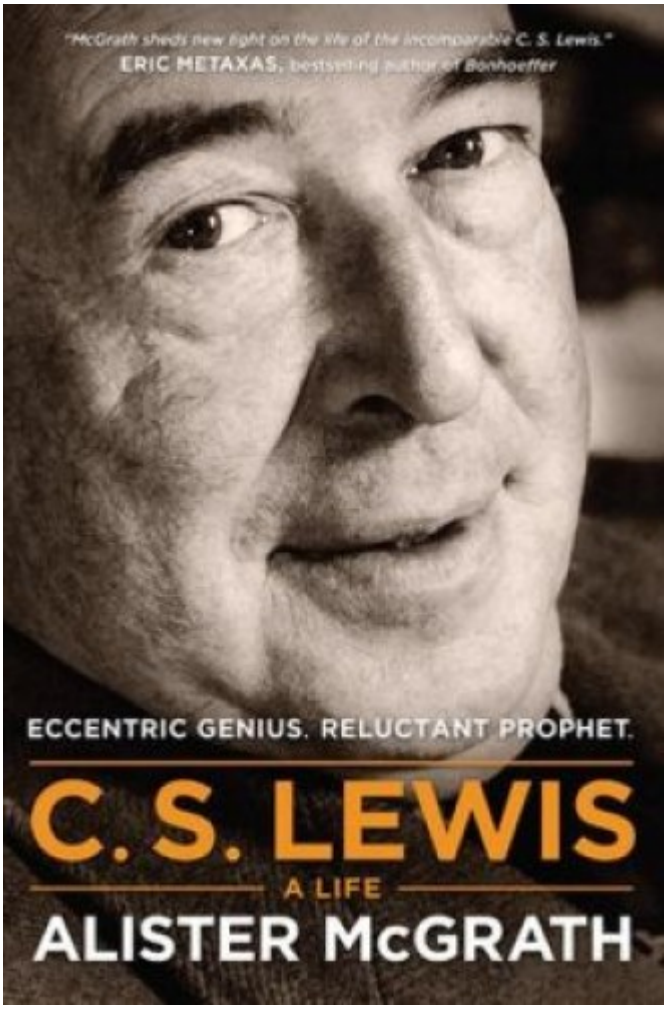
Inexhaustible Lewis

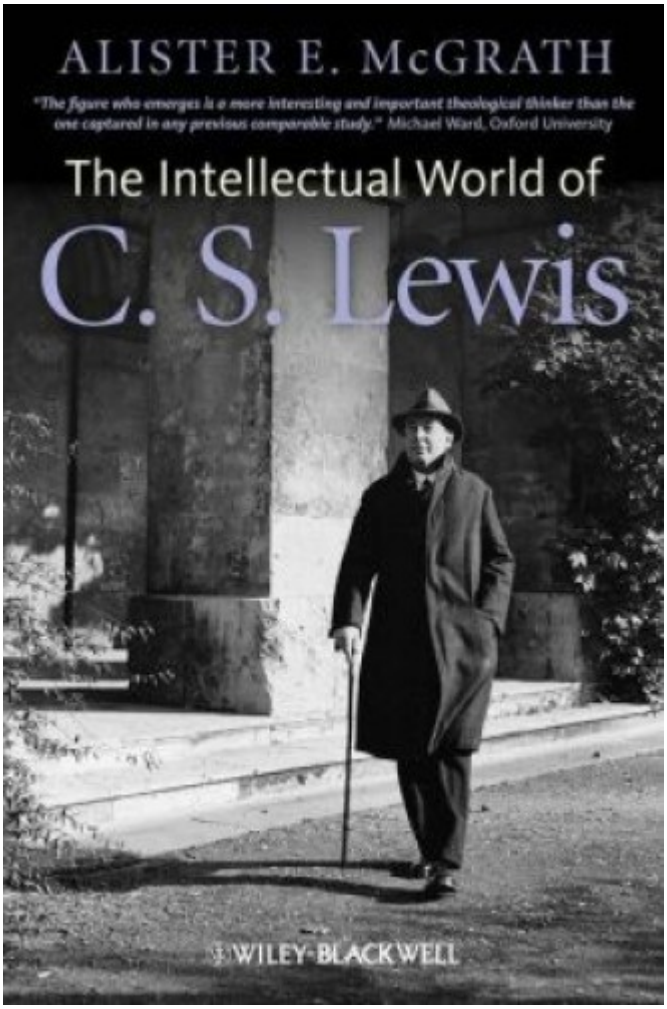
by Ralph C. Wood in the November 27, 2013 issue

