

# Jack's Wardrobe

Mark Pike, University of Leeds, UK



We all know we should be kind, honest, and hard-working. We also know we should be grateful, forgiving, and self-controlled.

We even know the people we need to forgive, where we need more self-control, and what we should be grateful for. But—if we're being honest with ourselves—whether we actually work to develop such virtues in our lives is another matter.

**Before Narnia I wouldn't have had a clue what vices and virtues were. But reading about the characters, you're like, "Oh, what virtue is that character showing?" It's quite fun to think about it.**

—11-year-old girl

Sometimes we even know how we could improve in a particular character quality but still don't do it. In that case, the problem is not the skill but the will. So, the question is, how do we motivate ourselves to be better?

## How Books Build Character

One way we learn about the virtues—and develop the desire to practice them—is through good books (and good movies). In his book on education, *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis wrote:

**We learn the rule of decent behavior from parents and teachers, and friends and books.**

You might think it curious that he included "books" among the sources of good character. How does reading books help us become better persons? Consider fiction. How can our character and behavior improve in the real world by reading about characters who don't actually exist?

The clue might be in a wardrobe. It might even be found in C.S. Lewis' own wardrobe. We can call it "Jack's wardrobe" because his friends and family used to call him "Jack."

The very wardrobe Jack had in his attic bedroom as a boy in Belfast, Ireland now resides in the foyer of the Wade Center, 20 miles west of Chicago, Illinois, where the archives of Lewis' letters and personal library are housed.

The management of the Wade Center, with a wink and a smile, have put a sign on the wardrobe's door saying that they accept no responsibility whatsoever for your children if they go inside the wardrobe . . .

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the Pevensie children, who first entered Narnia through the wardrobe, lived in two worlds. They spent time in Narnia and time in England. Yet every one of us lives in two worlds. We all live in a "primary world" (where we eat, shop, exercise, go to school, etc.). But most of us also live in a "secondary world" of the imagination. Some of us spend more time there than others.



C.S. Lewis, 1898-1963

*Rings* author, J.R.R. Tolkien, was Professor of English before moving to Oxford.

According to Tolkien, "A secondary world contains an 'inner consistency of reality' so that what you find inside is 'true' in that it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside."

It is the shuttling back and forth between our primary world and the secondary world of imagination that enables us to learn and grow in ways we couldn't if we remained in our primary world. A story enables us to see truths about a fictional character that then help us see ourselves afresh with a greater degree of honesty.

## Entering through the Right Door

Given the importance of stories and the world of imagination, we might ask ourselves if we're making enough use of good literature in character education.

*The Chronicles of Narnia* are "good books" in that they provide a moral "secondary world" where virtuous action is commended to us.

Having to deal with the challenges they face in Narnia is a character-building experience for Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy. They have to work hard and persevere as they seek to liberate the inhabitants of the land of Narnia and do the right (rather than the easy) thing.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that Jack, an Oxford don and a classical scholar, would have the door of his wardrobe swing open on its hinge, as it does, to allow the children to enter Narnia.

He would have been aware that the Latin for "hinge" is the word "cardo," from which we get the word "cardinal" as in the "cardinal virtues" (prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice).

That's why the Narnian virtues (which encompass the cardinal virtues) are so important for children and young people today. The door into the world of Narnia opens on the "hinge" of the cardinal virtues. Our whole moral life depends on them. Our existence as human beings hangs on them.

The *Narnian Virtues* character education curriculum offers the opportunity to develop good character—through the right door.

Welcome to Jack's wardrobe. ■

**Edmund showed deceit by lying to his siblings. I've shown deceitfulness when lying about breaking something—I blamed it on someone else. I wouldn't do that again.**

—12-year-old boy