



Winter 12-7-2005

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Recommended Citation

Aubry, Ann, "Narnia Movie Taps Into Modern Quest for Meaning, Retired IWU Professor Says" (2005). *News and Events*. 3490.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/3490>

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Narnia Movie Taps Into Modern Quest for Meaning, Retired IWU Professor Says

December 7, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – William L. White didn't have a mysterious wooden wardrobe in his office during his 33-year tenure as chaplain and religion professor at Illinois Wesleyan University, but the view out his Buck Hall window in wintertime looked remarkably like a classic illustration from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis.

It was appropriate, given White's interest in Lewis. White's book, *The Image of Man in C.S. Lewis*, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1969. A professor emeritus since 1996, White for many years taught courses on Lewis' writings at Illinois Wesleyan. So it's understandable that he's eager to see the movie opening in theaters Friday, Dec. 9, based on *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first in Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia children's series.

White thinks the movie, like Lewis' books, should appeal to wide audiences--both those who see them simply as delightful fantasy and those who know Lewis' underlying Christian views. In this first Narnia story, four children travel through a magic wardrobe to the mystical land of Narnia, where they join forces with the lion Aslan to defeat the evil White Witch, who is holding Narnia in perpetual winter.

"It can be taken on different levels. You might see another level of meaning or mythology, or you might not. That's all right for the novelist and the movie maker," White says. White doesn't see an inherent conflict between magical and theological motifs: "In the realm of imagination, rational people can separate it in their minds--which is story and which has more reality to it.

"There are witches in a number of C.S. Lewis stories. They get killed, and as (Lewis) said, the witches keep coming back. I think that's true of the evils that we have gotten rid of at one time, and then, just around the corner, here they are again. It's the continual struggle of good and evil in our world."

While cynics might say Disney is trying for its own share of the blockbuster profits generated by movie versions of the Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings series, White sees underlying reasons for the fantasy genre's potential popularity.

"There seems to be a hunger today for fresh ways to view ultimate reality," White says, noting that Lewis had a gift for reinvigorating ancient teachings with creative new images. "It's a really fresh encounter to meet familiar ideas in surprising garb--say, on a distant planet, or in Narnia. Persons who have become indifferent to the Bible may be entranced by the fate of the great lion Aslan," considered a Christ figure.

"A literary scholar as well as an informed lay theologian, Lewis was keenly aware that the theological language is inevitably the language of metaphor. We can speak of the infinite only in the terms of our finite human experience. The scholar Rudolf Bultmann was troubled by extensive picture-language in the Bible, and he suggested that we need to 'de-mythologize' the images to make the meaning clear. Lewis had a different approach. He took such biblical images seriously, though not literally. In his extensive creative writing, Lewis hoped to 're-mythologize' essential truths."

To arrange to speak with White about Lewis or Narnia, contact Ann Aubry at (309) 556-3181.



William L. White