

Why C.S. Lewis Never Goes Out of Style

The author's death barely made headlines 50 years ago when he died on the same day as JFK and Aldous Huxley. But today, his writings are more relevant than ever.

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Last month marked the 50th anniversary of a bizarre day in history. Three men of significant importance each died on November 22, 1963: President John F. Kennedy, author Aldous Huxley, and author and scholar C.S. Lewis.

On that day, the developed world (appropriately) halted at the news of the assassination of the United States' 35th president. The front page of *The New York Times* on Saturday morning, the day after the tragic shooting, read, "Kennedy Is Killed by Sniper as he Rides in Car in Dallas; Johnson Sworn in on Plane," and virtually every other news service around the world ran similar coverage and developed these stories for days and weeks following.

Huxley's death, meanwhile, made the front page of *The New York Times* the day after Kennedy's coverage began. The English-born writer spent his final hours in Los Angeles, high on LSD. His wife, Laura, administered the psychedelic drug during the writer's final day battling cancer, honoring his wishes to prepare for death like the characters in his novels *Eyeless in Gaza* and *Island*. Huxley's *Brave New World* depicts a haunting futuristic world where a sovereign, global government harvests its tightly controlled social order in glass jars; the *Times* obituary writer declared that Huxley's well-known book "set a model for writers of his generation."

The news of Lewis's death, though, didn't appear in print until Nov. 25, and it appeared in the normal obituary section of *The New York Times* weekday paper. At an earlier point in his life, Lewis enjoyed vibrant community with family, friends, and colleagues displayed famously in his writers' club, the Inklings—which included, among others, J.R.R. Tolkien. By the time Lewis died, however, many of those relationships had fizzled out, and only a handful people even knew about Lewis's funeral in time to attend. In one of the new biographies of Lewis by Alister McGrath (the now-definitive *C.S. Lewis: A Life*), the writer lists eight attendees, and assumes others, at the funeral for Lewis. No immediate family members were present—his brother, Warnie, stayed in bed, too drunk and distraught to venture to the ceremony. Lewis's stepson, Douglas Gresham, represented the family at the understated memorial.

But amid all of the attention to these three men during the past year—new biographies, films, conferences, magazines, articles—the legacy of Lewis stands out in relation to both those of the 35th U.S. president and of the prescient *Brave New World* author.

As Henry L. Carrigan, Jr. puts it in *Publishers Weekly*, “While Huxley is now largely forgotten and Kennedy remains a symbol of lost promise, Lewis lives on through his novels, stories, essays, and autobiographical works.” While I think that oversimplifies Kennedy and underestimates Huxley, the underlying point is worth considering: In one of the great ironies of history, Lewis at his death received less attention than Huxley, and far less than Kennedy. But it may be true that Lewis’s ideas claim the most lasting influence, both on the Christian tradition and on the Western culture beyond.

Lewis, a native of Belfast, Ireland, taught English literature at Oxford and Cambridge during the middle of the 20th century. Beginning in his teenage years and up through his early career, he was an atheist—but an uncomfortable one. In 1931, he became convinced that the Christian faith was more than a series of rational deductions; that it offered him a narrative that not only answered intellectual questions, but also satisfied his spiritual longings—what he described as the “god-sized hole” in his life. From that point on, he dedicated a significant portion of his energies to this idea that Christianity transcends facts and experience—Lewis believed Christianity wedded facts and experience in a deeper logical and emotional reality.

Lewis’s writing flowed in three streams: scholarly works, defenses of the Christian faith, and fiction. His canon, in addition to hundreds of essays and short writings, consists of more than 30 books, including widely celebrated criticisms on English literature and widely read works of fiction, poetry, and children’s stories. Today, several of these titles are familiar even to those with only a cursory interest in literature—such as *the Chronicles of Narnia* (which includes 1950’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*), 1956’s *Till We Have Faces*, 1952’s *Mere Christianity*, and 1942’s *The Screwtape Letters*.

Just about any list of the best Christian books in the English language, of course, will include at least one Lewis title. In fact, when *Christianity Today* magazine asked more than 100 Christian writers and leaders to rank the most influential religious books of the 20th century, they named Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* No. 1 by far—which explains why readers have purchased the around 18 million copies of the book. And Harper Collins, which distributed some 10 million in unit sales since it acquired the rights to most of Lewis’s titles in 2001, reports more than 150,000 copies of *Mere Christianity* sold in the past year.

But even those numbers seem small compared to the more than 100 million copies (in at least 30 different languages) of *The Chronicles of Narnia* series sold.

And Lewis’s stories seem just as comfortable in Hollywood as they are in a corner bookstore. In recent years, three stories of the *Chronicles of Narnia* appeared as major film adaptations, with a fourth in development. And other films based on his life and works have materialized, too—such as *Shadowlands*, which casts Anthony Hopkins as Lewis and tells the story of his marriage to Joy Davidman, and a forthcoming film version of *The Great Divorce*, currently in the development stage.

Lewis’s works also appear onstage: *Shadowlands* began as television film and later turned into a play, and the theater production of *The Screwtape Letters* will continue its current tour in California later this month.

Traces of Lewis even appear in the works of other writers. Most significantly, he helped Tolkien finish perhaps the best work of English literature from the century, *The Lord of the Rings*; McGrath calls Lewis the “chief midwife” to the stories. Another biographer suggests that J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series includes seven volumes as a kind of homage to the Narnia stories. Rowling’s character Dudley sounds and acts like Lewis’s Eustace Scrubb (from the *Chronicles of Narnia* series), and in an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Rowling said she found herself “thinking about the wardrobe route to Narnia when Harry is told he has to hurl

himself at a barrier in Kings Cross Station.” Lewis’s work also shapes, axiomatically, the stories of Christian writers like N.D. Wilson (also the screenwriter for *The Great Divorce* adaptation) and Andrew Peterson, and has also influenced writers like Lloyd Alexander—who said, “In our times, every fantasy realm must be measured in comparison with Narnia.”

