

HOW TO READ C. S. LEWIS: A Browser's Guide to the Beginning and the Continuing Reading of C. S. Lewis

by Paul F. Ford, Ph.D., founding director of the Southern California C. S. Lewis Society

"This C. S. Lewis fellow — I see his books everywhere. My friends quote him all the time. Some people tell me it's worth reading everything he wrote. He can't be that good, can he? And I don't like _____ (fill in the blank with 'science fiction' or 'theology' or 'philosophy' or 'children's books' or 'poetry' or 'fiction'). Won't he be over my head?"

These statements reflect the views of many people toward "Jack" Lewis. They probably don't know that his books have sold tens of millions of copies around the world. And they aren't aware that he was part of a circle of famous writers which included J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *THE HOBBIT* and *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*. And it probably doesn't concern them that he was a famous unbeliever-turned-believer or that he was one of the most popular lecturers at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. But they have been urged to read "something by C. S. Lewis" and they want to know where to begin.

Or perhaps they've seen the delightful three-part PBS Wonderworks series *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, *The Silver Chair*, and *Prince Caspian and the Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and now want to read the original stories. Or perhaps they've attended "Shadowlands" and want to more about Lewis and his wife Joy.

If this describes you, this guide is written for you. It is a first guide to reading one of the most popular authors of the twentieth century.

It is my experience that if you begin well (that is, with the kind of book you like to read), you will go on to read at least a few more Lewis books and you will enjoy each book that you read. So this is a beginner's guide. I will lead you to what most people think are the Lewis books best to start with and I will point out where you might go next.

In every library and nearly every bookstore in North America there are several sections where a reader can find books by C. S. Lewis. You can answer your own question — "Where do I begin with C. S. Lewis?" — by remembering what kind of books you like and going to that particular section in the library or bookstore and looking for the Lewis books there. Come with me on a tour of your library or bookstore. The book buyer in you is fortunate in the fact that most of Lewis's books are in paperback.

As we step through the door, let me tell you briefly how I started to read Lewis. My

first (and still favorite) Lewis book was *THE GREAT DIVORCE* which is about ghosts from hell on a one-day-off bus trip to heaven. I had heard a talk based on *THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS*, letters from a senior devil to a junior devil about how to tempt people. This upside-down look so intrigued me that I went to a bookstore to get a copy of this infernal correspondence but it was out of stock. But they did have *THE GREAT DIVORCE* which proved to be nearly the other side of the story: how angels and saints try to persuade their visitors to let go of whatever it is (shame, greed, lust, revenge, self-pity, etc.) that keeps them in hell. I can't recommend this book too highly.

But let's go over to the first section we see and look for Lewis's books there.

"Fiction"

Here you're sure to find *TILL WE HAVE FACES* which many readers consider Lewis's masterpiece. If you like books which deeply penetrate human psychology, this novel is for you. It's about a physically unattractive woman's jealousy and love for her prettier younger sister. The older woman becomes queen after the death of her abusive father. If you know the Psyche and Eros myth, you'll love Lewis's retelling of it in *TILL WE HAVE FACES*.

Here you might also find a copy of Lewis's earliest novel *THE PILGRIM'S REGRESS*, an allegory like John Bunyan's *THE PILGRIM'S PROGRESS*, except that the hero of Lewis's book is escaping from the repressive religion of his childhood and is going in search of the paradise of his dreams. You'll learn a lot from this wayward pilgrim's adventures but this is a book you'll have to spend some time with.

There are other Lewis books you might find in this section (see the checklist at the end of this essay), but also under

"Fantasy/Science Fiction"

Here you can be sure to find the Ransom Trilogy: *OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET*, *PERELANDRA*, and *THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH*. I'm not a great reader of science fiction but these are wonderful books. The first two take a British university professor, Dr. Ransom, to two different planets in our solar system where he uncovers the real reasons why our earth is called the "silent planet" by the rest of the rational beings of the universe and why our moon has a dark side. The last book, *THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH*, tells the story of the fight between the good and evil forces on earth and of the struggle of a wife and husband to save their marriage from boredom and phoniness. This book is especially well-crafted by Lewis who mirrors the woman's resistance to being "taken in" by the good forces with the man's readiness to surrender everything of value to belong to the forces of evil.

