



# The Rise and Fall of Narnia: *A review of* From Spare Oom to War Drobe: Travels in Narnia with My Nine-Year-Old Self

Simon Young

If you, in your younger years, swam with the mermaids off Cair Paravel, hiked, wary of giants, on Ettinsmoor or rode through the deserts of Calormene, then you will know. A childhood encounter with C.S. Lewis's Narnia can change your life. I first picked up the *Chronicles* in 1981, aged about nine. I read them repeatedly as a kid, revisited favourites in my twenties (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Last Battle*) and, at 48, get goosebumps just typing the word 'Paravel'.

I am not, I learn from Katherine Langrish's latest book, alone. Langrish in *From Spare Oom to War Drobe: Travels in Narnia with My Nine-Year-Old Self* gives us a just-shy-of-300-pages Narnian safari, written some fifty years after she stumbled into that world via *The Silver Chair*. There is a short introduction and conclusion, and a preface by Narnia adaptor Brian Sibley (who confesses that he used to try and get into Narnia through a closet). There is then – the bulk of the book – a chapter for each of the seven novels, in which her adult re-reading is interwoven with childhood reminiscences.

I warmed quickly to *From Spare Oom*, devouring it in one sitting. This was essentially because I (and doubtless tens of thousands of others) have so much in common with Langrish. Reviewer and author were both desperate, as children, to find other Narnia stories: I remember asking about copyright laws to determine when non-canonical volumes could be published; child Katherine simply penned her own tales. She relates, at one point, how she quoted, *in her twenties*, the first three dozen words of one Narnia book to a friend ...

What is it about Narnia that catches us up so? Is it just a mish-mash of different literary and folklore motifs that happen to work? Referring to its disparate elements, Katherine Langrish goes so far as to call Narnia a 'Waste Land for children'. Certainly, Narnia lacks, as a world, the

strict coherence of Tolkien's Middle-Earth. Tolkien despaired, for instance, at Lewis' decision to bring in a vaudeville Father Christmas halfway through *The Lion*. But as Langrish notes, 'If Lewis had been made to give the Narnia stories the same attention to detail that his friend Tolkien gave to Middle-Earth, they would never have been written.' Lewis was the busier man.

Tolkien's obsession with language was an (unconscious?) smoke screen for his myth-making. Lewis fundamentally saw his storytelling as a repurposing of the Gospels. Here were truths that were to be fed spoonful by spoonful to his young subjects. Lewis took his apologetics, the tiresome rhetorical jujitsu tricks from works like *God in the Dock*, and turned them into legend. All our experiences of plots and stories tell us that C.S. Lewis should have failed. The cinematic and literary embarrassments produced in the name of ideologies in the past century (the last decade being one of the worst) ought to be enough to convince anyone of that. And yet the Narnia books move readers. There is, to quote Lewis, a 'deeper magic'.

Yes, the books have storytelling 'fails'. There is the rickety plot in *Caspian* (the weakest of the seven). There is the long surplus-to-requirement underground journey in *The Silver Chair*: it never ends! There are, too, the studied attempts at comedy. Here Langrish remembers, as a child, thinking that she was supposed to find certain episodes funny and that probably other children did. I had exactly the same sensation reading, aged nine and ten, passages like the planting of Uncle Andrew in the *Magician's Nephew*. As with many avuncular sorts, C.S. Lewis didn't know when to stop shaking his sides.

But the deeper magic. There is also the deeper magic . . . They include Aslan's return from death and subsequent dance with Lucy and Susan; Reepicheep riding the waves into Aslan's Country. . . . But there are also a dozen other moments that are worth recalling: Lucy's encounter in the wood with Aslan in *Prince Caspian*; Eustace peeling off his dragon skin and being reborn; Shasta on the road with the voice in the dark . . . The only imaginative equivalents I can call to mind are the 'force' moments in the Star Wars films: those scenes where John William's music signals a realisation or transformation. You don't have to be a Christian or a Jedi – I am neither – to be set ablaze.

Much has been written about Lewis and gender and Lewis and race, over the past thirty years. Here Langrish takes up and then defends a sensible middle ground. She makes, for instance, the case that Narnia is 'an equal opportunities fantasy land'. Having recently read the series with my daughter I can't agree. But Langrish is right to point to very strong female characters. When Lewis first wrote *The Lion*, he apparently planned a male hero ('Peter'), only to turn his male lead into Lucy, the most relatable human in the *Chronicles*. Then, it is, in a bit of welcome role reversal, Adam (Digory) not Eve (Polly) who brings sin into the world in *The Magician's Nephew*.

