mother’s. [. . . But] perhaps it does not matter very much in which order anyone reads them” (*Letters to Children* 68). Walter Hooper reports that Lewis later reaffirmed his preference for the chronological sequence in comments to him (*Past Watchful Dragons* 32). Even if this letter and the comment to Hooper are serious expressions of Lewis’s intent, it is not wise to use them as a basis for limiting readers to one way of reading. Note that Lewis, despite expressing agreement with Laurence, does not say this is the *correct* order for reading them. When he says, “perhaps it does not matter very much,” he clearly means that more than one order, or perhaps any order, is acceptable to him for reading the Chronicles. If, however, he is suggesting that the order makes no difference to the reading experience, then he is simply mistaken. The order of reading in that sense matters a great deal. Viewed in terms of the imaginative reading experience, the “new” arrangement may well be less desirable than the original one.²

The only reason for putting *The Magician’s Nephew* first is to have the reader encounter events in chronological order, the order in which they happened, and that,

as every storyteller knows, is quite unimportant as a reason. Often the early events in a sequence have a greater impact or effect as a flashback, told after later events which provide background and establish perspective. Beginning a story *in medias res* (“in the middle of things”) is one of the oldest and most basic of narrative strategies, going back at least to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two of the earliest stories in the Western literary tradition. Lewis had used it before in *Perelandra* and would use it later in *Till We Have Faces*. In the Chronicles, the effect of *Prince Caspian* depends upon it. In Chapter 1, the four Pevensie children are whisked away from a train platform in our world to another world. They wonder if it might be Narnia, but everything looks unfamiliar. The children discover in Chapter 2 that they are not only in Narnia but in the ruins of the castle Cair Paravel, where they had lived at the end of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The castle is in ruins because a thousand years have passed in Narnian time since they returned to our world. In Chapter 3 they capture a Dwarf, who agrees to tell them what they need to know about events during those thousand years. Chapters 4-7 are a flashback containing the Dwarf’s story. Lewis carefully arranged the first three chapters so that the reader would share imaginatively what the children experienced: the feelings of fear and uncertainty, the slowly growing awareness of where they are, the perplexity over why things have changed so much. He could have started the book with Chapter 4, relating it from Caspian’s point of view, the way he did with Tirian in *The Last Battle*. Doing that, however, would have sacrificed the strategies through which he led readers into the story and got them involved in the action.

So it is with the Chronicles as a whole. To read one of the other books before *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* sacrifices strategies that Lewis used to lead readers into the world of Narnia and to help them share imaginatively in the experiences of Lucy, and later the other children, as they discover what that world is like. Consider, for example, the careful use of details to enable readers to share Lucy’s experience as she enters Narnia for the first time. In an ordinary-seeming house in the country, Lucy steps into an ordinary-seeming wardrobe, to smell and feel the long fur coats in it. The vivid details enable the reader to share Lucy’s experience, as she reaches ahead into the darkness of the wardrobe, hears a crunching underfoot, feels the cold wetness of the snow and the prickliness of the trees, and glimpses the light of the lamppost ahead of her. The reader shares her bewilderment and uncertainty about where she is and what she has gotten into, and her surprise as she hears footsteps and comes face to face with, not another human, but a creature which, though having the body of a

man from the waist upwards, has legs shaped like a goat's, with black hair, goat's hoofs, reddish skin, a short pointed beard and curly hair, two horns, and a tail.

A key strategy in the book is the use of what reader-response theory calls "gaps." All stories depend on gaps (details that need later to be clarified, questions that a reader wants answered—and immediately begins trying to answer by anticipating later events). *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* uses them very effectively. Its opening leads readers to ask, Who are these four children and the Old Professor? What are they like? What is the "something" that happened to them in the very large house far out in the country? The story, immediately or slowly as needed, begins filling those gaps. Notice that the story creates a gap by a reference to three servants, then quickly signals the reader that this is not an important gap: "(Their names were Ivy, Margaret and Betty, but they do not come into the story much.)" (*Lion* 1).³

The first mention of the name "Narnia" creates such a gap. Tumnus the faun asks Lucy how she came into Narnia, and Lucy asks what the reader also wants to know: "Narnia? What's that?" Tumnus replies, "This is the land of Narnia, [. . .] where we are now; all that lies between the lamp-post and the great castle of Cair Paravel on the eastern sea" (9). The reader will want and need to know more, of course, but for now he or she has been supplied the necessary basic information and given adequate orientation.

