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Book review of: *The Wonders of Creation: Learning Stewardship from Narnia and Middle-Earth* by Kristen Page

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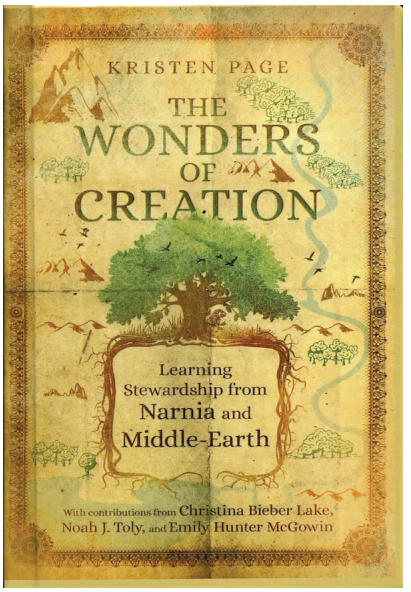
# Book Reviews

**Kristen Page, *The Wonders of Creation: Learning Stewardship from Narnia and Middle-Earth* (Hansen Lectureship Series), with contributions from Christina Bieber Lake, Noah J. Toly, and Emily Hunter McGowin. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2022.**




In 2020, due to public health restrictions during the pandemic, the classes I was teaching in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the city of C.S Lewis's birth, had moved online. This afforded more time, not only for gardening and walking, but for reading books and listening to podcasts. And so it was that I encountered Dr Kristen Page's Hansen Lectures on the Marion E. Wade Center's website. The opportunity to engage with Page's thinking would prove fortuitous and formative as I set about preparing my own teaching on Lewis's *Prince Caspian*, inspiring me to read, and later write about, the story through an ecological lens. For, as Walter Hansen points out in his introduction to *The Wonders of Creation: Learning Stewardship from Narnia and Middle-Earth*, Page's expert knowledge about and passion for natural habitats equips her to help us read both landscapes and books. It is the focus of her scientific research that informs the way she 'speaks forcefully about the destruction of nature caused by human self-indulgence and wastefulness' (2).

*The Wonders of Creation* presents Page's lectures, together with a short response to each of them by an expert friend. The book opens with 'Stepping Out of the Wardrobe', in which Page encourages her readers to join her in searching fictional landscapes to guide the way we view our world. Page shares her personal connection with forests, her work as an ecologist, and the way an understanding of physical landscapes can facilitate engagement with literary worlds. She notes that her own readings build on the important foundation of existing ecocritical writing, such as Dickerson and O'Hara's *Narnia and The Fields of Arbol: The Environmental Vision of C.S. Lewis*. In her own work, Page argues that reading about nature instils a desire to spend time engaging with the natural world, while at the same time, writers who spend time outdoors, like Robert Macfarlane, write very compelling books.

Page's lectures focus principally on the imagined landscapes of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, who created stories within worlds with 'specific geologies, geographies, ecologies and cultures' (15). She notes that Lewis was a regular walker through the Irish and English countryside, while Tolkien's mother passed on to him a lifelong love of botany and gardening. As Page says: 'Tolkien's observations and knowledge of nature allowed him to create fictional lansdscapes described in such detail that plant guides have been written and taxonomic keys developed to help the reader navigate the flora of Middle-earth' (19).

Page argues that the created landscapes and flora of Tolkien's and Lewis's fiction can transform both the protagonists and the readers of their books by making us slow down and pay attention to our environment. In Page's view this is important, given some Christians' apathy towards creation care: 'Rethinking Christian responsibility to steward creation is especially urgent today as we experience unprecedented losses of biodiversity and rapidly changing climate' (26). Page points to a hopeful example in the life of Bill McKibben, a writer and environmental activist who points to Narnia as a source of inspiration for his transformative work in tackling environmental injustice. Moreover, she highlights the particular importance of such inspiration in the experiences of children and future generations.

The first response in the book is given by Dr Christina Bieber Lake, professor of English at Wheaton College. Lake's message, developing Page's discussion of of the shaping of the moral imagination by fiction, is that the liberal arts has a key role to to play in understanding 'our interconnectedness with each other, with the natural world, and with Jesus Christ' (38). Lake reflects on her own reading of American literature and acknowledges that learning to see things differently is needed in order to care for the natural world; the imagination is vital in envisaging a new relationship of love between ourselves and the forest. As Lake reminds us, both Robert Frost and Richard Powers insist 'that the power of art will instruct us, via the faculty of the imagination, to see the natural world for everything that it is' (45).

Page moves, in the second section of her book, 'A Lament for Creation: Responding to the Groaning of God's World', to consider creation care as a facet of loving our neighbour. Story, she argues, helps us make sense of the world, affording a clarity of sight that may lead to recovery. We recognise our own stories in the stories we read, and from such a point we can begin to imagine a response to the injustices we witness. For example, Page sees in Tolkien's Mordor a depiction of the tragic impact of environmental contamination of the kind she has encountered through her work. In this section of the book, Page points us, albeit gently, towards lament. For, as she points out, stories teach us the need to lament both the maltreatment of the natural world at the hands of humanity and the destruction that ensues.