On race Lewis scores, according to Langrish, less well, with his shabby stage Arabs, the cruel Calormenes. Langrish here makes the fundamental point that the Calormenes are marked as a kind of anti-Narnia by their *lack* of magic. But if some of Lewis's words make for uncomfortable reading today, he was no racist. The argument about whether he was a racist

is another. The most determined of his female characters is 'true as steel' Aravis, a Calormene, who eventually marries into a 'white' royal line. Caspian, meanwhile, the closest there is to a Narnian saga hero (he appears in four of the seven volumes), comes from what appears to be Persian pirate stock and marries the daughter of a star. Lewis also makes much of the fact that Emer, a Calormene, is saved from damnation in *The Last Battle*. Lewis asserts, standing in a proud tradition which goes back to Marsilio Ficino, that you can worship the wrong god in the right way.

And here I inch into my only serious disagreement with Langrish. Lewis belonged to a monotheistic tradition that had polite but robust views on right and wrong, sin, repentance and mortification. We may agree, we may shrug. But sometimes Langrish comes worryingly close to berating Lewis for being, well, a 1950s Christian. For instance, why in *Horse and the Boy* was Aravis savaged by a lion? Aslan explains that she had needed the punishment for causing a slave girl to be whipped. Adult Katherine is worried at this; interestingly, child Katherine let it pass. Why, Langrish asks, was Aravis not encouraged to think more on the slave girl's pain; or why was she not made to help the poor thing (though Aravis was, then, hundreds of miles away)? What Langrish is really saying to Lewis here, I think, is 'why are you not more like me?'

Asking writers why they are not more like us makes sense, particularly in children's fiction. We need to relate to our narrators and to their creations. For this reason, we ought to be profoundly pessimistic about the future of Narnia. We learn in *The Last Battle* that the stars of Narnia fell from the sky sometime in the late 1940s and that its forests were eaten up by giant lizards at that date. But a second much worse death awaits. Will children continue to read books that require, as well as a suspension of belief, an act of empathy towards such an old-fashioned author and his world with its ersatz Revelations (giant lizards!) and its postwar patter? Katherine Langrish (and this reviewer) had to make no such effort when we started on Narnia. We were born into Lewis's Britain. For better or for worse, our children were not.

The changes in our society over the last forty years have problematised everything from our own civilisation. This is why Tolkien's Middle-Earth has a much better chance of survival than Narnia. Middle-Earth is entirely cut off from our reality: hermeneutically sealed in a sixth-century Anglo-Celtic philological bubble. Lewis, instead, very deliberately coupled his creation and planet Earth: like medieval fairy, Narnia was a mirror to be held up to ourselves. There were clear references to atom bombs, experimental education and police states and an associated, by turns jokey and earnest, commentary that could have come out of a pre-Beatles *Church Times*. The Narnian gender and race references matter more than Tolkien's because they are about our own world. These will increasingly stand as rubble between new readers and the deeper magic.

Yes, it is true that Narnia has promised great things on film, on television and radio. But none of these attempts have ever really come off: the closest to the spirit of Lewis's original is the atrociously drawn 1979 cartoon version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and some of the BBC adaptations. The much-heralded *Chronicles of Narnia* films of the 2000s

stuttered to a halt after just three films: four went unmade. Then as to the news that Netflix has bought the rights to all seven books for a seven-year series ... I'll take a wager now that, even if Narniaflix gets off the ground, it will never progress past its second season. In fact, I'll go further. By the time copyright has expired for the *Chronicles* in Britain in 2033, it will all be over for Aslan and the Pevensies. It will be time to wheel Narnia into the Madame Tussauds of dead or dying worlds. Lewis's creation will be lifted onto its plinth next to Avalon, Flatland, Krynn and other paracosms past.

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## Simon Young

Author: Katherine Langrish.

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*A review of*  
**La nouvelle jeunesse  
des contes:  
Transcréations des  
recueils de Perrault  
et des Grimm**

Jack Zipes

**T**he ten stimulating essays included in *La nouvelle jeunesse de contes*, a special issue of *Études de Lettres*, are based on talks delivered at an international conference held at the University of Lausanne in 2017. Four of the essays in the journal, which contains poignant illustrations, are in the English language, while the other six are in French. I shall focus mainly on the four English-language essays and three in French, given that *Gramarye* generally focuses on English-language publications.