The most important example of a gap in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when it is read first, is the buildup to the introduction of Aslan. The first reference to Aslan is by Mr. Beaver, when he meets the children in the woods: "They say Aslan is on the move—perhaps has already landed" (54). These words create a gap for the Pevensie children and—presumably—for the reader; the passage, significantly, assumes that readers have not already read other books about Narnia: "None of the children knew who Aslan was any more than you do; but the moment the Beaver had spoken these words everyone felt quite different" (54). In the long paragraph that follows, Lewis sought directly and intentionally to help readers share imaginatively what the children experienced:

Perhaps it has happened to you in a dream that someone says something which you don't understand but in the dream it feels as if it had some enormous meaning—either a terrifying one which turns the whole dream into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you could get into that dream again. It was like that now. At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in his inside. (54)

For the reader fully to participate imaginatively with this paragraph, to feel something mysterious jump in his or her inside, requires that it be the first book in the series to be read. The reader experiences the power of Aslan's name but—like the Pevensie children—is left to wonder who and what this person is. The anticipation and eventual filling of that gap is one of the great pleasures of reading the story. The fact that other books were written later, including a book describing events prior to these, does not change the artistic strategy of this passage.⁴

The gap is partially filled, and the mysteriousness heightened, in the next chapter, when the children ask Mr. Beaver to tell them more about Aslan and he replies: "Aslan? [. . .] Why, don't you know? He's the King. He's the Lord of the whole wood, but not often here, you understand. Never in my time or my father's time" (63). The gap is filled still further, and Aslan made even more exciting and mysterious, when Lucy asks if Aslan is a man and Mr. Beaver replies: "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion" (64). The excitement builds as the Beavers tell the children that Aslan is good but not safe, that everyone's knees knock when they appear before Aslan, and that the children will meet him tomorrow. For readers who have read *The Magician's Nephew* before encountering these passages, there are fewer, and smaller, gaps to fill, and as a result the story is less mysterious and less exciting.

The imaginative experience of the opening sentences of *The Magician's Nephew* is very different from that of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and has a different effect depending on which book is read first: "This is a story about something that happened long ago when your grandfather was a child. It is a very important story because it shows how all the comings and goings between our own world and the land of Narnia first began" (*Magician's* 1). For someone who has previously read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, this invokes recognition and memory: the word "Narnia" immediately connects the reader with earlier imaginative experiences and awakens a flood of memories. "Narnia" will not be mentioned again in *The Magician's Nephew* until the title of Chapter 9, but that matters not: knowing that this story will connect with the earlier one engages the reader imaginatively and emotionally and enables him or her to proceed in eager and watchful anticipation.

For those who read *The Magician's Nephew* before other books in the series, the opening sentence creates not the kind of skillful, satisfying gaps found in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, but vague and unsettling ones. The words "all the comings and goings" create the first gap in *The Magician's Nephew*. The reader who reads this

story first is left asking, what comings and goings? The question is never answered in this book, though the next to the last paragraph of the final chapter repeats the phrase and adds “which you can read of in other books” (166). It does not yield the imaginative satisfaction of a skillfully filled gap (like the Aslan gap in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*); it feels instead like the “bait” authors use to sell other books. The second gap is “the land of Narnia.” The reader has the clue that it must be separate from “our own world” and is left to wonder what and where this land is. But it too is not a satisfying gap (understandably, since Lewis was crafting this as a flashback, not a first book). The second paragraph shifts abruptly to a different story, about Polly, Digory, Uncle Andrew, London, and Charn, which is set up and told very effectively, with skillful creation and filling of gaps. Indications of what Narnia is do not appear until the final lines of Chapter 9: “Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters” (103).

Consider the difference in the imaginative experiencing of those words for those who read *The Magician’s Nephew* first, and those who have previously read one or more of the other Chronicles. If one reads this book first, the account of the creation of Narnia is a beautiful, powerful story, told in vivid detail. It draws the reader into the events and enables the reader to experience the excitement, emotions, mystery, and magic of what was occurring. For a lion to bring a new world into being and breathe life into it is something a reader will never forget. The imaginative experience of reading it as a reader’s first encounter with the world of Narnia is exciting and wonderful. However, it will prove to be even more meaningful and powerful when such a reader returns to it and rereads it after reading the other books and learning more about that mysterious lion; the memories, emotions, and associations from other stories make the creation of Narnia much more significant to the reader than it can be on first reading.

