

An interview by *The Literary Traveler* – 6/28/11 – with Robert Trexler, publisher of Winged Lion Press and editor of *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C.S. Lewis Society*

1. Let's start with your love of C.S. Lewis. What originally inspired you to have such an affinity for Lewis? Why do his works continue to inspire you?

Most people know C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) as the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* or perhaps *The Screwtape Letters* and *Mere Christianity*. But he was a professor of English literature at Oxford and Cambridge University – one of the most respected English literature scholars of his day. He wrote a total of 41 books – novels, fairy tales, science fiction, popular theology, poetry and literary criticism.

C.S. Lewis believed that our imagination is the primary way to discover reality. In his essay, "Myth Becomes Fact", he wrote: "What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is), and, therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truths on the abstract level. Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which become truths down here in the valley."

Once you understand the importance of myth and story-telling for Lewis, you can appreciate why he wrote mythopoeic literature. His Narnia stories and science fiction novels (which he called fairy tales for grown-ups) were intended to bypass the materialistic prejudices of the modern mindset. By writing stories that engage the mythic imagination he sought to put his readers in touch with universal values held in common by all people and societies. This is sometimes referred to as "natural law" and it is what C.S. Lewis called the *Tao* in his book *The Abolition of Man*. Natural law simply means that people normally have a sense of right and wrong.

I find his non-fiction just as appealing as his fiction because his literary and theological books and essays help you to understand what you experience in his stories.

2. At the monthly meetings for The New York C.S. Lewis Society, you have guest speakers. What do they discuss? Since Lewis is so strongly rooted in Christianity, do you have to be a Christian to join the Society?

Our meeting schedule is on the Society website www.nyclsociety.com and it lists meeting topics for nearly two years in advance. Guest speakers often explore a theme in Lewis' books or in books by writers who influenced Lewis – for example: J.R.R Tolkien, George MacDonald, Dorothy L. Sayers, G. K. Chesterton, or Charles Williams. Occasionally we have an open discussion about a Lewis book or one of the movies based on the Narnia stories. In August we have a meeting called "From the Floor" when any topic can be discussed. At that meeting the moderator especially asks people to bring up things that they disagree with Lewis about. Lewis himself loved a healthy debate. One long-time member was so bold as to confess that they do not enjoy reading the Narnia books. We average about 30 people attending a typical meeting.

Ours Society was founded in 1969 and the original charter for the Society is posted on our website. Our purpose has not changed in over four decades: two of the stated aims are “to consider all aspects of the life and works of this rare man and any matters on which his thought may shed light” and “to encourage scholarship and publication stemming from his writings.” It is not necessary to be a Christian to attend a meeting or become a member. For anyone interested in forming a C.S. Lewis Society or reading club, I recommend Will Vaus’ book *Speaking of Jack: A C.S. Lewis Discussion Guide*.

Meetings are held in New York City and are free and open for anyone to attend. You can become a subscribing member in the USA for \$10 dollars which entitles you to receive our bi-monthly bulletin. The bulletins are 16 to 20 pages in length and include essays, book reviews, and detailed reports of the monthly meetings. There are two sample bulletins that can be read on our website.

3. What inspired you to co-found Zossima Press?

My publishing ventures are a direct result of my involvement in the New York C.S. Lewis Society. As the editor of our bi-monthly bulletin for the past 11 years, I have become acquainted with many scholars who teach and write about C.S. Lewis and related subjects. I always receive excellent material to publish in the bulletin because the Society has gained a reputation as an important place to submit essays about all aspects of his work.

In August of 2002, John Granger submitted an essay on J.K. Rowling as a latter-day “Inkling” (the Inklings were the literary friends who gathered weekly for many years in Oxford, the most famous being J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis). I was immediately impressed by Granger’s original thinking and talent for communicating and published his essay in the bulletin. In 2006 we formed a partnership to publish a collection of Harry Potter essays. John, who has authored many bestselling books on the Harry Potter books, left Zossima Press in 2009 to pursue other projects and I am now the sole owner of Zossima Press (www.zossimapress.com) as well as two new imprints: Winged Lion Press and Barnabas Books (www.wingedlionpress.com). This summer will mark the publication of my 30th book.

4. Tell us about the book *Spotlight: A Close-Up Look at the Artistry and Meaning of Stephanie Meyer’s Twilight Saga* by John Granger? Give us an example of how *Twilight* can be read in a literary way.

This book is a highly original look at the *Twilight* phenomena and what made the books the huge bestsellers they are. The first part of the book is a case study of how *Twilight* (and other books) can be read on four different levels: the surface, moral, allegorical, and anagogical (or transcendent) level. After Granger gives examples of these four ways of reading, the second half of the book explores how Stephanie Meyer merged her Mormon upbringing with traditional literary symbolism and postmodern themes to create a story that millions of people found irresistible. I must admit that I have not read any of the *Twilight* books or watched any of the movies, but that did not make reading Granger’s book any less fascinating for me.