In Review



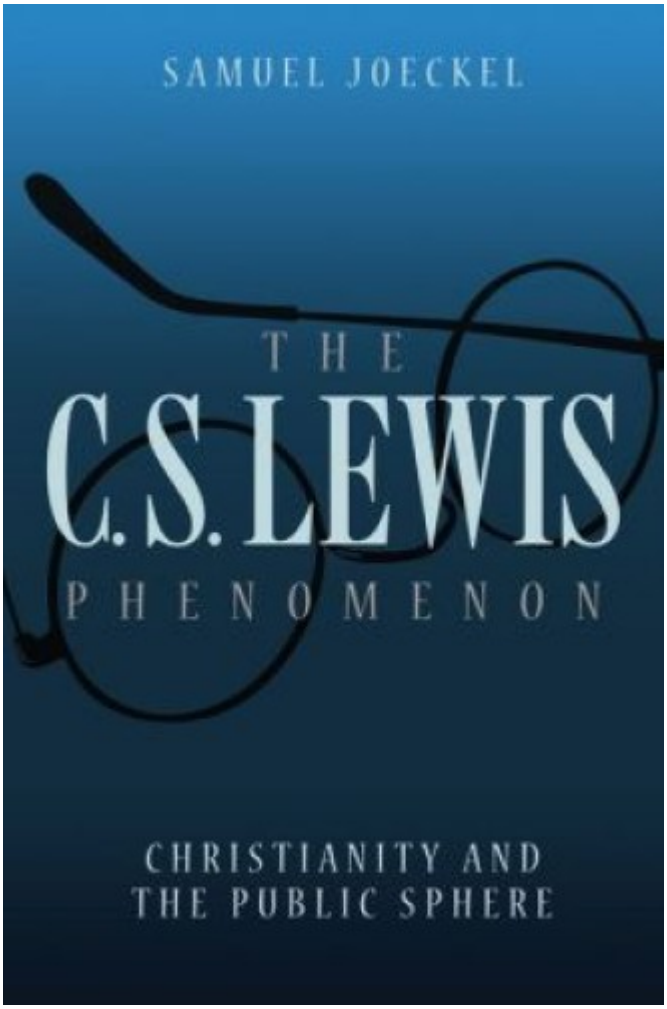
C. S. Lewis—A Life

By Alister McGrath
Tyndale House



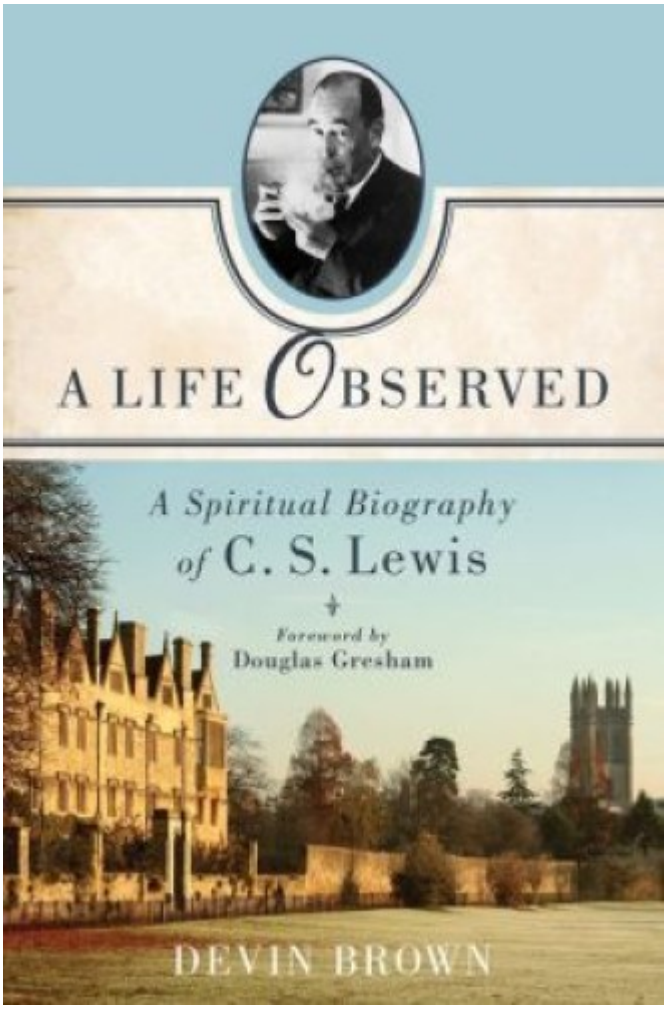
The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis

