



A Tame Movie: A Review of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*

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C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, directed by Andrew Adamson, is a feast for the eyes. The CGI animation sets your own mind thinking the Lion, Beavers, and other talking beasts are actually real. And the snow-laden forest discovered through the wardrobe is convincing. The details and special-effects promise the viewer of great things to come.

The first section of the movie is delightfully magical. The back story of the war gets us into the heads of the four Pevensie children and their sense of aloneness and struggle. Then, as I imagined it, we meet the ornery, fearful

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character of "The Macready" at the professor's house. Lucy finds Narnia the way we found it: the lamp burning bright and a quizzical Mr. Tumnus meeting her (though he could have looked and acted less youthful for being over 100 years old). Their exchange at the faun's house as well as his virtuous renouncing of the Witch carried the same storytelling pathos and virtue of the Lewis classic.

But as soon as they meet Mr. Beaver's cockney accent the magic starts waning. The movie falls through solid character development. At one point, Mr. Beaver even mocks his wife's cooking (the real Mr. Beaver is too gentlemanly for that!). And the magic fades until the movie leaves the viewer imaginatively parched, at least in comparison to the real story.

The movie self-consciously glances over its shoulder to meet the expectations of those looking for Tolkien, a sort of WWPJD? ("What would Peter Jackson do?") But comparing Tolkien's and Lewis's stories is an exercise in apples and oranges.

In April of this year, Jonalyn and I attended the Biola media conference which highlighted a live

interview with some of the key people that brought Narnia to the big screen. One of the gentlemen was in charge of the Integrity Department of Disney, an entire department devoted to preserving the story and spirit of the original text. He assured us that Narnia would be a faithful rendition of the book and that Lewis's own step-son, Douglas Gresham, would be overseeing the process.

After viewing the first preview for Narnia, the floor was opened for questions. Our excitement was peaked by the preview. A few minor, positive questions arose. Jonalyn and I stewed a bit in our seats over what we heard until Jonalyn popped her hand up.

When called upon, she said, "As a schoolteacher, I am skeptical of the Integrity Department of Disney. Not only has Disney distorted many of the old fairy-tales but they have also, like with Pocahontas, falsely retold history itself. I have to re-teach history in my classroom because Disney doesn't teach it correctly. I am fearful of Disney getting its hands on this story, especially in light of Lewis's concerns with Disney's productions.

How much am I really supposed to trust the Integrity Department?"

Many had a similar feeling as was evident in the moans, stirs, and whispers when she sat down. Sadly, the question was dodged at the front. There was no explanation or philosophy given as to how faithful is faithful enough.

Our fears, however, came true. And the largest disappointment was the Lion. Aslan was called the King of Narnia in the movie, but, in the book, Aslan carries the mystique of Gandalf—there is much more to this King Above All High Kings than meets the eye. Only with Aslan, he is even greater than Gandalf. That's the magic that draws you near. On the screen, we see that Aslan does not have that awareness or the all-seeing eye. Aslan tells Peter he is from Finchly in England. Peter is amazed at his omniscience. But Aslan goes on, "And the Beaver also told me..." hinting that Aslan didn't know that much about Peter but what others have told him. These little details detract in big ways from his character.

In the scene overlooking Cair Paravel, Peter is told he will one day rule as king. Aslan explains there is a deep magic that governs all, including him. Aslan comes across more like a creature than a god. The ideas behind the words could go different ways. If I didn't know better, I would say Aslan is using the language of pantheism. Something far from Lewisian thought.

In Lewis's thought, the only reason Aslan would be bound to the magic is because the magic is tied up in his character. He is not subject to it as much as it is part of him. It is magic designed from the creation of Narnia, which his own Father put into the world (a Father that is never mentioned in the movie, but is referred to in the book as the Father of Aslan and Emperor-Over-Sea).