One example of what Granger calls “literary scaffolding” in Meyer’s books can be discovered, as with most authors, by knowing what books influenced them. Meyer was an English major at Brigham Young University and she has admitted that Shakespeare’s plays have influenced her own stories. For your readers to get the best explanation of what Granger is writing about, I suggest reading the introduction to his book as well as an article he wrote for *Touchstone Magazine* which are both available on the Zossima Press website. (www.zossima.com)

5. Then you founded Winged Lion Press, a solo venture. How did you go about choosing books for your press?

As I mentioned earlier, I am fortunate to be part of a worldwide community of Lewis enthusiasts and scholars. By the end of this summer I will have published eight books on the works of C. S. Lewis. I have also been involved for many years with the George MacDonald Society (www.george-macdonald.com). MacDonald was a 19th century author of whom Madeline L’Engle wrote, “George MacDonald is the grandfather of us all—all of us who struggle to come to terms with truth through fantasy.” MacDonald influenced Lewis, Tolkien, L’Engle, and he even gets high marks from Philip Pullman. By the end of this summer I will have published five books related to George MacDonald.

Some of the other titles are also literary studies (for example, one about *Les Miserables* and another about early Romantic poetry) or reflections on pop culture and contemporary values. This month Winged Lion Press is publishing *Virtuous Worlds: A Video Gamer’s Guide to Spiritual Truth*. For anyone who feels the need to justify hours spent playing video games, this may be the book for you.

I don’t have a rigid template of what books I choose to publish, but they naturally tend to be books that I have a personal interest in. I recently published a young adult book of fantasy (*The Iona Conspiracy*) and the Barnabas Books imprint is for books that are more specifically religious. One book, *Called to Serve*, is the memoir of a Firefighter-Chaplain who served at Ground Zero after the 9-11 attacks and another (*The Living Word of the Living God*) is an introduction to reading the Bible written by an Episcopal priest. Following the example of C.S. Lewis, these books have an appeal across many denominations or even for readers who are not Christians.

6. Tell us about two books in particular: *The Order of Harry Potter* and *C.S. Lewis: His Literary Achievement*, both by Colin Manlove. Why would our literary traveler readers find them of interest?

I first met Colin at a George MacDonald (1924-1905) centennial conference in 2005. Scholars from many countries gathered at Baylor University to presented talks which were published in 2007 (*George MacDonald: Literary Heritage and Heirs*). Last year we published his book about C.S. Lewis and the Harry Potter stories. These give an overview and evaluation of the fiction of C. S. Lewis and J. K. Rowling – placing them in their literary context and highlighting what makes them unique. I should also mention that these are not stuffy academic tomes – the author’s style of writing is engaging and eloquent. One unique aspect of Colin’s work is his ability to approach any subject without being prejudiced by what

other critics may have written. As a result, his insights and ability to perceive literary trends and ideas is remarkable.

Colin lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he taught for many years at Edinburgh University. His specialty is fantasy literature, a topic on which he has published many groundbreaking books. To give you an idea of the breadth of his knowledge, Colin's book *From Alice to Harry Potter* is a survey of 400 English fantasy books.

7. Can you give our readers any advice if they are thinking of starting a small press? Also, can you give advice to writers who would like to be published by a small press i.e. what is the best way to submit their manuscript and/or book proposal?

Let me answer your second question first. The way to submit a book with a small publisher is the same as with any publisher, and advice can be found on the internet by googling the words "book proposal." For myself, in addition to asking for the usual proposal, so far I have asked to read the entire manuscript unless I know the author's writing or have published a book by them before.

As to advice on starting a small press, I have formed some opinions during the last five years which may be useful. First, expect a fairly steep learning curve. So if you don't think you'll love the work of publishing, then save yourself the time and effort (not to mention money). Depending on your skills, it can take several thousand dollars (or more) to design and create a professional-looking book and bring it to market. Even with print-on-demand technology, there is no guarantee that you will make back your initial investment.

Second, I recommend concentrating on an area that you are familiar with and find a niche that is underserved by larger publishers. Create a reputation and expertise that you can build on. Just as writers are advised to write about what they know, small publishers should follow the same rule.

However, while any publisher (and author) wants their books to become bestsellers, it is personally satisfying to know you have published a unique book that will enrich the lives of its readers. That's the bottom line for me. If you're looking for a way to make lots of money, learn a trade. But if you think you'd love working with authors and producing books – I wish you well as a publisher. Someone has said, "Do what you love and the money will follow." I say, "Do what you love and if you don't go broke, keep doing it."