



KRISTEN PAGE

# THE WONDERS OF CREATION

Learning  
Stewardship from  
Narnia and  
Middle-Earth

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## STEPPING OUT OF THE WARDROBE

*Searching Fictional Landscapes  
to Guide Our View of Our Own World*

*I have always gravitated toward forests*, and I think I've always connected to them deeply. In fact, there is a recording of a conversation between my father and me, as a two-year-old, in which when asked, "Where is heaven?" I exclaimed with certainty, "It's in the woods!" I love every kind of forest—those I physically walk through and those I mentally walk through as I read. As an ecologist I spend a lot of time exploring and learning in real forests, thus I can experience fictional forests more deeply with all of my senses. I have no doubt that I can experience literary landscapes so deeply because of my experiences in physical landscapes. As a result, I wonder if those who spend more time in fictional landscapes than actual ones might start to experience nature differently. Could literary landscapes teach us to see creation in a new way and possibly even motivate readers toward environmental stewardship?

One of my favorite literary landscapes is the place between worlds in C. S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew*. When I read about this place, I am transported to the many forested landscapes that I have visited in my life. Here is Lewis's description of Digory's first impressions:

All the light was green light that came through the leaves: but there must have been a very strong sun overhead, for this green daylight was bright and warm. It was the quietest wood you could possibly imagine. There were no birds, no insects, no animals, and no wind. You could almost feel the trees growing. The pool he had just got out of was not the only pool. There were dozens of others—a pool every few yards as far as his eyes could reach. You could almost feel the trees drinking the water up with their roots. This wood was very much alive. When he tried to describe it afterward Digory always said, "It was a rich place: as rich as plumcake." The strangest thing was that, almost before he had looked about him, Digory had half forgotten how he had come there. . . . If anyone had asked him "Where did you come from?" he would probably have said, "I've always been here." That was what it felt like—as if one had always been in that place and never been bored although nothing had ever happened. As he said long afterward, "It's not the sort of place where things happen. The trees go on growing, that's all."<sup>1</sup>

What did you imagine while reading this? While it is hard for me to imagine literal stillness and quiet ("no birds, no insects, no animals, no wind") in any of the forests I know, I understand what is being described. When I am in a forest, I

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Collier, 1955), 29.

experience a stillness—a quieting of my soul. Like Lewis, I understand that forests are “not the sort of place(s) where things happen”—at least not the everyday things that distract us from what is important. In forests, I find that I can join the psalmist in experiencing this promise: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). When I read about Lewis’s forest in the place between worlds, I can truly understand and experience this place, perhaps as Digory did in *The Magician’s Nephew*, because I have experience in actual forests. In fact, experiencing this fictional landscape makes me want to go and find similar places in real life so that I can experience “trees (that) go on growing.” Don’t you wish this too?

I love reading as much as I love exploring landscapes (whether forests, mountains, prairies, or wetlands). I read books to learn, to worship, to teach, to escape, and to relax. I am particularly drawn to books about nature or those with settings that enable me to feel part of nature through detailed descriptions. By reading such books, I have gained a desire both to be in nature as well as to protect it. I have also developed what Aldo Leopold, a famous conservation biologist and the father of wildlife biology, defines as a *land ethic*. I understand that I am part of a community that extends beyond people to include plants, animals, and all of creation.<sup>2</sup> Robert Macfarlane, an author of several books about place, literature, and imagination, writes, “Whenever I ask professional conservationists what first inspired them to get involved in the protection of the environment, they invariably mention either a book or a place.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Ballantine, 1966).

<sup>3</sup>Robert Macfarlane, in “Landscape, Literature, Life,” World.edu, March 4, 2012, <http://world.edu/landscape-literature-life/>.

It is my experience that many of us who have pursued conservation as a vocation connect strongly to places, even places discovered in books. We can easily connect fictional places with places we know that need protection or restoration. Love for these places is enough to motivate us to environmental action. It is also true that those of us who pursue environmental stewardship are drawn to writing about nature. Macfarlane suggests that most people, however, are not motivated to action simply through reading “nature writing.” He argues that those of us who are motivated by writings of naturalists are probably already interested and inclined toward environmental action. To those without a deep-seated inclination toward or interest in the natural world, books about nature can seem uninteresting, pious, or even tending toward propaganda.<sup>4</sup> However, these same people often are strongly drawn to the grand fictional landscapes created by authors like C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. For some of these readers, as they learn to care about these fictional locations, they are also awakened to the beauty of the created world in which they live. Accordingly, they may begin to care about the conservation and protection of the landscapes surrounding them.