By Alister E. McGrath
Wiley-Blackwell



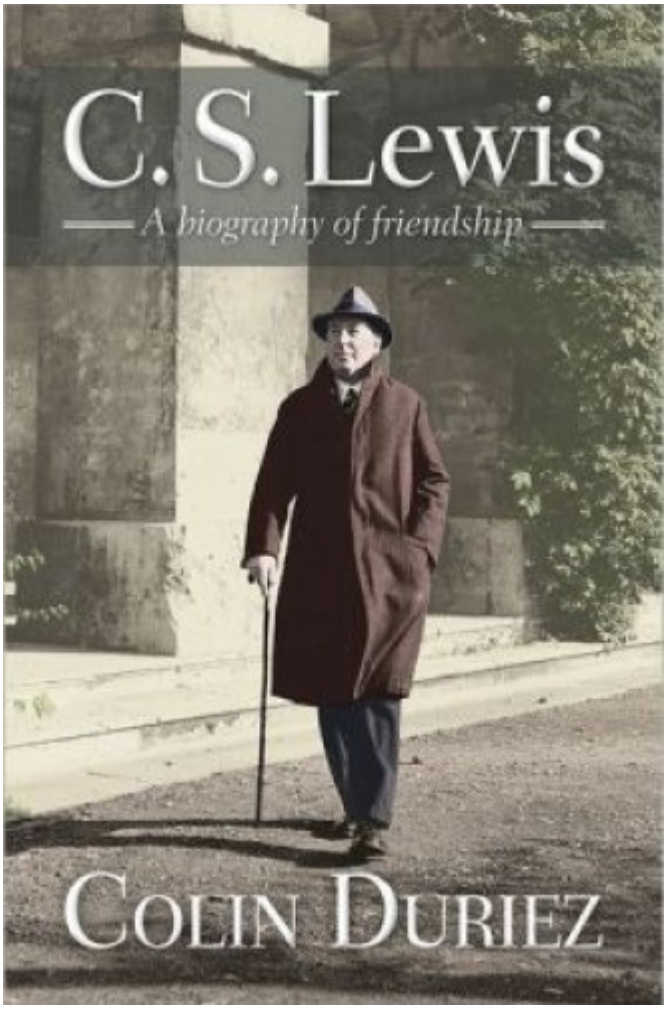
The C. S. Lewis Phenomenon

By Samuel Joeckel
Mercer University Press



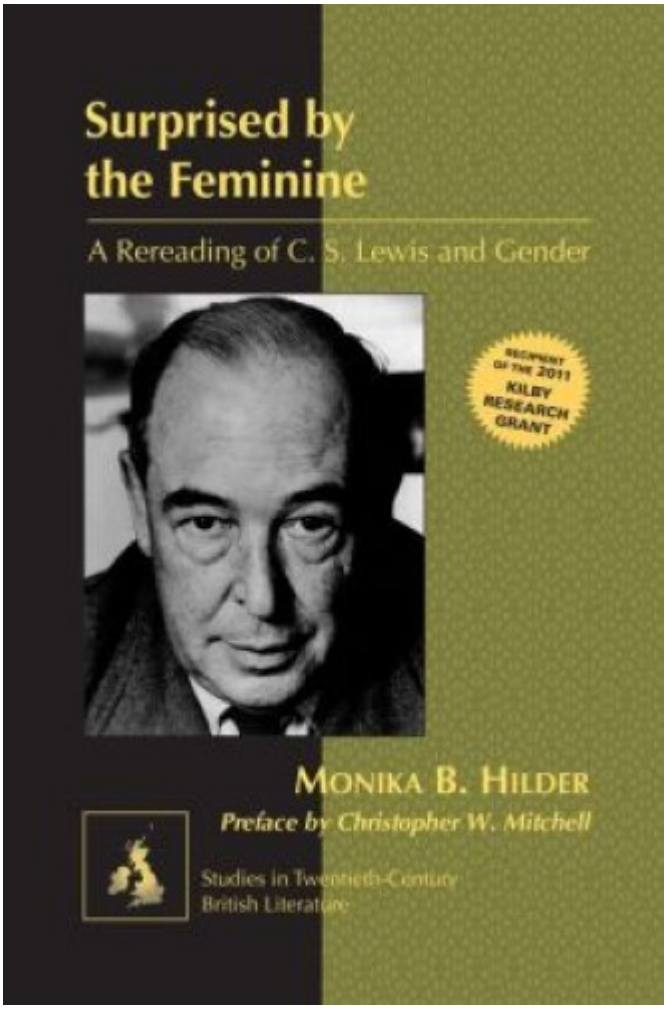
A Life Observed

By Devin Brown
Brazos



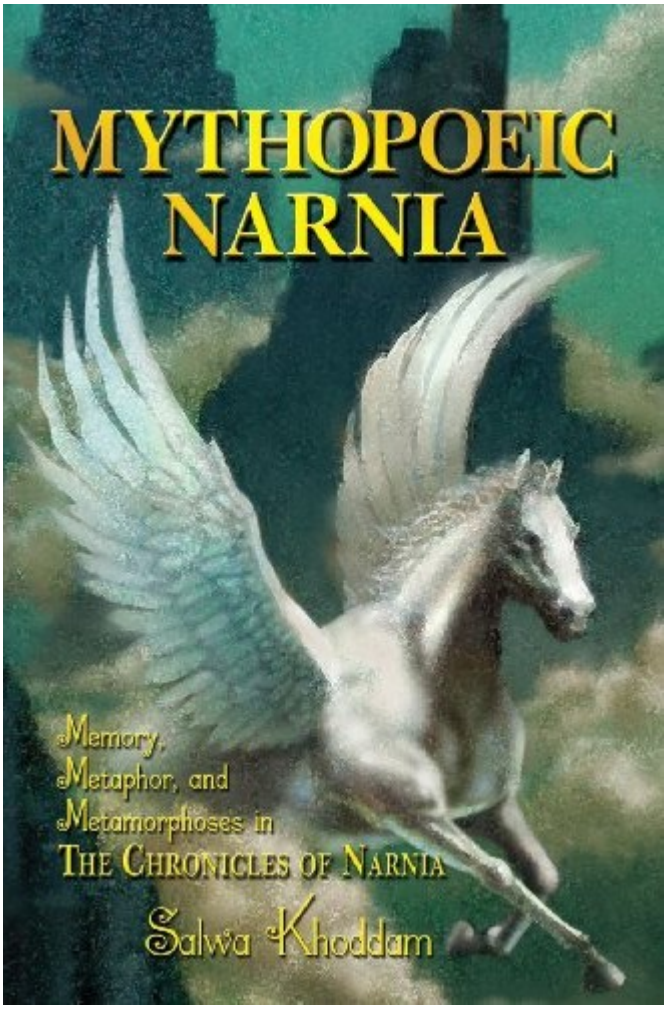
C.S. Lewis: A Biography of Friendship

By Colin Duriez
Lion Hudson



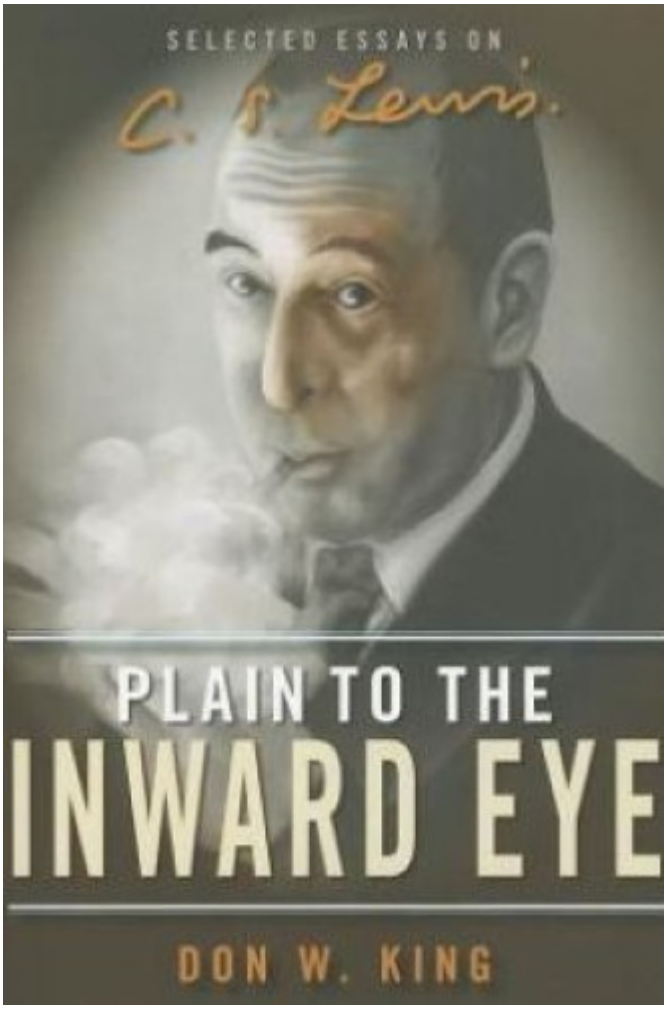
Surprised by the Feminine

By Monika B. Hilder
Peter Lang



Mythopoeic Narnia

by Salwa Khoddam
Winged Lion



Plain to the Inward Eye

By Don W. King
Abilene Christian University Press

An Oxford student once remarked to J. R. R. Tolkien that he had found his tutor C. S. Lewis to be “interesting.” “Interesting?” replied Tolkien. “Yes, he’s certainly that. But you’ll never get to the bottom of him.” The books, all published to mark the 50th anniversary of Lewis’s death, reveal the truthfulness of Tolkien’s response.

Lewis has fared well in the half century since his death on November 22, 1963. (The death date is easy to remember: the world had its eyes trained not on Headington Quarry, the suburb north of Oxford where Lewis lay dying, but