For those who read other books before *The Magician’s Nephew*, the delightful elements of surprise and recognition are added to that of deeper meaningfulness. Readers who had shared with Lucy the mysterious experience of encountering a lamppost unaccountably placed in the middle of a forest have the pleasure, upon seeing the lamppost grow in *The Magician’s Nephew*, of recognition: “Oh! That’s how the lamppost got there!” (For those who watch the birth of the lamppost before reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, there is no mystery when they encounter it with Lucy.) Likewise, readers who have already encountered the White Witch in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* experience surprise and recognition in *The Magician’s Nephew* as they gradually figure out who Jadis is and realize the long-term

significance of the events in Charn. Readers who first were introduced to Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* experience the thrill of recognition as the lion comes into view, and perhaps the pleasure of accurate anticipation if they guess that the voice is Aslan’s before he appears or before his name is mentioned. The fullest imaginative experiencing of *The Magician’s Nephew* comes through reading it as a flashback, for that is the way Lewis thought of it as he wrote it and those are the artistic strategies he consciously or unconsciously built into it. Thus, there is no introduction to Aslan in *The Magician’s Nephew*, no explanation that he is the king of the wood or the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea; there was no need to—readers already knew all that from earlier books.

Imaginative experience extends also to the religious dimension of the Chronicles, and here too the arrangement of the books makes a difference in their effect and meaning. The religious motifs are embedded in image and story, which the reader experiences imaginatively, not (as in *Mere Christianity* or *Miracles*) in concept and logical argument. I have shown elsewhere that the Chronicles, intentionally or unconsciously, echo and parallel *Mere Christianity*, which Lewis was revising for republication at the time he was writing the early Chronicles.⁵ The Chronicles, read in order of publication, develop a sequential presentation of Christian ideas similar to that in *Mere Christianity*. Book 1 of *Mere Christianity* demonstrates the need for salvation; Book 2 explains the plan of salvation; Book 3 deals with morality, explaining how Christians should live as individuals and as a church, a company of the faithful, in light of their salvation; and Book 4 clarifies theological issues that cause difficulties for Christians. The arrangement of the four books is deliberate. Their full effect depends on the order in which they are read: “It is after you have realised that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind the law, and that you have broken that law and put yourself wrong with that Power—it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk” (*Mere Christianity* 38-39). The discussion in Book 3 (“Christian Behaviour”), if read first, will not have the same meaning as it does when read after the sections on “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe” and “What Christians Believe,” which clarify that the moral teachings in Book 3 grow out of the premises about law, grace, and faith laid out in the earlier parts.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe lays imaginatively a theological foundation for the succeeding books, much as Book 1 of *Mere Christianity* lays a foundation for the other three parts. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* begins, as *Mere Christianity* does, by establishing the existence of moral law, or “Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time,” and the fact that Edmund has broken that law and thus needs to be rescued.

As Aslan dies in Edmund's place, the story images Book 2 of *Mere Christianity*. "Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time" (*Lion* chapter 15) represents the love and grace which saved Edmund from the penalty of the law. Other themes from *Mere Christianity* are reflected in succeeding Chronicles, including the theme of Christian morality in *The Magician's Nephew*. When *The Magician's Nephew* is read in the order of publication, the earlier books create a context for the theme of morality, just as Books 1 and 2 of *Mere Christianity* establish a context for Book 3. Earlier stories imaging law, faith, spiritual growth, and divine guidance and care provide a Christian basis for the moral instruction. Morality grows out of faith, not just out of a desire to "do better." Christian meanings can come through the chronological arrangement, too, but in a less unified, less imaginatively and intellectually satisfying way than the sequence that flowed out of Lewis's imagination as he wrote the stories.