Let's wander over to a section you may or may not spend time browsing in when you visit your library or bookstore:

"Children's Books"

Here you can find boxed sets of the seven CHRONICLES OF NARNIA, as well as the individual volumes. These are perhaps Lewis's most popular books (they've sold nearly 30 million copies). I wish I had read them as a child; as it was, I didn't read them until I was 20 and then secretly — I didn't want to be caught reading a children's book, no matter how much I loved the author.

There's no better book-gift for a child than THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA. If you can afford only one, start with THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE; this is the first one Lewis wrote. From 1950 until the summer of 1994 Macmillan Publishing Company was selling the American editions (which had changes Lewis made for his American audiences, changes listed in my book COMPANION TO NARNIA in the "Using the Companion" section under "Variants"). Then, in the summer of 1994, HarperCollins Publishers released the worldwide editions based on the British original edition. (The chief obvious difference between the editions is that Macmillan followed the order of original publication and HarperCollins follows the order of internal chronology.)

You'll get the most out of reading them in the following order:

- 1) THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE
- 2) PRINCE CASPIAN
- 3) THE VOYAGE OF THE 'DAWN TREADER'
- 4) THE HORSE AND HIS BOY
- 5) THE SILVER CHAIR
- 6) THE MAGICIAN'S NEPHEW
- 7) THE LAST BATTLE

Though Lewis wrote these books for ten- to twelve-year-olds, even children eight years or younger like them a lot, especially when the Chronicles are read aloud to them. Lewis's correspondence with children who wrote him about the Chronicles is available in C. S. LEWIS'S LETTERS TO CHILDREN. And if you or your children want to understand the Chronicles as Lewis intended them, you'll want to get a copy of my book, COMPANION TO NARNIA, which is a guide for re-readers (I have reread them at least twenty times). A lovely book illustrated by Pauline Baynes, the original illustrator of the Chronicles, is Brian Sibley's THE LAND OF NARNIA.

Now come with me to the section in which I first found the most Lewis books:

“Philosophy/Religion”

If you didn't find them in fiction (which they are), THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS and THE GREAT DIVORCE are almost always in this section. In fact you might find them in a boxed set with four other titles: MERE CHRISTIANITY, THE PROBLEM OF PAIN, MIRACLES, and THE ABOLITION OF MAN.

The last is Lewis's philosophy of education and, in spite of the subject, is written very readably (it's also good background to the Ransom trilogy). MIRACLES is a layman's preliminary study of the relationship between science and religion; this short volume will reward the serious study you will want to give it. THE PROBLEM OF PAIN is Lewis's attempt to explain how pain and evil can exist in a world which Christians claim is made by an all-good and all-powerful God. If you read this one along with Lewis's own diary of his agony after his wife's death, A GRIEF OBSERVED, you'll see why Lewis is acclaimed as a compassionate thinker (and you'll see where the power of "Shadowlands" comes from).

Lewis was also a radio broadcaster in England during World War II; his three sets of talks on the basics of Christianity (THE CASE FOR CHRISTIANITY, CHRISTIAN BEHAVIOR, and BEYOND PERSONALITY) are published in MERE CHRISTIANITY. This book is a perfect example of Lewis's gift for concrete, practical, imaginative writing: he always combines anything abstract with a good story or a vivid picture.

One other collection of broadcast talks (which Lewis did for American radio) is THE FOUR LOVES. This is a perfect book for anyone wanting to know more about family love, friendship love, sexual love, and Christian love. This makes a good wedding or anniversary present or a good friendship gift.

