
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

the
Magician's
Book

A SKEPTIC'S
ADVENTURES

in
NARNIA

by
LAURA MILLER



A conversation with the author of *The Magician's Book*

Laura Miller talks with Rebecca Traister of Salon.com

How did you first encounter Narnia?

I was given *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by my second-grade teacher, Wilanne Belden, whom I worshipped and am still in touch with. I interviewed her for *The Magician's Book*. When I asked how she came to give me this thing that would become the whole center of my inner world, she said, "You were just a kid who needed to read this book." What surprised me was that she had had *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* for quite a while, probably around ten years, before she actually tried giving it to one of her students to read. I was the first one. And it was a huge success.

Your obsession with the Chronicles did not stop at one reading?

I became obsessed and read them so many times that I practically have them memorized—except for *The Last Battle*, because, as with many people, that is my least favorite of the seven. I saved up my money to buy my own copies. My mother gave me a paperback set, but I wanted the hardcovers. And I'm not a collector; this was the only thing about which I've ever said, "I have to have it."

Then, when I was thirteen and in the process of trying to track down other books that would give me the same kind of thrill, I discovered [in a book of literary criticism] that there was all this Christian symbolism in the Chronicles. That completely shocked me. I was so horrified, because I had been raised as a Catholic—not a superstrict or guilt-heavy Catholic, but nevertheless Catholic—and

I wasn't really a believer. I wasn't into church or religion in any way. For me, Narnia was everything I would want life to be, and none of the things I disliked, such as church and religion and the Bible. The idea that this thing I was trying to get away from was secretly lurking in my place of refuge, in my most private, cherished thing—I remember feeling physically nauseated by that, deceived and betrayed.

But you did believe in Narnia, if not Christianity.

Yes, when I was small. It's like Neil Gaiman told me: he had no doubt that this was true and that these things had happened. I particularly loved the creatures of classical mythology—I thought the centaurs were so cool! And the trees that were people. But these are things that have nothing to do with Christianity. They come from Lewis's background as a literary scholar. He had read everything and had been strongly influenced by *The Faerie Queene* and many more obscure narratives, including material that is older than Christianity and is pervasive in Western culture. A lot of what we're responding to in Narnia, for example, is the ideal of Arcadia, from classical mythology.

With *The Magician's Book*, I wanted to pull that stuff out from the background because it tends to get overwhelmed by everyone's perception of the Christian message. Lewis was trying to integrate all of it in his imagination. Some of his critics, especially Tolkien, would complain that it was a random crazy patchwork—Santa Claus is there, and Norse mythology—and Tolkien felt it wasn't consistent. But it *is* consistent in that it held everything meaningful to its author. That's what hits child readers. What I said to my teacher was, "I didn't realize anyone else had an imagination like mine." That has come up again and again: it's as if the author of this book had reached into my head and found the things I wanted most, and made them into a story.

Your path—of ardent belief in Narnia, and then a rejection and repudiation of your childhood devotion, and then your return and reckoning—actually mimics what many people consider a religious journey.

Yes, and very consciously so. The story of naive faith, and then loss of faith, and then the recuperation of something that is not faith, because it's not unquestioning. . . . It's what Philip Pullman, who is a guiding light in some ways for this project, would call "experience." It's not just a loss of innocence: it's a different path to grace. My belief in the power of books is embodied in these seven books, with their ability to have an infinite number of meanings, to have meanings that the author didn't intend, or that the author put in there without being aware of it.

My feeling of being cut off from that wellspring of my imagination during the adolescence of my reading life, which is the middle of the book, is like a loss of faith. Then there is the later process of working through how and why I loved these books as a child and continued to love them as an adult, to get to something much bigger than my early belief in them.

Can you talk a bit about Philip Pullman's influence on that final stage of your journey?

In Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials*, Lyra, the young heroine, has been able to read a divination instrument without really trying, thanks to the grace of being unself-conscious. When she becomes self-aware with puberty, she loses that grace and can no longer read it. A character comes to her and explains that there is another kind of grace you can find through experience. If she devotes herself to studying the instrument, she can reach a point where she'll be able to read it even better than she did before.

When you're writing children's books, or writing about children's books, there is this feeling that the loss of innocence is only

a loss. Lots of the great children's authors were obsessed with childhood and their desire to go back to childhood. But there's something adolescent about just being disillusioned. Many people, in any situation—it could be a love relationship, or how you feel about Barack Obama—get stuck at the stage of disillusionment. Pullman is saying that you have to persevere, to put effort into it. If you do that, you can come to an enlarged understanding that is, in its own way, a kind of grace.

And you pursued that enlarged understanding, in part, by pursuing Lewis himself?

One treasure I discovered was his literary criticism. He wrote two major works, *The Allegory of Love* and his volume of *The Oxford History of English Literature*, which is mostly about Spenser. Those inspiring books show an enthusiasm and appetite for the literary experience that you rarely see in any academic, and in precious few literary critics. They helped me to reengage with Lewis as a writer. I also tried to track down everything in biographies, in his letters, his diaries, and other writings that would tell me what had contributed to Narnia.

I came to see how my own relationship with the Chronicles continued without my realizing it. As an English major, I read a lot of the books that Lewis loved and I also loved them — Dante, Milton, Spenser, Austen. I've been *recognizing* them all along because Lewis put all of them into Narnia. His books made a reader out of me by preparing my mind and heart for an imaginative experience that would last for the rest of my life.

