

David Downing,
The Most Reluctant Convert: C.S. Lewis's Journey to Faith,
Review by M.M. Hubele
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David Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert: C.S. Lewis's Journey to Faith*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004. ISBN 9780830832712.

David Downing's new biography of C.S. Lewis, much like the inspiring quote to which its title points, is often as eloquent and concise as the master's work itself, making *The Most Reluctant Convert* an entertaining and poignant work. Focusing on Lewis' spiritual journey, specifically his transformation between the years 1904 and 1931, *Convert* is a departure from other biographies of this famed author, as Downing expressly leaves out portions of Lewis' life—and includes others—so as to remain centred strictly around Lewis' spiritual evolution. In this way, the book offers the reader a pointed and deep analysis of the personal, fantastical, and textual influences forming and honing C.S. Lewis' philosophy and faith.

Downing uses C.S. Lewis' diaries, letters, and literature—as well as several of Jack's closest confidants' reflections—to paint a remarkable picture of the ideas and people influencing Lewis' formation. Especially notable is Downing's exceptional cross-referencing of Lewis' readings, experiences, and writings, which showcases not only the evolution of his subject's thought but also the resulting amalgamation of Lewis' later ideas. Making good use of literary critical techniques, Downing unearths striking overlaps between Lewis' historical experiences and his ensuing literary reflections and characters. This fluency allows Downing to demonstrate not just how Lewis' experiences impacted the man's thought, but also how *significant* each experience was in the writer's faith journey. Defending his observations with several analyses of Lewis' lexicon, recurring symbols, character descriptions, and plot developments, Downing reveals a startlingly clear, if dynamic, coherence in Lewis' work before, during, and after the great author's conversion. In this way Downing accomplishes his task of revealing Lewis' personal thought as he moved towards Christianity.

Downing's concise assembly of Lewis' experiences and work makes *The Most Reluctant Convert* an energetic and easy read. Throughout the book I found myself nodding along and marking observations, impressed by Downing's ability to demonstrate both the fluidity of Lewis' transformation and the unforeseen influences impacting the author. Building upon, and in many ways fleshing out, Lewis' *Surprised by Joy*, Downing synthesizes many of the works and thinkers that Lewis

engaged. While these synopses frequently veer off Downing's point and occasionally are left without thorough explanation, they nevertheless provide a rounding out which, if nothing else, allows the reader to form a fuller understanding of Lewis' encounters. Further, as Downing often uses the same method of exchange that Lewis himself used—namely a dialogue between Lewis' reflections and the texts the author was reading—Downing is able to draw the reader deeper into the thought processes of C.S. Lewis. In this way the reader becomes an active observer of the transformation of Jack's mind.

Although the author readily relies on numerous sources for his biography, a notable absence in this work is a consideration of Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*. While the title is referenced once, Downing does not use this book, which Lewis considered his best and into which he poured so many autobiographical reflections, as the literary mirror of Lewis' spiritual journey that it is. A self-proclaimed spiritual biography, *The Most Reluctant Convert* should have spent more time with Lewis' *Faces* to defend its interpretation of events. The slight is not detrimental to *The Most Reluctant Convert*, but it presents a missed opportunity for deepening the synthesis of Lewis' reflections with Downing's own.

In the end, David C. Downing's *The Most Reluctant Convert* is an enjoyable and enlightening biography that introduces readers to yet another layer of C.S. Lewis' conversion to Christianity. Eloquently constructed, Downing's book expands upon works previously written while also offering a novel presentation of Lewis' journey through materialism, spiritualism, and theism—and ultimately his return to Christianity. By the end of the book, readers will be so enraptured with Downing's approach that the biographer's final conjectures about Lewis' first profession of Christ will appear an inevitable—and desirable—prospect to complete the entire tale. I recommend this book as an essential complement to other works about both Lewis and the psychology of conversion. *Within The Most Reluctant Convert* lie pearls of insight for seekers and believers alike.

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