In their work *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol*, Dickerson and O’Hara argue that “people are sometimes willing to listen to ideas that come in the form of story that they would not listen to in the form of abstract arguments.”<sup>5</sup> Further, Patrick Curry also maintains that in order for readers to be motivated to environmental action from the stories they read, they must have

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<sup>4</sup>Robert Macfarlane, “New Words on the Wild,” *Nature* 498 (2013): 166–67.

<sup>5</sup>Matthew Dickerson and David O’Hara, *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol: The Environmental Vision of C. S. Lewis* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

formed a personal connection to these fictional landscapes.<sup>6</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis both created landscapes that readers seem to connect with, including descriptions of fictional places that their readers know intimately and love to explore. For example, Tolkien's "subcreation"<sup>7</sup> of Middle-earth provides a setting for his stories that connects the readers to real landscapes ranging from swamps and forests to mountains and grasslands.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the hobbits' beloved Shire was based on the rural land in the West Midlands of England, where Tolkien spent his boyhood. Likewise, Lewis's creation of Narnia reflects the landscapes he loved to walk across in the Belfast countryside.<sup>9</sup> Thus, both Tolkien's and Lewis's personal experience of the natural world allowed them to create familiar places that readers can recognize and envision for themselves as they read the stories. Stories speak of truths,<sup>10</sup> including environmental truths about the vulnerabilities of nature when actions within the stories destroy rather than protect the created world.

## Reading Landscapes

Everyone has some kind of connection to place. When I teach ecology, I start the course asking my students to think of their favorite place in nature and describe it to me. I remind them that there are many aspects to place—there are elements that

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<sup>6</sup>Patrick Curry, "Tolkien and Nature," Tolkien Estate, 2015, [www.tolkienestate.com/writing/patrick-curry-tolkien-and-nature/](http://www.tolkienestate.com/writing/patrick-curry-tolkien-and-nature/).

<sup>7</sup>Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, eds., *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories* (London: HarperCollins, 2008).

<sup>8</sup>Dinah Hazell, *The Plants of Middle-earth* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>Dickerson and O'Hara, *Narnia and the Fields of Arbol*.

<sup>10</sup>Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans, *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

can be described using our senses: what you see, smell, hear, taste; relationships that require a bit of observation and remembering; and also processes like climate that shape each of these elements. Essentially, what the students are doing in this exercise is describing their home landscape. My students are thinking about a familiar place, one they connect with and are drawn to. This can be any place—their actual home or where they find the stillness the Psalmist describes. I call this activity “reading landscapes.” It involves scanning, recognizing, identifying, and interpreting a place with the hope of learning, worshiping, teaching, escaping, or relaxing.<sup>11</sup> Reading the landscape involves paying attention to one’s surroundings in order to understand what attributes make the place unique. As the landscape is explored, the “reader” considers the common species making up the specific community (like robins in a maple tree and gray squirrels hiding acorns), delights with every surprising discovery (like a visiting scarlet tanager in the top of a bur oak or a roaming red fox in the honeysuckle hedge), and considers how they personally interact with the place.

Reading landscapes includes not only the flora and fauna but also the habitat. Interestingly, *landscape* is a term used by many disciplines to describe the attributes of a place.<sup>12</sup> For example, scientists might be interested in the elements of the land that explain natural processes, like ecosystem services,<sup>13</sup> while artists may be interested in connecting feelings or

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<sup>11</sup>David Schur, *An Introduction to Close Reading* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Stanislas Dehaene, *Reading in the Brain: The Science and Evolution of a Human Invention* (New York: Viking, 2009).

<sup>12</sup>Thomas Kirchoff, Ludwig Trepl, and V. Vicenzotti, “What Is Landscape Ecology? An Analysis and Evaluation of Six Different Conceptions,” *Landscape Research* 38 (2013): 33-51.