In their introduction to all the essays, Cyrille François and Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère point out that the 'classical' tales of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm have undergone numerous operations ever since they appeared in the 17th and 19th centuries. The changes have included translations, adaptations, parodies, reinterpretations, musicals, operas, films, ballets, and so on. The editors claim that these modern variations have led to a 'transcreation', which generates a double effect: the Perrault and Grimm tales take on a new meaning in a new socio-cultural context that is different from their initial or original meaning, and the basic texts are reborn or reinvigorated, so to speak, because the new adaptations inspire readers to trace and understand the original meanings. Altogether, we can speak of a double dynamic process that renews the older Perrault and Grimm tales, while creating new texts with similar plots that address changing modern conditions. There is something memetic in the double process, for the 'new' tales reveal that their historical essence will not vanish until the human conflicts are resolved. So, in the case of 'Little Red Riding Hood', it is repeatedly retold as a meme in various ways throughout the world because its initial 'birth' stems from a universal trauma, the violation of women. So, we recall this tale from the past to try to understand the present conditions of rape with the hope that such reproduction will enable us to counter the act of violation or to provide a modification of our behaviour or civilising process.

Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère's 'Translation, Illustration, Transcreation. From the Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault to Classic Fairy Tales Retold' is a model essay in this collection that captures the themes and analyses of most of the other essays in this journal. She studies the various reinterpretations and adaptations in the works of Angela Carter as well as the innovative illustrations by Martin Ware. According to Dutheil de la Rochère, Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979) contains innovative, erotic, densely allusive and woman-centred tales and was so unique that it changed perceptions of the genre, while rejuvenating the familiar stories in a different sense. Monica Wozniak's 'The Power of Imagination. Polish Illustrations of Fairy Tales in the Communist Period (1945-1989)' focuses on the lasting impact of illustrations on the general perception of some tales and their influence on the collective imaginary. Wozniak's essay demonstrates how important it is to consider the particular socio-political-economic aspects of illustrations to grasp the reception of fairy tales in nation states. Lucia Pozniak and Marie Émilie Walz's 'The "Mundys" Will Never Let You Die. Reproducing Images and Stories of "Snow White" in Bill Willingham's graphic novels, *Fables*' continues the exploration of visual works that is important for understanding the constant adaptation of Perrault's and the Grimms' tales. This essay is closely related to all the other essays in this journal that deal with the particular and universal elements that constitute the transcreation of fairy tales. As Pozniak and Walz state, their article

'highlights how *Fables* creatively and critically engages with both the visual culture of the American comic book ... and the literary tradition of the European fairy tale ... thus "mashing-up" these two genres' inherent reproductive qualities to create new stories and even new fictional worlds' (208).

Interestingly, many of the authors in this special issue turn to 'Little Red Riding Hood' or 'Snow White' to demonstrate how transcreation operates. Giorgio Bacci's 'Dis-locating the Tale. Roberto Innocenti, Little Red Riding Hood and the Contemporary "Non-lieux"' is a detailed study of the great Italian illustrator Roberto Innocenti, who uses unusual artistic methods in *The Girl in Red* (2012) to reflect on the problem of housing and loneliness in globalised modern times. Pascale Auraix-Jonchière's essay, 'La "Blanche Neige" des Freres Grimm. Migrations et "transcréations" de la couleur rouge en régime iconotextuel' demonstrates how several books based on 'Snow White' make use of the colour red to shape their interpretations of this fairy tale.

Illustrations play a major role in all the essays in this issue of *Études de Lettres*, and François Fièvre shows in his provocative article, 'Doré devore Perrault', how Gustave Doré's illustrations are not just visual reflections of the text but more psychoanalytical interpretations of Perrault's tales. Also, Alain Corbellari's essay 'Le conte de fées de Gotlib. Entre hommage, parodie et transgression' deals with the French comics of the famous Marcel Gotlib, who included fairy-tale themes and motifs in his works not just to parody Perrault and the Grimms, but to show how their tales form a treasure of common cultures.

It is very difficult to do justice to all the essays in this volume in a short review. Almost all the articles take unusual approaches to the transcreation of the Perrault and Grimm fairy tales, and in doing this, they have not only left us with a new concept but also with convincing arguments that demonstrate how these tales continue to be reborn and reused to contend with age-old social and political conflicts.

Editors: Cyrille François and Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère.

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## Jack Zipes