Imaginative experiencing of the Christian motifs is even more important when viewed from the perspective developed by Doris Myers in a fine essay on the Chronicles. Myers argues that "the seven books, read in the order of original publication, describe the emotional climate of Christian commitment at various age levels, from very young childhood to old age and death" ("Growing in Grace" 185).⁶ The Chronicles present, "in a form attractive to young and old alike, the whole scope of a Christian life according to the Anglican style of gradual growth rather than sudden conversion, of love of tradition, and of emphasis on codes of courtesy and ethical behavior" (202). This is not an allegorical way of reading the stories. It holds that the characters and events in and of themselves depict and convey religious feelings at different stages of life, not that the stories point outside themselves to parallel characters and events which add a "deeper" meaning to what one is reading. These stages of spiritual development according to the Anglican pattern can be experienced imaginatively only when the books are read in order of publication. The foundation in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the subsequent steps built upon it are lost when the series is rearranged according to internal chronological order.

In one sense, then, as Lewis said, the order in which the Chronicles are read does not really matter, but it unquestionably does make a difference—which he did not acknowledge, and perhaps did not recognize fully. The decision to renumber and rearrange the Chronicles in current editions may or may not be considered unfortunate. But it is definitely unfortunate that the publishers did not indicate a different arrangement exists in earlier versions, remains an alternative order for reading the books, and is preferred by a number of Lewis scholars.⁷ Principles of textual editing, past and present, call for signaling textual changes so the reader can evaluate

the difference the variants make, and perhaps choose between the alternative versions. Failure to indicate in the books what the original numbering was has the regrettable effect of wiping out the past and imposing a single, "authoritative" reading upon the Chronicles. It is a decision that detracts from, not enhances, recognition and appreciation of the artistry and meaning of Lewis's best-known books.

Notes

This essay is part of a larger study of imagination and the arts in C. S. Lewis.

¹ "Of a book's meaning [. . .] its author is not necessarily the best, and is never a perfect, judge" ("On Criticism," *Of Other Worlds*, 56-57). "You must not believe all that authors tell you about how they wrote their books. This is because a man writing a story is too excited about the story itself to sit back and notice how he is doing it. [. . .] And afterwards, when the story is finished, he has forgotten a good deal of what writing it was like" ("Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," *Of Other Worlds*, 42).

² Two days before he died, Lewis had a visit from Kaye Webb, editor of Puffin Books, which had at that point brought out paperback editions of three of the Chronicles—*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, and *The Magician's Nephew*—and were soon to issue the other four. Ms. Webb reported that Lewis "promised to re-edit the books (connect the things that didn't tie up)" (Green and Hooper 307). There is no indication that this reediting would include rearrangement of the books or the extensive revision reordering should actually entail.

³ Quotations of the Chronicles in this essay are from the Macmillan editions, which include changes made by Lewis in several of the books after their British counterparts had gone to press. The HarperCollins worldwide editions issued in 1994 reproduce the first British editions, and regrettably do not indicate that a later version contains authorial revisions. For details and discussion of the alterations, see Paul F. Ford, *A Companion to Narnia*, xli-xlii (Variants) and Appendix 4.

⁴ Similarly, as Doris Myers has shown, the chronological order dampens the "leap of faith—the decision to trust beyond the evidence" which the books, in order of publication, require of readers as well as of the Pevensie children. "From a position of superior knowledge, the reader watches, but does not share, the children's doubts and risks" ("Spenser's Faerie Land as a Key to Narnia," lecture delivered at Wheaton College, 24 September 1998). Chronological order "flattens" the stories, imposing a single reading on them, "whereas the Chronicles are in fact polysemic, having many layers of meaning." Myers concludes, "As far as I know, there is no evidence that Lewis ever went back and read the books in chronological order to see if they held together that way as fiction."

⁵ Peter J. Schakel, *Reading with the Heart: The Way into Narnia*.

⁶ In her fine book *C. S. Lewis in Context*, Myers shows that the Chronicles, read in order of publication, reflect characteristics and themes Lewis absorbed from Edmund Spenser's

The Faerie Queene (112-81).

- ⁷ Cf. Ford, *Companion to Narnia*, xix-xx and xxxiv-xxxvi; Evan K. Gibson, *C. S. Lewis, Spinner of Tales: A Guide to His Fiction*, 133; Colin Manlove, *C. S. Lewis: His Literary Achievement*, 124-25, and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Patterning of a Fantastic World*, 111-15; Myers, *C. S. Lewis in Context*, 227, and "Growing in Grace," 185 (as well as its earlier version, "The Compleat Anglican: Spiritual Style in the Chronicles of Narnia," 148; and Schakel, *Reading with the Heart*, 143-45.

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