When I was in college, very strict realism was the only thing to do in American literature, and it was hard to explain why you would want to read a book that had magic in it. In *The Allegory of Love*, one of the things Lewis explains is that a story that's not strictly realistic can nevertheless be profoundly truthful. [An author may use]

witches or centaurs in order to tell a story about a human experience that transcends realism. It can be universal in a way that realism can't.

There's also something religious in your desire to move beyond your naive faith in Narnia to a world in which you could pick apart books. Your experience of reading Animal Farm, alongside learning of Lewis's Christian message, is tantamount to biting the apple and getting thrown out of Eden.

I wanted to know more, I wanted to understand more, I wanted to read more, I wanted to be a grown-up, to have the knowledge and power and responsibility that comes with that. Part of that knowledge was admitting to myself that there was no Narnia, that it had been invented by a man. I had been like Neil Gaiman, thinking, "This has to be true; this is too good not to be true," which is actually how Lewis felt about God. He wanted God too much for God not to be real.

Then I discovered the idea that a story can have a secret meaning, that it doesn't just describe events. As a child, when you think that stories are things that happened to people who actually existed, that's all you need to know. But when you come to see a story as created by a person who has intentions, the story itself can have intentions, such as the intention to teach you something. That's the most rudimentary criticism you learn as a beginning student: What does this symbolize? These pigs stand for certain revolutionaries and Boxer the horse stands for the proletariat. Once you see stories as having some purpose, they cease to exist simply for the sake of their wonderfulness.

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Questions and topics for discussion

1. Laura Miller was introduced to the Chronicles of Narnia by her teacher and was immediately swept into their magical world. Describe your own discovery and reaction to them.
2. When Miller writes about her most powerful reading experiences while growing up, she cites *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Five Children and It*, and the *Little House on the Prairie* series. Name some of the formative books of your childhood and discuss why they were important to you. What about them has stayed with you into adulthood?
3. In the excerpt that opens *The Magician's Book*, Lucy encounters the best story she has ever read. Afterward, she is unable to remember what happened in the story or to reread it. Have you ever lost yourself in a story as Lucy did? What were you reading? How old were you? Discuss why you think you were able to forget yourself so completely. How do our daily lives affect the way we read? What does this say about the role readers play in the creation of a story's meaning?
4. Neil Gaiman and Jonathan Franzen note the importance of C. S. Lewis's books in their own lives and work. Discuss the similarities and differences between their books and the Chronicles of Narnia. Have you noticed Lewis's influence on other writers? If so, which writers? And why does their work remind you of the Pevensie children's adventures?

5. Does Miller's description of C. S. Lewis's life and personality alter your view of his novels? In what ways? Have your opinions of other books changed after discovering personal details about the author? Why does biographical information affect our interpretation?
6. Laura Miller writes that she will not address the religious symbolism in the Chronicles, focusing instead on the stories and their creator. Do you agree with her decision? Are there other aspects of the books you would have liked Miller to address?
7. When Miller discovered Narnia's Christian messages, her feeling of betrayal drove her away. Eventually, she returned and reexamined the books as an adult. Why was she upset by her new understanding? Discuss the role that the passage from innocence to understanding played in her reaction. Is one experience more valid than another?
8. Part memoir, part biography, and part literary criticism, *The Magician's Book* touches on the many factors that shaped the author's relationship with the novels. Discuss the extent to which each reader's knowledge informs and shapes his or her interpretations of stories.
9. At its core, *The Magician's Book* is the story of Laura Miller's attempt to regain her childhood enchantment with the Chronicles. Have you reread the Chronicles of Narnia as an adult? If so, how has your enjoyment or understanding of them changed? Do you think it is possible to regain the childhood experience of reading? Why?

Laura Miller's suggestions for further reading

While I was writing *The Magician's Book*, I often found myself talking with parents whose kids adored Narnia. A few of them asked me to recommend similar titles for their children. Since I remember how eagerly I searched for such books when I was a girl, it's a request I take very seriously.

Beyond the best-known classics—*The Wizard of Oz*, the Harry Potter series, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Hobbit*, etc.—here are a few suggestions. Some of these books I loved as a child; others I've discovered since. You can find more information about these books and additional recommendations, as well as a full bibliography for *The Magician's Book* and related materials, at www.magiciansbook.com.

Joan Aiken, *The Serial Garden*

Lloyd Alexander, *The Prydain Chronicles*, beginning with *The Book of Three*

Susan Cooper, *The Dark Is Rising* series, beginning with *Over Sea, Under Stone*

Edward Eager, *Half Magic*

Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*

Tove Jansson, *Finn Family Moomintroll*

Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*

Andrew Lang, editor, *The Red Fairy Book*

Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*

Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*

George MacDonald, *The Princess and Curdie*

China Miéville, *Un Lun Dun*

E. Nesbit, *Five Children and It*

Garth Nix, *Sabriel*

Philip Pullman, His Dark Materials trilogy, beginning with *The Golden Compass*

Lemony Snicket, A Series of Unfortunate Events series

P. L. Travers, *Mary Poppins*

Ysabeau S. Wilce, *Flora Segunda*

Diana Wynne Jones, The Chronicles of Chrestomanci, beginning with *Charmed Life*

Laura Miller is a journalist and critic. She is a cofounder of Salon .com, where she is currently a staff writer, and is the editor of *The Salon.com Readers Guide to Contemporary Authors*. She contributes regularly to the *New York Times Book Review*, and her work has also appeared in *The New Yorker*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Time*, and other publications. She lives in New York.

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