

# SPEAKING OF JACK



A C.S. LEWIS DISCUSSION GUIDE  
WILL VAUS



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## *Why another Book about C. S. Lewis?*

**T**here are now more books in print about C. S. “Jack” Lewis than the forty-one books he wrote during his lifetime. What is it about this Oxford don, Cambridge professor, Christian apologist and fantasy writer who died in 1963 that makes him so popular? And why should there be yet another book about him and his work?

People have been analyzing for decades what makes Lewis so popular. The Narnia stories account for at least half of C. S. Lewis book sales. So one reason why Lewis is so well known is because he wrote what have become seven classic children’s fairy tales. However, before Lewis ever walked through the wardrobe into Narnia he was already well known as a Christian apologist due to his numerous talks over BBC radio during the Second World War and his bestselling book, *The Screwtape Letters*. Thus Lewis’ popularity can also be traced to the fact that his books appeal to a wide variety of audiences: those interested in a logical presentation of Christianity, as well as those interested in a more imaginative approach to the faith. Perhaps Lewis is popular because he is so knowledgeable about the whole Western tradition, from the classics of Greek and Rome down to nineteenth century English literature, and he brings all of this tradition to bear, in an accessible way, through his books. On the other hand, maybe Lewis is so widely read simply because he is a great writer, one who delivers scintillating prose, intriguing storylines, and fascinating characters. Whatever the reason, Lewis is without doubt the bestselling author of Christian theology outside of the Bible, with over 100 million copies of his books in print: and that’s apart from Narnia! The Narnia books

altogether have sold another 100 million copies and continue to sell at a rate of one million per year.

But why write another book about Lewis? The answer: because so many people want to read Lewis' work and discuss it. C. S. Lewis Societies have been popping up around the globe since the first one started in New York in 1969. I have started and led three groups myself. And what you have in your hands is all the material I have passed on to those three groups: introductions to most of Lewis' books, and questions designed to stimulate discussion about Lewis' work and his life story. The best part about this book is that these materials have been "road- tested".

I became interested in being part of a C. S. Lewis Society, devoted to discussing Lewis' life and works, a number of years ago. Since there was no such Lewis Society in my geographical area at that time, I decided to start one. First I contacted other Lewis Societies to see how they had done it. After sorting through those materials I picked a place to meet—a Barnes & Noble bookstore in my area. I advertised our first and subsequent meetings in a local newspaper and on a nearby radio station. Barnes & Noble also advertised the meetings in their store calendar. We had over thirty people show up for the first meeting! We were overflowing the café area in the bookstore. It was a great size group for the delivery of a lecture, but it was not conducive to book discussion. So we multiplied into two groups which met on two different nights, once per month. I made up a reading list and we discussed a different book by Lewis each month, starting with his most popular works: *The Screwtape Letters*, *Mere Christianity*, and *The Lion, the Witch and The Wardrobe*.

I wrote introductions for each book we discussed, and I read those introductions at the beginning of each meeting. I also came up with helpful reading guides for some of the books—like a glossary to guide readers through the maze of abstract terminology in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, and listings of chapter topics for *The Screwtape Letters* and *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*.

Some of the discussion questions in this book are designed to highlight certain important facts in various Lewis books. Other questions are more open-ended. In almost every case I have written



more questions than can possibly be discussed in one meeting of a book discussion group. I led one group through a study of Lewis' works, reading one book per month in chronological order according to original publication date. Since that time the group has continued without my leadership. However, they continue to use the original discussion questions I wrote, in order to dig deeper into each book than they did in their first discussion. So, when you use the discussion questions, pick your favorites to discuss, and leave some questions for the next time your group reads the particular book in question.

In addition to the discussion questions there is: a timeline of Lewis' life, a reading schedule that will take you through most of Lewis' major works in a little under three years—one book per month, some suggestions for how to organize an introductory six-week class on Lewis' life and work, a guide to planning a C. S. Lewis Tour of Ireland and England, a bibliography, and a listing of resources for further study.

There are a few different ways you might use this book:

1. In an existing book discussion group.
2. To start a C. S. Lewis Society where you live.
3. To discuss Lewis' life and works in your Sunday School class or small group, or
4. You could use the questions to stimulate your own solo exploration of Lewis' books.

Whatever way you choose: may this book lead you “further up and further in”.

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*Introductions & Discussion Questions*

*Boxen*

Clive Staples Lewis was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland on November 29, 1898. He was the son of Albert Lewis, a police court solicitor, and Flora Hamilton Lewis, the daughter of a Church of Ireland (Anglican) clergyman and graduate of Queen's College, Belfast, with honors in mathematics. Both of Clive's parents loved books, especially some of those written by the great Victorian novelists. So it should come as no surprise that Clive himself developed an interest in books at a young age. However, Clive's literary tastes were rather different from his parents. From the time he was small Clive developed a love of romantic poetry and fairy tales.

Clive had only one sibling, his brother Warren, or Warnie as he was called by family and friends. Warren was just three years older than Clive. Together Clive and Warren were cared for, not only by their parents, but by their beloved nurse, Lizzie Endicott. Lizzie was the one responsible for introducing Warren and Clive to some of the great legendary tales of Ireland.

These stories, among others, must have fired the imagination of the young Clive Staples Lewis. This was so much the case that he had to get the pictures in his mind out on to paper. He did this at first through drawing, then eventually through writing stories about the pictures popping into his mind.

Another source of inspiration for the creative young Clive was the world of "dressed animals" in the Beatrix Potter books. Clive worked hard at drawing his own dressed animals and as well as human figures

and making them look like they could really move.

