

“The Books the Made a Difference”

exerpt from

American Bookseller

Volume X, Number 10

June 1987

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This excerpt created for the Stephen R. Donaldson official web site:

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Photo by Helen Marcus

BOOKS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN VITAL to me - from the early wonders of "Oz" to the mature passion of *Lord of the Rings*, from the simple melodrama of "Bomba the Jungle Boy" to the complex excitement of *Heart of Darkness*. But I doubt that any book or books affected me as much as C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* series.

I first read them at an important time in my life: when I was in junior high school. Of course, I was always an avid reader. Books gave me something to do with my imag-

ination, the fantasy life inside my head: They filled me with adventures that I could play out for myself, over and over again, casting myself in the role of hero, or combining ideas to make new adventures. And the same books also gave me something to do with my friends: We built elaborate games based on books we had all read, playing "Maneaters of Kumoan" until our parents thought we had lost our minds. But, nothing I had read before thrilled me the way the Narnia books did.

I remember staying home to read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* or *Prince Caspian*, when my friends were going to the beach - which made my friends think I had lost my mind, since going to the beach was a big deal for all of us. I remember struggling to read *The Magician's Nephew* or *The Last Battle*, while a barber was trying to cut my hair - which made the barber think I had lost my mind, since I couldn't wear my glasses during a haircut, and the page in front of me was covered with clippings. I remember sneaking a flashlight into bed with me so that I could read *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, or *The Horse and His Boy* under my blankets after lights-out - which, in the end, nearly everyone understood, since those books didn't belong to me, and I had to give them back the next day.

While I was immersed in Narnia, however, I didn't care what other people thought of me. The combination of magic, adventure, and *meaning* in the Chronicles took over my mind.

I loved magic because it was hope. It told me that there was more to life than I could see on the surface; that there was more to *me* than I could see on the surface. It told me that life and people are greater than the sum of their parts; that there are always ways to solve problems if I just didn't let myself feel defeated.

I loved adventure because it made me feel brave. It showed me that the most important thing wasn't whether my life was hard, or whether I had muscles, or whether people liked me, but whether I could look at everything as an excitement instead of as a chore. The heroes of Narnia were kids like me, with fears and weaknesses just like mine; and I could see that they were heroes because they remembered to be excited instead of afraid.

And I loved the *meaning* in the Chronicles because it told me that magic and adventure weren't just for kids. They weren't things I had to give up or grow out of when I got older. Narnia showed me that magic and adventure are ways of talking - maybe the best ways of talking - about the questions which matter most to everybody. Questions like, Who am I? or, Why am I here? or, What am I supposed to do about it, now that I *am* here?

Of course, I didn't think about questions like that while I was first reading the Chronicles. I just read them because I loved them. But I've spent a lot of time since then thinking about why I loved them; and now I think I loved them because they gave me the best gift there is.

Books can do that. □

Fantasy writer Stephen R. Donaldson is well-known for his two series, The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant and The Second Chronicles of Thomas Covenant. His most recent book is The Mirror of Her Dreams.