on Dallas, Texas, where John F. Kennedy was assassinated.) His books have sold perhaps a billion copies. His undying presence on the British cultural scene will be ensured by the memorial plaque to be unveiled this month in his honor in Poets’ Corner of

Westminster Abbey.

Among the general studies of Lewis's life and ideas, Alister McGrath's two volumes rank among the best. McGrath gets at the slippery character of Lewis by quoting James Como's comment that Lewis "at once hid [himself] absolutely, distorted it, and invented parts of it to parade forth; he repressed, explored, and denied it; he indulged and overcame it; certainly he would transform, and then transcend it; almost always he used it." Even so close a friend as Owen Barfield admitted that "I had the impression of living with, not one, but two Lewises; and this was so as well when I was enjoying his company as when I was absent from him." Among this plethora of personalities, two are worthy of special note: Lewis the confident apologist and Lewis the much less certain artist.

Samuel Joeckel's *The C. S. Lewis Phenomenon* is sure to shake the foundations of Lewis studies. Joeckel makes the revolutionary case that Lewis became the most important Christian intellectual of the 20th century because he wrote in full accord with the modernist foundations that have undergirded public discourse since the 18th century. Against the popular notion that Lewis was opposed to the Enlightenment, Joeckel demonstrates that Lewis embraced most of its governing assumptions:

1. That human experience is basically the same across the entire spectrum of cultures and civilizations;

2. That human reason is able to transcend the particularities of history by occupying a "view from nowhere," a timeless and placeless objectivity;

3. That from this alleged neutral standpoint one can establish moral and even aesthetic certainties;

4. That a public intellectual such as Lewis can make convincing appeals to our "common humanity"; and

5. That because these very same Enlightenment assumptions put Christianity under attack, apologetics becomes the chief mode of Christian discourse, in the conviction that, standing outside Christianity, a defender of the faith can establish proofs for its validity.