Aslan eventually surrenders himself to the White Witch to appease the Deep Magic and save Edmund's life. The Deep Magic says that treacherous people belong to her and must be destroyed on the Stone Table. Aslan's death is portrayed well enough. We see into his eyes as he suffers. He is a Suffering Savior. After he dies, I want to want to weep. But I cannot. There is a

brief mention of Love (which awkwardly enters the Witch's speech), but the movie has not allowed me to know Aslan enough to understand the depth of his sacrifice. Susan and Lucy run to the table and weep all night. I want to believe them. If I import my memory of the book into the experience, I do believe them. But in the movie, I think, "They haven't known this guy very long and they don't really have much of a relationship. I suspect they should be upset about his death, but not much more than the death of anyone else."

As for the resurrection, it was a minor role in the movie and quickly over with. No morning Romp. No sure and full roar from the Great Lion whose conquering death is only the greatest thing to happen in both Narnia and our own world from time immemorial. Just a simple hurry-up-and-get-it-over-with explanation ready by Liam Neeson about the Deeper Magic and a speedy roar as the camera fades back to the embellished battle scenes.

I was expecting the resurrection scene to be skipped as the focal point of the movie moved more and more to overemphasize the children. Father Christmas makes the abominable remark

that it is the presence of the children that provides the hope that is thawing Narnia. Hope thaws snow? This lifts the movie out of Narnia and into our present subjectivist culture. No, no. The truth is that Aslan is on the move. *He* is thawing the snow! *He*, not the children, is Narnia's only hope. The children have parts to play, but the power comes from a transcendent Master of Ceremonies.

So, on and on, the emphasis is thrown at the children. Aslan is shoved out of the spotlight. And his claws, to echo Dorothy L. Sayers, are pared.

Neeson is a fine actor. I enjoy the way he plays his roles. But in this movie, he felt hurried. Proper weight was not given to the words of Aslan (or even proper weight to the words of the Witch for that matter). I struggled to believe much of what he was saying.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, and all of Lewis's fiction, is layered. When I read this book, I find layers of meaning that draw me back again and again. The book, though written for children, is not a children's book. It is neither trite nor simple nor safe. But it is good. I see Lewis's vision

of myth that makes the world sacred because Aslan has made it so.

In this movie, that deeper, mythical layer, the one that makes this book a classic, is missing. The deeper magic rises and falls on one point. Lucy herself says it in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, "It isn't Narnia, you know. It's you. How can we go on living never meeting you?" The rule of thumb for the Chronicles of Narnia is the same as when we read the Scriptures. If you remove Aslan from the center, the story fails.

That is the point the Integrity Department at Disney, Andrew Adamson, and dare I say, Douglas Gresham seemed to miss. We don't really MEET Aslan. We meet a tame lion.

The reason for this is understood when we read Andrew Adamson himself. As co-writer and director, he said, "I actually set out really not to make the book so much as my memory of the book because I realized in reading the book as an adult that it was kind of like the house that you grew up in, much smaller than I remembered." Then he explains why he thinks the book is a classic, "I

think in retrospect...so many people have liked [the books] over generations of readings, is the idea of the possibility of imaginary places existing." He adds that he thinks the story is primarily about the empowerment of children. And I think he soundly succeeds in conveying his ideas.

Imaginary places are fun and exciting. But this imaginary place, Narnia, is not so much an escape as it is a place that makes our world more meaningful. It gives us eyes to see that, not only are children capable of responsibility, but that our whole world means more than the machineries of modernity and the mindlessness of postmodern political correctness. In the medieval mind, even the trees have souls. We go to Narnia to remember that. We go to Narnia to learn that our world is no less of an epic and has no less of a god.

Aslan says, "It is finished," after the Witch is killed in the movie. As a viewer I thought the line was a fine allusion to the Cross. But when Adamson was asked about the line being a Biblical allusion, he said, "I actually honestly didn't know that."¹

¹ Adamson quotations from Paul Fischer interview with Andrew Adamson at darkhorizons.com.

I applaud the attempt of this movie, but I wouldn't call it a success for Lewis. And I'm reluctant to encourage them to make the next book, *Prince Caspian*. Based on what I've seen, I'm not sure the writers yet have the depth to understand Lewis, nor the heart to say it.

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