<sup>13</sup>Kirchoff, Trepl, Vicenzotti, “What Is Landscape Ecology?”



memories or longings to the land by focusing on elements of the landscape that are familiar. This is why we are not disoriented when we enter Middle-earth at the beginning of *The Hobbit*, for what child has not dreamed of digging out a fort or a hideaway? However, I'm guessing most of these attempts result in a hole that isn't nearly as welcoming as the child envisioned. This is where Tolkien starts with the development of his landscape: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort."<sup>14</sup>

The description of what the hole is not, and the similarity to the shared experiences of many children, is exactly what orients the reader to the "comfort" of a hobbit-hole. Shared experiences allow us to understand landscapes, whether we have spent time in them or not. In this way, the landscapes of Tolkien and Lewis extend beyond mere settings for a story; these authors have created worlds with specific geologies, geographies, ecologies, and cultures. Just like in actual landscapes, readers can experience these created landscapes at different scales. For example, in the terrain of *The Hobbit*, the reader can experience the detail of the path:

As they went on Bilbo looked from side to side for something to eat; but the blackberries were still only in flower, and of course there were no nuts, not even hawthorn-berries. . . . They still went on and on. The rough path disappeared. The bushes, and the long grasses between the boulders, the patches of rabbit-cropped turf, the

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<sup>14</sup>J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), 3.

thyme and the sage and the marjoram, and the yellow rockroses all vanished, and they found themselves at the top of a wide steep slope of fallen stones, the remains of a landslide.<sup>15</sup>

Readers can also experience the grand, sweeping vistas of the journey: “Now they could look back over the lands they had left, laid out behind them far below. Far, far away in the West, where things were blue and faint, Bilbo knew their lay his own country of safe and comfortable things, and his little hobbit-hole.”<sup>16</sup>

Regardless of the scale, there are elements of the landscape that orient the reader to a place of comfort because they connect the reader to elements that are familiar. The created landscapes of Lewis and Tolkien are believable because each author spent time in nature learning to read actual landscapes in addition to spending time in literary landscapes as they read throughout their lives.

### Imagined Landscapes

C. S. Lewis created imagined landscapes for most of his life. In *Surprised by Joy*, he describes his boyhood fictional creation “Animal Land” as a place of “anthropomorphized beasts” that entertained his imagination. However, he describes his drawings as lacking beauty and having a “shocking ignorance of natural form.” Lewis says, “This absence of beauty, now that I come to think of it, is characteristic of our childhood.”<sup>17</sup> However, a “biscuit-tin garden” made by his brother with

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<sup>15</sup>Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 113.

<sup>16</sup>Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, 65.

<sup>17</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harper-One, 1955), 5.

moss, twigs, and flowers was brought to the nursery one day, and “that was the first beauty [he] knew.”<sup>18</sup> The moss-garden of Lewis’s childhood, perhaps, was the seed for the imagined landscapes of his fiction, since he wrote that it first made him aware of nature.<sup>19</sup>

Lewis loved walking across landscapes and was certainly influenced by what he experienced. For example, in October 1918, he wrote in a letter to his boyhood friend Arthur Greeves,

“Savernake Woods,” doesn’t that breathe of romance? . . .

I have been in Savernake Woods this morning. You get clear of the village, cross a couple of fields and then a sunken chalky road leads you right into the wood. It is full of beech and oak but also of those little bushy things that grow out of the earth in four or five different trunks—vide Rackham’s woodland scenes in the “Siegfried” illustrations. In places, too, there has been a good deal of cutting down: some people think this spoils a wood but I find it delightful to come out of the thickets suddenly to a half bare patch full of stumps and stacks of piled wood with the sun glinting thro’ the survivors. Green walks of grass with thick wood on either side led off the road and we followed one of these down and found our way back by long détours.<sup>20</sup>

As he explains in another letter to his brother, Warren, his experience went beyond “lines and colours, but (extends to) smells, sounds, and tastes.”<sup>21</sup> Lewis further describes

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<sup>18</sup>Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 6.

<sup>19</sup>Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 6.

<sup>20</sup>Walter Hooper, ed., *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914–1963)* (London: Collins, 1979), 233.