Joeckel is quick to note that most public intellectuals have been progressive reformers, whereas Lewis sought to defend traditional orthodoxies. Nor does he deny that Lewis styled himself as a dinosaur, an outsider to the materialist and scientistic assumptions of his age. Even so, Lewis remained incorrigibly modernist in his antimodernism. *Mere Christianity*, for example, became the most celebrated of Lewis's works because it claims to transcend the contingencies of church history and the conflicts of Christian doctrine. It does so in order to defend a basic, bedrock, nonnegotiable kind of Christianity that is supposedly common to all believers in all times and all places.

Lewis's immense modernist success was purchased, however, at considerable cost. He minimized the huge, often nullifying disagreements among Christians about these very matters. Examples of such internecine conflict are not hard to find—from disputes over the oneness of substance between the Father and the Son to arguments over the two natures of Christ, the procession of the Trinity, the nature of baptism and Eucharist, modes of church government and clerical celibacy.

Joeckel is not denying the worth of Lewis's vigorous defenses of Christianity, nor is he disputing the validity of the hundreds of Christian conversions that have been their result. He is pointing out, instead, that Lewis could never have had such broad and deep appeal if he were not employing such Enlightenment notions (to use Lewis's own phrases) as "the law of nature," "innate morality," "objective value," and "conformity to reason." By claiming the essential concord between Christianity and these modernist concepts—though of course the latter were never identified as such—Lewis was able to succeed as did no other 20th century apologist.

Joeckel is perhaps most incisive when he describes Lewis's fiction, except for the Narnian novels and *Till We Have Faces*, as apologues. A term with the same root as apologetics, an apologue is a work of narrative art that seeks to argue a thesis by clothing it in plot and character, image and atmosphere. The message doesn't arise out of the matter, therefore, but totally subordinates it. After reading an apologue, we remember the meaning it conveys far more than its central scenes and personages.

Unlike a genuinely imaginative work of art, an apologue usually has clear and unambiguous import. Never in *The Screwtape Letters*, for example, do we find Screwtape doubting the legitimacy of his demonic enterprise, for Lewis's express aim is to make superlative evil utterly transparent. And while there are moments of

immense wonder and beauty in *Perelandra*—the discovery of solid space amid interplanetary travel, the floating islands and mystical creatures called sorns and hrossa, the nonerotic quality of the naked Green Lady—they serve largely as a staging ground for the intellectual debates between Ransom and Weston.

“Lewis’s fiction,” Joeckel argues, “almost always gravitates toward the expository mode, eager to flesh out arguments and defend claims that lead readers to . . . the truth of Christianity.”

This is not a weakness, Joeckel adds, for it was precisely Lewis’s intention to convey theological truths more than to provide an imaginative experience. Dorothy L. Sayers, a strong Lewis advocate, was nonetheless dissatisfied with such triumphs of apologetics over art. “One trouble about C. S. Lewis,” she wrote, “is his fervent missionary zeal. I welcome his able dialectic [i.e., his skill in argumentation], and he is a tremendous hammer for heretics. But he is apt to think that one should rush into every fray and strike a blow for Christendom, whether or not one is equipped by training and temperament for that particular conflict.”

This was also J. R. R. Tolkien’s complaint when he designated Lewis as “Everyman’s theologian”—a tart term for the populist and subscholarly character of his friend’s apologetic work. Tolkien feared that his fellow Inkling was making dubious pronouncements on matters about which he had not made long and deep study. In a 1958 dustup in the *Christian Century*, the theologian Norman Pittenger brought similar charges against Lewis, chiding him for resorting to straw man accounts of his opponents, especially naturalists. Lewis replied that he was a deliberate simplifier and amateur, a “translator” of complex theological concepts into vernacular terms that ordinary intelligent readers could comprehend.