There are a number of collections of Lewis's essays and addresses and sermons (he was a standing-room-only speaker in England). The one Lewis book I'd have to have with me on a desert island is THE WEIGHT OF GLORY AND OTHER ADDRESSES; the title sermon and a few others are worth their weight in gold. GOD IN THE DOCK, THE GRAND MIRACLE, and CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS, contain a whole assortment of Lewis's essays essential to understanding the man's thinking. Lewis himself put together the collection THE WORLD'S LAST NIGHT which is full of goodies. And Lewis's collection of the spiritual wisdom of the man who was Lewis's greatest teacher, GEORGE MACDONALD: AN ANTHOLOGY, may be the most important key to understanding Lewis himself.

If you are looking for guidance in prayer, REFLECTIONS ON THE PSALMS is Lewis's thinking on how to pray the Scriptures and LETTERS TO MALCOLM, CHIEFLY ON PRAYER is a series of insightful and moving letters from Lewis to a

fictional friend about the many challenges of personal prayer and faith. His real correspondence with an American woman, *LETTERS TO AN AMERICAN LADY*, and with an American man, *A SEVERE MERCY*, talk deeply about the same sort of challenges.

“Autobiography/Biography/Guidebooks”

Do you like this section as much as I do? Here you are sure to find Lewis’s autobiography, *SURPRISED BY JOY*. In this charming and enlightening book, Lewis tells the story of his childhood, fall from belief (over the death of his mother), education, experiences in World War I, struggles to find a university teaching post, and his return to belief. To learn of the second half of his life, look for the new, expanded edition of *THE LETTERS OF C. S. LEWIS*, edited by his older brother and only sibling, Warren H. Lewis and re-edited by Walter Hooper. Warren’s diaries, published as *BROTHERS AND FRIENDS*, are full of fascinating details about his brother Jack’s life. A slice of Lewis’s life in his own words is found in *ALL MY ROAD BEFORE ME: THE DIARY OF C. S. LEWIS, 1922–1927*. Walter Hooper has just published a three-volume set of Lewis’s letters (Vol 1: *FAMILY LETTERS 1905–1931*, Vol. 2: *THE CHRISTIAN SCHOLAR 1931–1951*, Vol. 3. *NARNIA, CAMBRIDGE AND JOY 1952–1963*).

If you like reading the correspondence of famous people, you can look for *THEY STAND TOGETHER*, the lifelong correspondence between Lewis and his best friend, Arthur Greeves. And I have already told you how valuable is Lewis’s *A GRIEF OBSERVED*; many people who read it when they are mourning the loss of a loved one report it to be the only book that really spoke about what they were going through. Brian Sibley’s *C. S. LEWIS THROUGH THE SHADOWLANDS* fills in the background for William Nicholson’s stageplay, BBC1 film, Attenborough film, and theatrical release, “Shadowlands.”

Douglas Gresham, Lewis’s stepson, has written *LENTEN LANDS: MY CHILDHOOD WITH JOY DAVIDMAN AND C. S. LEWIS*. Another fine presentation about Joy Davidman Gresham and her marriage to “Jack” Lewis is *AND GOD CAME IN* by Lyle W. Dorsett.

The best biography of Lewis is by his friend of forty years, George Sayer; it is called *JACK: C. S. LEWIS AND HIS TIMES*. Another good one is *CLIVE STAPLES LEWIS: A DRAMATIC LIFE* by William Griffin. Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper have written *C. S. LEWIS: A BIOGRAPHY*. *C. S. LEWIS AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE* by James Como contains informative essays about Lewis’s life and also the most complete Lewis bibliography. *C. S. LEWIS: IMAGES OF HIS WORLD* is an excellent collection of photos of Lewis, his friends, and their world of Irish and English countryside and towns; the text by Clyde Kilby is first-rate.

There are two great guidebooks for the study of C. S. Lewis: Walter Hooper, *C. S. LEWIS: A COMPANION AND GUIDE* and Jeffrey Schultz and John West, *THE C. S. LEWIS READER'S ENCYCLOPEDIA*.

"Poetry"

A lot of Lewis's finest thinking and deepest feeling is contained in his poetry. The best collection of his poetry is *POEMS. NARRATIVE POEMS* and *SPIRITS IN BONDAGE* contain his pre-conversion poetry.