One of the few men who did attend Lewis’s funeral was the English theologian and philosopher Austin Farrer. In his eulogy that day, Farrer effectively described the combination of logic and emotion—of fact and imagination, of prose and poetry—that made Lewis’s writings resonate with many demographics of readers: Farrer said, “There lived in his writings a Christian universe that could be both thought and felt, in which he was at home and in which he made his reader at home.” In other words, readers found—and still find—that Lewis narratives both answer intellectual questions and satisfy spiritual longings; Lewis demonstrates the importance of images and stories for the life of faith, without forgetting the necessity of reasoned, coherent belief, as well.

But Lewis’s appeal clearly reaches further than his Christian audience and draws appreciation from adherents of other faiths and the non-religious. There’s a profound reason for that. As the flamboyant, *avant garde* theater critic Kenneth Tynan, a proud proponent of amorality, wrote in his diary after reading Lewis’s novels, “How thrilling he makes goodness seem—how tangible and radiant!” And after reading a work of nonfiction, he wrote, “C.S.L. works as potently as ever on my imagination.”

In honor of his achievements as a writer, officials of Westminster Abbey announced last month that they will honor Lewis in the prestigious Poets' Corner alongside literary figures such as Geoffrey Chaucer and Charles Dickens. The memorial stone displays Lewis’ famous summary of his faith: “I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen. Not only because I can see it but because by it I can see everything else.”

This vision for a Christian lens to the world permeates Lewis’s stories, because, for him, the best stories hinted at the deep structures of reality, helping humanity in the journey for truth and significance. Good stories point to an ultimate story. And as Farrer—but few else—might have predicted, Lewis appears more relevant today than ever.

Lewis’s writings still often show up in both religious and secular conversations. As recently as last week, writers for *The Atlantic* recalled Lewis while analyzing contemporary, mainstream works of fiction: One writer invoked Lewis while in a critique of Disney’s *Frozen*, and another used Lewis’s *The Four Loves* to make a positive case for the film *Love Actually*. We live in a culture that views the world more as charcoal than black-and-white—a culture that prefers the mixed-motive, quasi-heroes in 2010’s *True Grit* to the good-guy-bad-guy figures in 1969’s version; a culture that prefers the more experiential, sensitive atheism of Slavoj Zizek to the cold, laboratory atheism of Richard Dawkins. But Lewis’s vision of the world still resonates in the 21st century as well as it did in his native 20th.

Like all good stories, Lewis’s includes an antagonist of sorts, or at least an opposing moral force: Philip Pullman, the author of the His Dark Materials Trilogy (perhaps more familiar to Americans as the series that includes *The Golden Compass*), an explicitly atheist alternative to the children’s literature of Lewis’s. In 2002, a headline in the *Daily Telegraph* read, “Pullman does for atheism what C.S. Lewis did for God.” Pullman decried Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia as “blatant religious propaganda.” and accused Lewis of sexism and racism, among other things.

But, as McGrath, author of *C.S. Lewis: A Life*, points out, Pullman's statements about Lewis's wide readership almost 40 years after his death only draw more attention to the *Narnia* author, and "affirms Lewis's cultural significance." In this way, "Lewis's most strident critic, paradoxically, turns out to be one of the most important witnesses to his present-day influence and importance."

Last month, a writer for *The Guardian* suggested that Huxley was actually the more "visionary" of the two writers who died on Nov. 22, 1963. He points out specifically how Huxley's *Brave New World* hints at today's social networking websites that exchange services for members' "intimate details." He writes: "So, even as we remember C.S. Lewis, let us spare a thought for the writer who perceived the future in which we would come to love our digital servitude." Still, he admits that, compared to Lewis, "Aldous Huxley never attracted that kind of attention."

And assessments of Kennedy's ideas, in turn, remain mixed. His actions, certainly, caused massive repercussions on the nation: In part, his term shaped the future of presidential campaigns, as television became a normal aspect of elections campaigns. And his celebrity-type appeal added style, in addition to substance, to the list of essential characteristics of a United States president. But crises like the Bay of Pigs debacle, the Cold War, the convoluted situation in Vietnam, and racial discord around the country arguably mark his time in office more than his Camelot White House.

"Assessments of Kennedy's presidency have spanned a wide spectrum," according to Kennedy scholars at the University of Virginia. "Early studies, the most influential of which were written by New Frontiersmen close to Kennedy, were openly admiring. They built upon on the collective grief from Kennedy's public slaying—the quintessential national trauma. Later, many historians focused on the seedier side of Kennedy family dealings and John Kennedy's questionable personal morals. More recent works have tried to find a middle ground." So, the legacy of Kennedy's ideas remains ambiguous; today, he is perceived by many as an intriguing national figure who lost his opportunity to fulfill many promises.

Back 50 years ago, no one reading the news headlines from November 1963 would predict that the ideas of an English scholar and children's writer would wield (arguably) greater influence on European and American cultures than Kennedy's or Huxley's. After all, Lewis's funeral only included one family member, related by marriage.

Huxley once wrote that "the prophet must make a selection of the facts that are more significant, that will have the greatest effect on the greatest number of future human beings." And Kennedy famously said that a "man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on."

And that's why, in 1963, Lewis left us a legacy with influence that reaches far beyond 1960s England: He wedded significant facts with ideas that live on.

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