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**Peter J. Schakel, *The Way into Narnia: A Reader's Guide*
Review by Shannon C. Taylor
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Peter J. Schakel, *The Way into Narnia: A Reader's Guide*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005. 202 pp. ISBN 978-0802829849.

Thanks to the film industry, the past decade witnessed a renaissance in fantasy, or what Lewis and Tolkien termed 'the otherworldly' (pp. 31-32). While both authors would have argued that this natural human longing is far better ministered to by the written word, one can be thankful to the entertainment industry for introducing good stories to the public. Alongside the supernatural stories of comic book heroes and boy wizards, the masterful tales of C. S. Lewis shine invitingly. While long adored by faithful readers, and admired for his scholarship by others, his entrance into the entertainment world has renewed interest in Lewis's life, work, and philosophy among critics and readers alike. Biographies and literary criticism, anthologies and commentaries have blossomed in the past decade to an almost overwhelming abundance. It is refreshing, in a way, that Peter J. Schakel's *The Way into Narnia: A Reader's Guide* does not add to this scholarly abundance. It does, however, offer something significant and necessary for bridging the gap between scholastic appreciation of Lewis and that of his general readership. *The Way into Narnia* serves as a reliable and accessible primer to Lewis studies, perfect for those desiring deeper appreciation for Lewis's fiction or for those wishing to foster such an appreciation in others.

Peter Schakel, professor of English at Hope College and a Lewis scholar, acknowledges his book's introductory purpose in its preface: 'Perhaps, as the most basic of the three books,¹ this is the one I should have written first: the "guide" pointing out the "way" into Narnia and preparing for the journey. But I needed to write the others first to get to know the Chronicles well enough to do this one' (p. ix). Indeed, Schakel handles his material with a sense of close familiarity and confidence, clarifying foundational ideas and offering illuminating insights, primarily those connected to his argument that 'the best way to enter Narnia is to read the Chronicles as fairy tales' (p. ix). This theme also permits Schakel to discuss much of Lewis's philosophy of art. Such an introduction serves the reader well,

promising to enrich his understanding not only of the Chronicles, but of Lewis's works as a whole.

To this end, Schakel lays a strong foundation in the book's opening sections. He begins with an overview of Lewis's life, focusing primarily on the events most directly influential to his later writing of the Chronicles. He also addresses many questions regarding Lewis's influences and writing process, concluding his biographic section with an overview of the series's publication and editing, suggesting an order of reading most engaging to the reader's imagination. (Schakel argues for an initial reading according to publication rather than the chronology of Narnian history [pp. 13-21].)

He then turns to defining the fairy-tale genre, drawing extensively from Tolkien's essay 'On Fairy-Stories', which greatly reflected and influenced Lewis's own understanding of the genre. This section provides some of *The Way into Narnia's* most helpful clarifications, as the terms fairy-tale, fantasy, and myth are all heavy with misleading connotations. Schakel sifts Tolkien's thoughts for their essential meanings, offering an easily grasped (but not too simplified) explanation of each term as these authors would have understood them. Tolkien's defense of Faërie is key to gaining a better appreciation of the fairy-tale genre, as it defies the common understanding of such fiction as merely entertaining or, worse, escapist. Tolkien and Lewis both adhered to a higher view of the literary craft, believing that it held great power and influence, and thus put a great responsibility on the writer. Both agreed that in their very nature, fairy stories (encompassing aspects of fantasy, myth, and legend) spoke poignantly and directly to the imagination. Schakel also focuses on Lewis's intentional choice of the fairy-tale form as a vehicle for moral and religious truths, and emphasizes the elements of the fairy-tale genre which especially suit it to such a work: '[F]airy stories, fantasy, myth, and religious experiences all create a powerful imaginative and emotional appeal, a sense of wonder and longing, that can be satisfied only by something beyond the realm of this world. That, for many people, is the effect they experience as they read the Chronicles of Narnia' (p. 38).

The book's remaining chapters take each Chronicle in turn, evaluating them for the elements of fairy-tale they present and the thematic or spiritual qualities these elements convey. Schakel walks the reader through each book's basic plot, stopping to analyze characters, settings, symbolism, allusions, and the structure of the plot itself. While the analysis offered is not comprehensive, by focusing on a few key themes for each book, he allows the reader to follow his example of reading critically, to delve deeper and hopefully enrich her appreciation with each successive reading.

Perhaps the most original offering, and most useful in extending Lewis scholarship, is found in the appendix. Schakel includes annotations for each Chronicle, focusing particularly on definitions of archaic or obscure words, as well as some literary, cultural or historical allusions. He also cross-references key allusions, themes, or metaphors used throughout the series and in Lewis's nonfiction, reflecting the imaginative comprehensiveness of their author. For example, here is Schakel's illumination of Bacchus turning water into wine during the festivities that conclude Prince Caspian:

Bacchus turning water into wine is the Narnian counterpart to what Jesus did at the marriage in Cana (John 2:1-11). Lewis, in *Miracles*, calls that a Miracle of the Old Creation, a sudden and local instance of something that happens every year, more slowly, 'as part of the Natural order.' God 'is the reality behind the false god Bacchus.' At Cana, 'God, now incarnate, short circuits the process: makes wine in a moment.' (p. 134)

These annotations are only a beginning, but they serve to greatly enhance one's reading, and make one long, as Schakel himself does, for a complete annotated edition of Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. Schakel also documents his research with a moderate index and bibliography, further equipping his readers for their own investigation.

Lewis once wittily called using the fairy tale genre to carry essential truths the writer's attempt to 'steal past the watchful dragons' (qtd. in Schakel, p. 114). Peter J. Schakel's *The Way into Narnia* teaches readers how to peek behind the veil and behold the literary power at work on their imaginations. Schakel's guide stands both as a refreshing reminder of the basics and as a beneficial beginning for Lewis studies. Thus, readers familiar with Lewis's stories, as well as readers new to them, will find that Schakel succeeded in his hope to 'enrich [their] imaginative experience with the *Chronicles*' (p. x).

Shannon C. Taylor

1. Peter Schakel has written two books on Lewis prior to *The Way into Narnia: Reading with the Heart: The Way into Narnia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) *Imagination and the Arts in C.S. Lewis: Journeying into Narnia and Other Worlds* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002).