"Literary Criticism"

If this is your favorite section of a library or a bookstore, then you are the kind of reader who knows how to determine what to check out or buy. So I will only list the books available in this category: *THE ALLEGORY OF LOVE*, *C. S. LEWIS ON STORIES*, *THE DISCARDED IMAGE*, *ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY EXCLUDING DRAMA*, *ESSAYS PRESENTED TO CHARLES WILLIAMS*, *AN EXPERIMENT IN CRITICISM*, *OF OTHER WORLDS*, *ON STORIES*, *THE PERSONAL HERESY*, *A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST*, *REHABILITATIONS AND OTHER ESSAYS*, *SELECTED LITERARY ESSAYS*, *SPENCER'S IMAGES OF LIFE*, *STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE LITERATURE*, and *STUDIES IN WORDS*.

The best book to begin with here is *AN EXPERIMENT IN CRITICISM* which is Lewis's version, so to speak, of Mortimer Adler's classic *How to Read a Book*. And an important thing to remember about this category is that, even though it is labeled "literary criticism," the books are by C. S. Lewis and that means that they are eminently readable.

"Anthologies"

Several anthologies of Lewis are available: *A MIND AWAKE*, *THE ESSENTIAL C. S. LEWIS*; *THE JOYFUL CHRISTIAN: 127 READINGS*, *THE VISIONARY CHRISTIAN: 131 READINGS*, and *THE QUOTABLE C. S. LEWIS* by Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root. The best of these is *THE BUSINESS OF HEAVEN: DAILY READINGS FROM C. S. LEWIS*. These make excellent gifts to people who know and love Lewis already.

TO SUM UP (OR, WHAT DO I READ FIRST?)

Most people who like Lewis say that if you begin with any of the following books,

you will like to read him too: THE GREAT DIVORCE, MERE CHRISTIANITY, LETTERS TO MALCOLM, CHIEFLY ON PRAYER, or THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE. Happy reading!

LEWIS ON TAPE AND FILM

Recordings of Lewis delivering the original ten-part radio series THE FOUR LOVES (four cassettes), other talks (on three cassettes, entitled COMMENTS AND CRITIQUES — C. S. LEWIS IN PERSON), and the recordings of the actor Michael York reading MERE CHRISTIANITY and THE WEIGHT OF GLORY are available for purchase from The Episcopal Radio TV Foundation, 3379 Peachtree Road, N. E., Atlanta, GA 30326, or the C. S. Lewis Foundation Bookstore (listed below).

John Cleece's marvelous recording of THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS (abridged: four letters are omitted) is available in the Spiritual Classics on Cassette series from Audio Literature, Inc., 3800 Palos Verdes Way, South San Francisco, CA 94080 (ISBN 0-944993-15-X), or the C. S. Lewis Foundation Bookstore (listed below).

The animated film of THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE is available for rental or purchase from the Episcopal Radio TV Foundation or your local video store, or the C. S. Lewis Foundation Bookstore (listed below).

The three-part PBS Wonderworks series *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, *The Silver Chair*, and *Prince Caspian and the Voyage of the Dawn Treader* is available from PBS Videos and other video outlets.

The film biography of Lewis, THROUGH JOY AND BEYOND (the one-hour, revised and edited version is the recommended version), and the film interview with Lewis's friends, JACK REMEMBERED, are available for rental from your local video store. A second video biography, MERE C. S. LEWIS, has just been released by The Episcopal Radio TV Foundation (address above).

The BBC1 television version of "Shadowlands," starring Claire Bloom and Joss Ackland and the VHS version of the Richard Attenborough film "Shadowlands," starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger are also available.

