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Book Review of: *C.S. Lewis for Beginners* by Louis Markos

AUTHOR(S): Josiah Peterson

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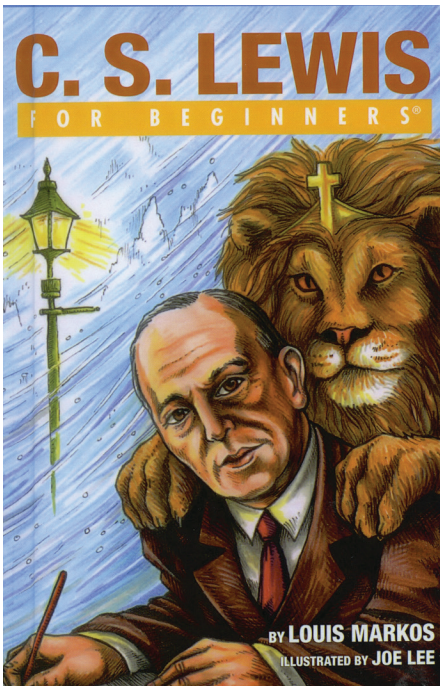
Marion E. Wade Center • Wheaton College
501 College Ave • Wheaton, IL 60187-5593
630.752.5908 • wheaton.edu/wade



Online Book Reviews

Louis Markos, *C.S. Lewis for Beginners*. Illustrated by Joe Lee. Danbury, CT: For Beginners®, 2022.

“Lewis had a gift for plowing through vast tracts of primary material and selecting representative gems” (Markos 33). So writes Houston Christian University English Professor Louis Markos of C.S. Lewis. Markos exercises a similar gift introducing Lewis’s own prolific output in his recent book, *C.S. Lewis for Beginners*.



Markos introduces Lewis as “the greatest Christian apologist of the twentieth century,” defining apologist by way of Plato’s “Apology,” in which Socrates makes a “defense of what he believes and practices” (1). This is the first of many Plato references from Markos, who released his book *From Plato to Christ* in 2021. Markos is clear about how deeply Lewis’s Christianity affected his work, yet he offers eight reasons why even non-Christians should read Lewis, including Lewis’s deep engagement with the Western tradition, his insights into ethics and psychology, and his accessible and winsome writing.

Unlike his Teaching Company Great Course on “The Life and Writings of C.S. Lewis,” which was arranged topically, in *For Beginners*

Markos devotes a chapter to each of Lewis’s books and arranges them chronologically. Markos only deviates from this chronology to group four less-accessible academic works (*The Allegory of Love*, *The Personal Heresy*, *English Literature in the 16th Century*, and *Studies in Words*) together in one chapter and to cover the Narnia sequence without interruption. Lewis’s poetry and essay collections are acknowledged but not given chapters. Markos does not cite unless directly quoting the text; when he does, he cites by book and chapter. There is no index, but there is a substantial annotated bibliography. Chapters average six pages, each starting with a bullet-point overview of genre, summary, context, and sometimes notes on reception or influences,

and ending with a “suggested pairing” of a Lewis essay or two to read alongside the book just discussed.

As the title suggests, the book is not aimed at scholars, though the scope and sequence, sporadic trivia, and Markos’s characteristic insights may prove helpful to more serious students of Lewis. One might learn, for instance, that Lewis wrote a preface to Joy Davidman’s devotional book on the ten commandments, *Smoke on the Mountain* (159), or that Stanley Fish wrote *Surprised by Sin* in response to Lewis’s *Preface to Paradise Lost* (70). Or one might gain deeper insight into allusions such as the cracking of the Stone Table’s call back to the breaking of the tablets of the law in Exodus (110).

Markos’s style is winsome and engaging, with clever illustrations: “Rather than study the medieval knight as an artifact, the genial critic puts on his helmet and looks at the world through his visor” (72). His summaries are concise: “Summary [of *Miracles*]: Miracles are consistent with the laws of nature and the nature of God” (99). He makes lists whenever he can (lists of apologists, of resolutions Lewis arrived at in *A Grief Observed*, controversial religious topics Lewis *does not* talk about) and employs frequent use of exclamation marks.

If only one could similarly praise the book’s visual illustrations. The book includes at least one picture every two pages, often garish and cartoonish: see the red-eyed, cross-tiara-wearing Aslan spooning C.S. Lewis on the cover. Worse, it is clear the illustrator never read Lewis. His hrossa is a beaver in Greco-Roman armor carrying a drawn sword, while Ransom wears a fish-bowl space-helmet (45). The work of Pauline Baynes this is not.

Markos does overreach on a few points of scholarship. He repeats the falsehood that Lewis’s was the second-most-recognized voice on the radio after Churchill during World War II (22).¹ He confidently asserts that Mrs. Moore remained an atheist until she died (15), while there is evidence to the contrary.² Other points may be misleading in their emphasis, if not in their factual basis, such as his stress on Tolkien’s role in Lewis’s conversion (19) to the total exclusion of Hugo Dyson.³ When discussing *The Allegory of Love*—right after a brilliant passage explaining the seismic shift that took place from the ancients, who saw love as a maddening force, to the Medievals, who saw it as ennobling—Markos repeats Lewis’s assertion that “chivalric romance is almost always adulterous” (35). He fails to point out, though, that subsequent scholars have identified this as an area in which Lewis led people astray.⁴

Who is the book ultimately for? The chapters covering nonfiction are likely to inspire less-confident readers with the value of attempting some of Lewis’s more challenging works. It is harder to identify whom the fiction summaries are targeted toward. What “beginner” would want these stories to be spoiled in advance of reading them? In Markos’s defense, the plot was not the part of the story that Lewis thought most important. These chapters

will likely help those who have already read Lewis's fiction and are looking for guidance on how to get more out of the experience. Thus, the book is well suited to those familiar with but ready to go farther into C.S. Lewis.

JOSIAH PETERSON
Chandler Preparatory Academy
Chandler, Arizona

Notes

¹William O'Flaherty explains the origins of this claim and offers countervailing evidence in the June 24, 2017, issue of "Correcting Misconceptions Special Feature," published on the *Essential C.S. Lewis* website. He cites Bruce Johnson's "C.S. Lewis and the BBC's Brains Trust: A Study in Resiliency," published in Volume 30 (2013) of *VII*, for most of his evidence.

²Joel Heck offers the countervailing evidence in his chapter on her in *No Ordinary People: 21 Friendships of C.S. Lewis* (105). Heck's most compelling point is Ronald Head's recollection that Lewis always included Mrs. Moore on the list of the "faithful departed" on All Souls' Day.

³In contrast, Joel Heck writes, "While Tolkien is mentioned more often as an influence on Lewis's conversion, Hugo Dyson probably had a greater impact than Tolkien" (Heck 34).

⁴As Helen Cooper writes: "Perhaps the most notorious example would be *The Allegory of Love*. . . . His account includes the patently untrue remark that one of [courtly love's] defining characteristics was adultery: a remark that set medieval literary studies on the wrong path for two or three generations, and we have still not quite got over it" (150–51). Dr. Helen Cooper is Emeritus Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at the University of Cambridge, the chair once held by C.S. Lewis.

Works Cited

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