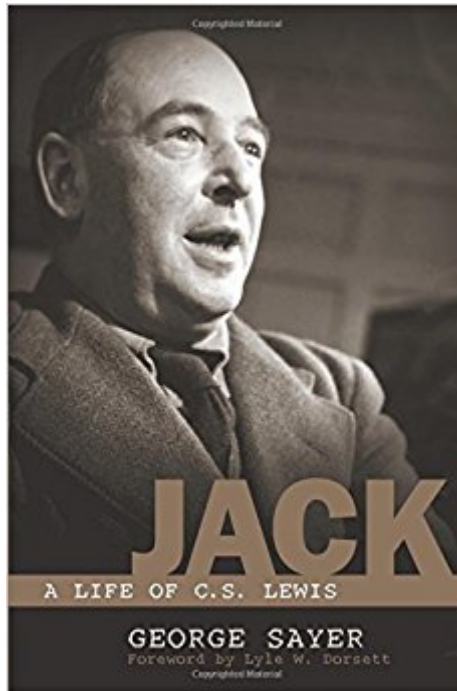




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Jack: A Life Of C. S. Lewis



Synopsis

As I walked away from New Buildings, I found the man that Lewis had called "Tollers" sitting on one of the stone steps in front of the arcade. "How did you get on?" he asked. "I think rather well. I think he will be a most interesting tutor to have." "Interesting? Yes, he's certainly that," said the man, who I later learned was J. R. R. Tolkien. "You'll never get to the bottom of him." Over the next twenty-nine years, author George Sayer's first impression about C. S. Lewis proved true. He was interesting; but he was more than just that. He was a devout Christian, gifted literary scholar, best-selling author, and brilliant apologist. Sayer draws from a variety of sources, including his close friendship with Lewis and the million-word diary of Lewis's brother, to paint a portrait of the man whose friends knew him as Jack. Offering glimpses into Lewis's extraordinary relationships and experiences, Jack details the great scholar's life at the Kilns; days at Magdalen College; meetings with the Inklings; marriage to Joy Davidman Gresham; and the creative process that produced such world-famous works as the classic *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Mere Christianity*, and *The Screwtape Letters*. This book is an intimate account of the man who helped—and through his works, continues to help—generations hear and understand the heart of Christianity.

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Customer Reviews

"My object ... is to present the factual background to the motivation and character of a remarkable man."

GEORGE SAYER (1914–2005) was head of the English department at Malvern College in Worcestershire until his retirement in 1974. While there, he and Lewis held long literary discussions on their frequent walks in the countryside. Sayer and Lewis maintained a long friendship.

George Sayer describes the life of Clive Staples Lewis—"Jack" to those close to him. He draws information from documented sources, his experiences with Lewis as a student, and from frequent visits and correspondence exchanged throughout the rest of Lewis's life. Beginning with its subject's unhappy childhood, overshadowed by the death of his mother, the book describes his equally unpleasant public school years and then follows the timeline of his adult life. The book's twenty-two chapters are roughly chronological. Each deals with a time or location important to Lewis's life, a writing project, or a close relationship. The writing chapters are the most interesting, revealing discussions, readings and insights that influenced Lewis's work. We learn, for example, of his crafting *The Chronicles of Narnia* stories as "pre-Christian" instructional tools for children to help them more easily recognize moral concepts as adults. These chapters summarize Lewis's thinking by excerpting from his writing without creating the impression that the reader no longer needs the original work. Skillfully done! In the relationship chapters the author dispels misconceptions about three people in his subject's life. The first is his brother Warren who, as Lewis's secretary, was intimately involved with his business and correspondence. Warren's alcoholism strained their relationship, but did not cause the estrangement other biographers have suggested. The book explains Lewis's relationship to Mrs. Janie Moore, in whose household he lived for many years. Mrs. Moore was the mother of Lewis's close friend, Paddy Moore. After Paddy was killed in WWI, Lewis fulfilled his promise to look after his friend's mother. In some ways she assumed the role of Lewis's own absent mother. There is also description of Lewis's relationship with his wife, Joy Davidman. The author dismisses its portrayal in the movie *Shadowlands* as inaccurate. His own account is based on observation and conversations with both Joy and Lewis. It captures the couple's progression from tentative correspondents to close and happy partners. The relationship chapters are written in the same abstract, summary style as the writing chapters. But it is less effective here; the few anecdotes whet the readers' appetite, but leave it unsatisfied. Their effect is one of distance from Lewis, rather than of increased intimacy. This is unfortunate. This book is recommended as a summary of Lewis's character traits and ideas. It is worth reading. It should be accompanied or followed by *Mere Christianity*, *Surprised by Joy*, and other works by Lewis himself.

Understanding the great C. S. Lewis may not be possible no matter how many biographies are

written. As J. R. R. Tolkien said to the author of this book back in 1934, "Interesting? Yes, he's certainly that.... You'll never get to the bottom of him" (xvii). But this biography by George Sayer at least comes close to capturing the heart of who Jack is, and perhaps does so better than any other attempt. Sayer was not only a student of Lewis who saw the man at work both as a tutor and a lecturer, he was a personal friend who had access to Jack's home life and even private thoughts. Sayer goes beyond presenting Lewis the public figure, or even the private man, as he perceived him; instead, Sayer digs deep, using letters and interviews and facts to gather knowledge beyond what he gained during the course of their friendship. He also strives to capture the essence of each location that influenced Lewis, describing the history and politics and local nuances, so that the reader sees how Lewis affected and was affected by his culture. Although this biography is a clear presentation of facts, managing to resist any creative elaboration for the sake of story, it rivets the readers' attention with just the right amount of detail to bring to life this beloved author, lecturer, radio personality, brother, novelist, lover, poet, son, friend, and lay theologian. Besides, Jack's great mind, his faithfulness to loved ones, his passion for literature, his sexuality, his love for animals and nature, his humor, his romance, his devotion to God, and his penchant for skinny dipping keep us intrigued without any need for elaboration.

I've appreciated Lewis ever since my mom read me the Narnia stories. As a young adult I read his space trilogy and several of his other books--finding some over my head, but absorbing others eagerly. I was deeply moved by the movie *Shadowlands*, portraying his brief but full marriage. This is the first biography of Lewis that I have read, and I found it both affectionately honest, tasteful, and a very useful framework and summary for all of Lewis's writings. Over the decades I've collected most of them, and now I'm launching back into them, revisiting some with experienced eyes and anticipating the new with George Sayer as my first guide. I'm now most of the way through *Mere Christianity* again, and this time Lewis sounds even more fresh and wise and personal than upon my first reading thirty years ago.

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