A third source of inspiration, for Clive's drawings and stories, was the landscape of Northern Ireland all about him. There were castle ruins like those of Dunluce on the Antrim Coast. And there were the green Castlereagh Hills which Clive could see out the nursery window of his first home at Dundela Villas.

It was while Clive was living in his parents' first home that a momentous event took place. One day Clive decided to change his name. Various stories have been told about how this change of name came to be. I relate these in my book *The Professor of Narnia: The C. S. Lewis Story*. It is sufficient for our purposes here to say that one day Clive came home and said to his mother, pointing proudly to himself: "I is Jacksie." From that point on he refused to answer to any other name. The family shortened his nickname to Jacks, and eventually it became simply Jack. Thus the title of this book, *Speaking of Jack*, and thus I shall refer to C. S. Lewis throughout this discussion guide.

In 1905 the Lewis family moved from Dundela Villas to a larger home on the outskirts of the city of Belfast. This new home was dubbed "Little Lea". It was there, in "the Little End Room" on the third floor of that house that Jack continued drawing pictures and writing stories about his dressed animals. Jack's reading developed in him a love of knights in shining armor and so he included these in his stories as well. Out of these pictures, stories and some stuffed animals Jack created his own imaginary world which he called Animal Land.

While Jack was developing his tales of Animal Land his brother Warnie's interests were growing along other lines. Warnie was a lover of India. Thus for the two boys to be able to play effectively together Warnie's imaginary land of India and Jack's Animal Land had to be united. The end product came to be known as the federation of Boxen.

Even in writing these childhood stories Jack wanted to set the scene, so to speak, in The Middle Ages. How else can one have knights in armor? One can see how Jack's childhood make-believe eventually blossomed into a lifelong career, two careers really: that of a novelist, as well as that of a teacher of Medieval and Renaissance literature.

However, to keep his brother Warren content Jack's medieval

Animal Land had to somehow be connected to Warnie's modern India with its trains and steamships. This led Jack to write up a little history of Animal Land from The Middle Ages down to modern times. And then he had to make a map to show how Animal Land was situated with reference to Warnie's India.

Sadly, writing stories and drawing pictures of Boxen was not to last forever. Before long, Warnie was sent off to boarding school in England. And Jack soon followed his brother there after the death of their mother in 1908 from cancer. During the couple of years while Warnie was in boarding school and Jack was still at home, they would write back and forth about their imaginary country. On one occasion Jack wrote to Warnie, "At present Boxen is *slightly* convulsed. The news has just reached her that King Bunny is a prisoner."<sup>5</sup>

Though Jack and Warnie one day stopped playing with stuffed animals and in fact buried all their toys in the garden at Little Lea after their father's death in 1929, we can be grateful that they saved some of the stories and pictures of Boxen. And we can be thankful too that these childhood stories written by C. S. Lewis and his brother have now been edited and published by Walter Hooper, Jack's secretary at the end of his life. For in these stories we catch some valuable glimpses of the man C. S. Lewis was to become; among other things we are allowed a window into the imaginary world of a boy who would one day write some of the most beloved fairy tales of all time.

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5 Walter Hooper, editor, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Volume I, London: HarperCollins, 2000, p. 3.

**Discussion Questions**

1. C. S. Lewis wrote some of the stories in this collection as early as eight years old. What strikes you about these stories, considering that they were written by a child of that age?
2. These first stories were also written around the time that Jack lost his mother to cancer. How do you think young Jack might have used writing to cope with grief?
3. What else might the content of these stories and their subject matter tell us about Jack's life as a child and youth?
4. What hints, if any, do you get through Boxen of the later creation of Narnia? What is similar and dissimilar between the two worlds?
5. What do you think of Jack's artistic ability as a child as reflected in the drawings in this book?
6. What does the Encyclopedia Boxoniana reveal about Jack the literary critic and historian?
7. Obviously Jack and Warnie maintained a lifelong interest in these childhood stories. Why do you think that might have been the case?
8. What other insights or observations about Jack and Boxen do you have that you would like to share with the group?

## *Spirits in Bondage*

According to Walter Hooper, C. S. Lewis began writing poetry in the Little End Room at Little Lea before he went away to boarding school at the age of ten.<sup>6</sup> Jack's earliest extant poem dates from 1912 when he was a student at Cherbourg preparatory school in Great Malvern, England. Inspired by Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, Jack wrote 801 lines of a heroic poem. In 1913, another poem, *Carpe Diem*, won him a prize at his next boarding school, Malvern College, also in Great Malvern, England. Soon Jack aspired to be a great poet. During his years at Malvern College Jack also wrote a narrative poem entitled *Loki Bound* which was Norse in subject and Greek in form.

After his years in Malvern Jack was sent to a tutor by the name of William Kirkpatrick who lived in Great Bookham, Surrey. Kirkpatrick was responsible for preparing Jack to take the entrance examinations to Oxford University. During this time Jack continued to add to a collection of poems he entitled *Metrical Meditations of a Cod*. (According to Jack's brother, Warnie, "cod" was an expression of humorous and insincere self-deprecation used by inhabitants of Northern Ireland.) Between 1915 and 1917 Jack wrote fifty-two poems which he added to this collection, kept in a notebook. Fourteen of these poems eventually found their way into the book which became *Spirits in Bondage*. Jack first thought of getting these poems published while he was in the Officer Training Corps at Keble College, Oxford University in 1917.

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6 Walter Hooper, editor, *Narrative Poems*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979, p. vii.