<sup>21</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters*, Vol. 1 (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 558.

how as he walked, he thought of literature or opera and considered how beloved scenes might play out in the landscape where he was walking: "I was always involuntarily looking for scenes that might belong to the Wagnerian world, here a steep hillside covered with firs where Mime might meet Sieglinde, there a sunny glade where Siegfried might listen to the bird . . . But soon . . . nature ceased to be a mere reminder of the books, became herself the medium of the real joy."<sup>22</sup>

Spending time in nature certainly impacted Lewis's creativity, and as a result, his readers experience many of his fictional landscapes in the same way that he explored actual landscapes; as the characters walk or journey, the landscapes unfold. Consider, for example, this passage from *Out of the Silent Planet*, the first book in Lewis's Space Trilogy:

They walked forward—beside the channel. In a few minutes Ransom saw a new landscape. The channel was not only a shallow but a rapid—the first, indeed, of a series of rapids by which the water descended steeply for the next half-mile. The ground fell away before them and the canyon—or handramit—continued at a very much lower level. Its walls, however, did not sink with it, and from his present position Ransom got a clearer notion of the lie of the land.<sup>23</sup>

Because Lewis spent much time walking across landscapes, he is able to create something beautiful and familiar in an entirely new landscape on a planet previously unknown to the reader.

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<sup>22</sup>Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 77.

<sup>23</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 63.

Just as Lewis learned to love nature from the biscuit-tin garden created by his brother Warren, Tolkien was introduced to the beauty of the natural world by his mother and her love of botany and gardening.<sup>24</sup> He cultivated his own love of plants, especially trees, throughout his life.<sup>25</sup> He spent enough time in nature reading landscapes to be able to know the intricacies of natural rhythms. In a letter to his son, Christopher, he describes in detail the flowering and leaf-out sequence of the trees: “The oaks were among the earliest trees to be leafed equaling or beating birch, beech and lime etc. Great cauliflowers of brilliant yellow-ochre tasseled with flowers, while the ashes (in the same situations) were dark, dead, with hardly even a visible sticky bud.”<sup>26</sup>

Tolkien’s observations and knowledge of nature allowed him to create fictional landscapes described in such detail that plant guides have been written and taxonomic keys developed to help the reader navigate the flora of Middle-earth.<sup>27</sup> These familiar elements of landscape allow the reader to become immersed in imaginary worlds. Tolkien explains in a 1964 interview with the BBC that elements of his fictional landscapes were based on the place where “memory and imagination” come together, and that “the Shire is very much like the kind of world in which I first became aware of things.”<sup>28</sup> Middle-earth represents the “actual Old world of this planet,”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Hazell, *Plants of Middle-earth*.

<sup>25</sup>Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 220.

<sup>26</sup>Carpenter and Tolkien, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 408.

<sup>27</sup>Hazell, *Plants of Middle-earth*; Walter Judd and Graham Judd, *Flora of Middle-earth: Plants of J. R. R. Tolkien’s Legendarium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>28</sup>J. R. R. Tolkien, 1964 interview by Denys Geroult, British Broadcasting Corporation, broadcast in 1971.

<sup>29</sup>Carpenter and Tolkien, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 220.

but Tolkien does not claim to “relate the shape of the mountains and land-masses”;<sup>30</sup> rather he describes his created landscape as “at a different stage of imagination.”<sup>31</sup> He explains, “Mine is not an ‘imaginary’ world, but an imaginary historical moment on ‘Middle-earth’—which is our habituation.”<sup>32</sup> Because Middle-earth “is our habituation,”<sup>33</sup> we might expect to recognize elements of the “habitable lands of our world.”<sup>34</sup>

### Landscapes That Transform

Time spent in nature “reading landscapes” helped Lewis and Tolkien create realistic and relatable places for their fictional works to develop, yet these places are much more than settings for stories. Lewis and Tolkien have created worlds that are familiar to their readers: ecosystems that we can understand and even experience as we journey with the sons of Adam, daughters of Eve, or the Fellowship.<sup>35</sup> These created landscapes play a role in transforming characters as they pass on their journeys, and readers might also experience transformations as they participate in the journeys of the characters. For example, landscapes dominated by forests often are important to the action of the story, as if they too are characters. In Lewis’s *The Last Battle*, the trees call King Tirian to action (even if indirectly). He is sitting under a “great oak” enjoying “pleasant spring weather” and starts receiving messages of Aslan’s return to Narnia from the birds and the squirrels. Just as Tirian is questioning the rumors of the return of Aslan to Narnia, a dryad of a beech tree comes to him with an urgent message.

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<sup>30</sup>Carpenter and Tolkien, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 220.

<sup>31</sup>Tolkien, 1964 interview by Geroult.

<sup>32</sup>Carpenter and Tolkien, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 244.

<sup>33</sup>Carpenter and Tolkien, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 244.

<sup>34</sup>Carpenter and Tolkien, *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 376.

<sup>35</sup>Judd and Judd, *Flora of Middle Earth*.

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