The response to this second section is contributed by Dr Noah Toly, provost at Calvin College and formerly executive director of the Center for Urban Engagement at Wheaton College. Toly has edited and written several volumes addressing biblical perspectives on environmental issues, and his response endorses Page's appeal for lament, playing insightfully on the concept of the middle of the story and the idea of the in-between. 'The middles of many trilogies', he argues, 'rhyme with a time between times . . . a time when the Spirit of God puts the possibilities of transformation within our reach, but the powers and principalities keep those possibilities just beyond our grasp' (77–78). We live in the midst of challenges inherent in 'long, forbidding middles' (79). But challenge, Toly argues, is a prerequisite for transformation; it can change the way we look at the world, and ultimately, with lament, it leads to hope. In these in-between times of environmental challenge, we can take heart from Christ's words in the Beatitudes: 'It's only you who hunger now who will be satisfied, and only those who weep now who shall laugh' (80).

In the book's final section, 'Ask the Animals to Teach You: How to Regain Wonder and Rejoin the Chorus', Page's passion is clear, not only for landscapes and flora, but for fauna in all their diversity. Drawing on the biblical concept of stewardship and the account of Adam naming the animals, Page challenges us to 'learn about creation, as naming implies knowing—and to care properly for a garden requires knowledge of what is needed by the life within' (83). Reading Lewis's Narnia stories can help with this, as they present a wide range of creatures. Yet of particular concern in this section is the loss of species; Page mourns this as one might lament the loss of a precious gift.

Yet Page dwells also on the transformative power of more positive experiences such as awe, wonder, and close attention. Page depicts the latter as a 'discipline' that can ultimately 'turn our focus and wonder toward the Creator' (96). Similarly, she depicts ecological wonder as a 'virtue' that can move us towards godly stewardship (98). Page has witnessed this wonder in children and in the life of her own daughter, in particular. Importantly, she encourages us to journey *with children* in wonder, but also to journey in wonder *as children*, for, as Christ taught us, 'the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these' (102). Page considers the virtue of humility also: humility in our response to technology, for example, and, drawing on Psalm 8, humility in understanding our role in the universe and relationship with God.

The final response is given by Anglican theologian Dr Emily Hunter McGowin, co-editor with Jeffrey Barbeau of *Wonder: Theology, Imagination, and the Arts* (Cascade, 2022). Praising both Page's writing and her wildlife photography included in *The Wonders of Creation*, McGowin's words illuminate Page's ideas through the prism of historical theology. For example, she draws on Thomas Aquinas's understanding of wonder as a type of fear

and notes the distinctiveness of Page's presentation of wonder as a virtue to be cultivated through practices of engagement with both nature and literature. McGowin suggests that children might act as 'exemplars and mentors' in wonder (122) and reminds Christian readers that in the New Creation, 'Learning to see ourselves within Christ, and in Christ among the created world—a living bridge between heaven and earth—is central to our vocation as human beings' (124).

This book illustrates the strength of interdisciplinary scholarship and the value of the arts and humanities on one hand, and the value of the natural sciences on the other. The work of Page and her respondents is informed by close readings of the work of Lewis and Tolkien, but it also draws on knowledge of other academic fields, on personal reflections, and on wider reading of literature and Scripture. In terms of environmental issues, Page draws mainly on American examples and admonishes the evangelical wing of the church, but her message is relevant globally. There is certainly cause for lament, but ultimately this is a book about hope rather than despair, holding out the possibility of Christians 'leading the way in moving the privileged away from an "orthodoxy of more" . . . to make real changes that in turn will loosen the grasp of winter on our global world and bring about the hope of spring once again' (76). Whilst accessible, this is an erudite book, rich in knowledge and wisdom and helpful for spiritual formation. At its heart is Page's appeal that we learn to see ourselves as 'part of the chorus of creation' (115), with a God-given responsibility to care for and seek the flourishing of his awesome, wonderful world.

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**Jason M. Baxter, *The Medieval Mind of C.S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022.**

During my first semester in college, our survey course in history read C.S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image*. Subsequent class discussions made it clear that for the vast majority of students, the text had been frustrating, impenetrable, and difficult to take seriously. This was not the Lewis they knew. They were hardly alone in their bewilderment: C.S. Lewis as medievalist, and more profoundly as disciple of medieval thinkers, is a neglected persona. In his new book, *The Medieval Mind of C.S. Lewis: How Great Books Shaped a Great Mind*, Jason Baxter demonstrates how far this neglect hampers our understanding of the man and restricts our experience of his ideas.