Pittenger’s prescient reply makes the point that Lewis missed entirely—namely, that he had employed facile Enlightenment means to establish complex Christian ends and thus that he had denied both the subtlety and profundity of mature faith:

> This kind of thing seems to me very *bad* “modernism.” The apologist has two obligations laid upon him: to commend the faith, but at the same time to commend it with absolute integrity of mind, with guarding of style, with nuances, with fine shades, with ambiguity, at those places where these things are indicated as essential to a fully truthful presentation of the faith.

Lewis counterpunched by charging that Pittenger's method would have been "worse than useless." It would have both confused and alarmed the common reader whom Lewis sought to convince: "He would have thought, poor soul, that I [i.e., Lewis] was facing both ways, sitting on the fence, offering at one moment what I withdrew the next." Lewis dodges Pittenger's central concern—that converts made by simplistic modernist means are likely to be locked in a simplistic modernist faith.

Even so ardent a Lewis advocate as Chad Walsh—whose 1949 study entitled *C. S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics* provided the first serious reading of Lewis for American audiences—was put off by Lewis's notorious insistence that Jesus was either "liar, lunatic, or Lord." To this classic logical fallacy of the false dilemma, Walsh wittily retorted, "It is always possible that God can count beyond two." There are many identities that can be ascribed to Jesus, whether rightly or wrongly, other than this notion that he was either bad, mad, or God. N. T. Wright has noted, for example, that Lewis's argument "doesn't work as history, and it backfires dangerously when historical critics question his reading of the Gospels."

Devin Brown and Colin Duriez have written valuable if rather conventional accounts of Lewis the man. Brown is especially adept in explaining Lewis's famous argument for God's existence from the experience of Joy. *Joy* is the English synonym that Lewis chose for the German word *Sehnsucht*. The latter is rooted in the verb *sehnen* (to long for, to yearn after) and the noun *Sucht* (sickness, passion, even rage). Lewis spoke of Joy in the upper case, perhaps fearing that such terms as *yearning* and *passion* might lead readers to dismiss him as an effete and dreamy romantic, an aficionado of sexual sublimation by way of an otherworldly bliss.

Brown shows, instead, that Lewis regarded Joy as the foundational quality of every well-lived human story. It is a natural desire for the supernatural, a fundamental impulse of the soul that leads not to self-abnegation and contempt for the world, but to the supreme delight of participation in God's own life. Not unlike St. Augustine's claim that human hearts are restless because they secretly or openly seek rest in God, Lewis regarded Joy as the driving desire to enter the realm wherein the earth's splendors have their transcendent origin and sustenance and end. That Lewis belongs to the Platonist-Augustinian tradition can hardly be doubted.

Duriez, who like Brown is a veteran laborer in the vineyards of Lewis studies, stresses Lewis's capacity for friendship. He pays careful attention to Lewis's remarkable loyalty to his alcoholic brother Warnie; his childhood companion and

lifelong confidant Arthur Greeves; his tough-minded Scots tutor William Kirkpatrick; his “adoptive mother” Janie Moore and her daughter Maureen; the one real philosopher among the Inklings, Owen Barfield; the magic-obsessed novelist Charles Williams; as well as Tolkien and Davidman. Though each of these friendships is worth book-length treatment, Duriez deftly deals with them in short compass.

The burden of Monika Hilder’s book is to answer the charge that Lewis was a sexist. Hilder admits that Lewis’s formal pronouncements, when isolated from the totality of his work, sound outrageously misogynist. In his *Preface to “Paradise Lost,”* for example, Lewis declares that “whether the male is, or is not, the superior sex, the masculine is certainly the superior gender.” Yet Hilder shows that Lewis’s deepest sympathies can legitimately be called feminine. For example, the virtues of the classical hero—conquest, deceit, pride, and especially “martial valor . . . in establishing worldly power”—are usually regarded as masculine, but they rarely appear in Lewis’s work except to be disdained. By contrast, the spiritual heroism embedded in Judeo-Christian tradition—care, submission, obedience, truthfulness, humility, and especially mercy—are usually regarded as feminine. Lewis’s fiction is filled with characters who embody such qualities.