ABOUT THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA C. S. LEWIS SOCIETY

For twenty-five years people in southern California have gathered monthly (except July, August, and December) in Pasadena, California, to discuss the life and writings of C. S. Lewis. We don't consider ourselves Lewis "fans"; we are far less interested in looking at Lewis than in looking along his life and his writings to his ideas and influences. We publish a quarterly journal called *The Lamp-post* and occasional newsletters; and we sponsor events which promote the study and appreciation of Lewis's life and writings, especially an annual week-long workshop at St. Andrew's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery at Valyermo, California. For membership information and/or information about meetings and workshops, please write:

The Southern California C. S. Lewis Society
1212 162nd Street
Gardena, CA 90247
lamppost@pacbell.net

ABOUT THE C. S. LEWIS FOUNDATION

The C. S. Lewis Foundation was created for the purpose of encouraging a renaissance of Christian scholarly and artistic endeavor within the mainstream of contemporary university life. The foundation is blessed to own Lewis's home, "The Kilns," in Oxford, England, and is in the process of restoring and furnishing the home as a museum and a study and retreat center. The foundation has also organized the very successful summer institutes in Oxford and Cambridge, England. The foundation also runs a bookstore and publishes a book catalog with materials by and about C. S. Lewis and his circle of friends and his influences. These are just a few of the foundation's activities. For more information, please write or call:

The C. S. Lewis Foundation
P. O. Box 8008
Redlands, CA 92375
Telephone: 909-793-0949
FAX: 909-335-3501
Bookstore: 800-554-7456
www.cslewis.org

BEST LEWIS WEBSITE

The best Lewis website is Into the Wardrobe at <http://cslewis.drzeus.net>

A CHECK LIST OF LEWIS BOOKS

Fiction

- BOXEN: THE IMAGINARY WORLD OF THE YOUNG C. S. LEWIS
- THE DARK TOWER & OTHER STORIES
- THE GREAT DIVORCE
- LETTERS TO MALCOLM, CHIEFLY ON PRAYER
- NARRATIVE POEMS
- THE PILGRIM'S REGRESS
- POEMS
- THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS
- SPIRITS IN BONDAGE
- TILL WE HAVE FACES

The Chronicles of Narnia

- 1) THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE
- 2) PRINCE CASPIAN
- 3) THE VOYAGE OF THE 'DAWN TREADER'
- 4) THE HORSE AND HIS BOY
- 5) THE SILVER CHAIR
- 6) THE MAGICIAN'S NEPHEW
- 7) THE LAST BATTLE

The Ransom Trilogy

- OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET
- PERELANDRA
- THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH

Autobiographical Works

- A GRIEF OBSERVED
- A SEVERE MERCY
- LETTERS OF C. S. LEWIS
- LETTERS OF C. S. LEWIS AND DON GIOVANNI CALABRIA
- LETTERS TO AN AMERICAN LADY
- SURPRISED BY JOY
- THEY STAND TOGETHER

Non-fiction

- THE ABOLITION OF MAN
- CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS
- THE FOUR LOVES
- GOD IN THE DOCK
- THE GRAND MIRACLE
- MERE CHRISTIANITY
- MIRACLES
- PRESENT CONCERNS
- THE PROBLEM OF PAIN
- REFLECTIONS ON THE PSALMS
- THE SEEING EYE AND OTHER SELECTED ESSAYS FROM CHRISTIAN REFLECTIONS
- THE WEIGHT OF GLORY AND OTHER ADDRESSES
- THE WORLD'S LAST NIGHT AND OTHER ESSAYS

Literary Criticism

- THE ALLEGORY OF LOVE
- C. S. LEWIS ON STORIES
- THE DISCARDED IMAGE
- ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY EXCLUDING DRAMA
- ESSAYS PRESENTED TO CHARLES WILLIAMS
- AN EXPERIMENT IN CRITICISM
- OF OTHER WORLDS: ESSAYS AND STORIES
- ON STORIES: AND OTHER ESSAYS ON LITERATURE
- THE PERSONAL HERESY
- A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST
- REHABILITATIONS AND OTHER ESSAYS
- SELECTED LITERARY ESSAYS
- SPENCER'S IMAGES OF LIFE
- STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE LITERATURE
- STUDIES IN WORDS