Salwa Khoddam, another veteran of Lewis scholarship, brings a refreshingly Orthodox vision, especially with its emphasis on the iconic imagination and the doctrine of theosis. Unlike much of the Western focus on the Atonement and thus on redemption from sin, the Eastern church is centered upon our participation in the divine life itself, so that nature and spirit are not at war with each other. Khoddam observes that, in both *The Magician’s Nephew* and *The Last Battle*, Lewis envisions Aslan’s country as lying beyond the borders of the world, yet also as having its many places of mysterious entry into the world.

The main breakthrough made evident in these books is that after World War II Lewis often turned away from defending Christianity against both its cultured and benighted despisers. He directed his energies less to discursive expositions of the faith than to imaginative explorations of it. Don W. King, in an anthology of his own essays on and reviews of Lewis, discerns this shift, especially in treating Lewis’s poetry. When writing in this most concrete and image-dependent form, he is least able to offer pat answers to wrenching difficulties.

In “After Prayers, Lie Cold,” Lewis declares that after having bedtime devotions it is best to regard the frosty bed as analogous to the grave, the wintry end that awaits

us. It will bury all our frenetic striving, bringing rest to the body and mercy to the soul. The warmth awaiting at dawn may not be a token of the final Resurrection so much as a return to the furor of the daily fray:

> Be not too quickly warm again. Lie cold; consent
> To weariness' and pardon's watery element.
> Drink up the bitter water, breathe the chilly death;
> Soon enough comes the riot of our blood and breath.

Rowan Williams, one of the finest guides to the dark undercurrents that ripple beneath the Narnian books, interprets them as fictional "supposals," as Lewis himself called them. Rather than dispensing ready-made answers, Lewis brings fictional life to such questions as these: What would it be like for a Christian to do daily battle with an evil whose chief tactic is deception, or to travel to unfallen planets, or to inhabit a world populated with talking beasts, or to confront God incarnate in animal form?

When Lewis dealt with such "what if" questions, and when he put himself under the constraints of authentic art, he was often able to throw off the modernist mantle of rationalist objectivity, of timeless and placeless morality, of the false notion that the world's religions and myths are variations on a single theme, and thus of the rhetorical point-scoring that readily crowns Christianity as the true fulfillment of them all.

In the seven Narnian novels, in *Till We Have Faces*, in *A Grief Observed*, as well as many of his poems, we find a Lewis who speaks from inside the imaginative and confessional worlds he narrates, not as a modernist justifier of the faith. Above all, we meet Lewis the Christian who knows that to believe is to be engaged with the darkest doubts and deepest troubles.

In 1940, for example, in *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis had confronted the issue of undeserved suffering. "What seems to us good may not be good in His eyes," he wrote, "and what seems to us evil may not be evil." He then offered a rather glib answer: "The Divine 'goodness' differs from ours . . . not as white differs from black but as a perfect circle from a child's first effort to draw a wheel." In *A Grief Observed* , published in 1961 in response to his wife Joy Davidman's death from cancer, he abandons such trite and assuring analogies. Instead, Lewis confesses the sheer tyranny of grief, as it obliterated not only his confidence in God but also rendered

Joy herself terribly unreal. “Reality, looked at steadily, is unbearable.” “There is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it.” “My idea of God . . . has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast.”

Nowhere in Lewis’s apologetic works do we encounter such humbled and vexed belief as this. Yet he had anticipated something like it in *Till We Have Faces* five years earlier, in 1956. This pre-Christian recasting of the Cupid and Psyche myth is a genuine work of imaginative fiction containing no candy-coated theodicy. Perhaps because he wrote it in close collaboration with Joy Davidman, Lewis creates a convincing female protagonist named Orual.

Though far from innocent, she has a legitimate complaint against divinity. Hers is not a cry so much as a scream against the deity whose exactions, as Job and Jeremiah both protested, would be beyond bearing had he not borne them for us: “The Divine Nature wounds and perhaps destroys us,” Orual confesses, “merely by being what it is.” Only when she embraces this enigma does she also learn that true faith consists in nothing less than saying “Yes” to this unknown God. Here Lewis hints that the Unknowable has been made agonizingly yet graciously known in Israel and Christ and the Church. This word comes not from Lewis the apologist so much as from Lewis the artist. It is this Lewis and this God who remain inexhaustible.