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Disney's Next Hero: A Lion King of Kings

By DAVID KEHR

AS the residents of Narnia like to whisper, "Aslan is on the move." And so he is. But for the moment, Walt Disney Pictures has him on a very short leash.

Aslan, a talking lion with mystical powers, is the central figure in "The Chronicles of Narnia," the much-beloved seven-volume series of fantasy novels written by the British academic C. S. Lewis in the 1950's. By the year's end, if Disney marketers have their way, he will have joined Mickey Mouse, Pinocchio and Buzz Lightyear in a long line of characters that have periodically provided the Burbank giant with entertainment's most valuable asset, a new fantasy to trade on.

This next wave begins with the expected release on Dec. 9 of "[The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe](#)," which combines live action and computer-generated images in a movie adaptation of Lewis's epic. Sequels may follow. But films are only the spearhead of a corporate initiative that is likely to include a theme park presence, toys, clothing, video games and whatever other tchotchkes the infinitely resourceful Disney team can devise. Having been criticized for failing to cash in on the merchandising opportunities offered by 2003's "[Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl](#)," Disney is preparing for the kind of all-encompassing drive it hasn't mounted since 1994, when it turned "[The Lion King](#)" into a pop cultural event that still reverberates in its retail stores and on Broadway.

Company representatives, however, have little to say publicly about the "Narnia" cycle, which is being produced in partnership with the financier Philip Anschutz's Walden Media. They cite a natural reticence about promoting work that is still in progress: the director Andrew Adamson, an animation specialist whose only previous films are the computer-generated comic fairy tales "[Shrek](#)" and "[Shrek 2](#)," is still behind his digital console.

But this time, the pros at Disney are wrestling with a special challenge: how to sell a screen hero who was conceived as a forthright symbol of Jesus Christ, a redeemer who is tortured and killed in place of a young human sinner and who returns in a glorious resurrection that transforms the snowy landscape of Narnia into a verdant paradise.

That spirituality sets Aslan apart from most of the Disney pantheon and presents the company with a significant dilemma: whether to acknowledge the Christian symbolism and risk alienating a large part of the potential audience, or to play it down and possibly offend the many Christians who count among the books' fan base.

Disney executives say their aim is to capture the largest possible audience by remaining true to Lewis's work. "We're lucky that there are millions of devoted fans, who probably cross four generations," said Dennis Rice, the studio's senior vice president of publicity. "We want to reach all of those devoted fans."

To do that, Mr. Rice said, the studio plans to reach out to middle schools, boys' clubs, girls' clubs, fantasy fans and, where appropriate, religious groups. Mr. Rice said the company's message would be: "We are trying to make this movie to be as faithful to the book as possible. And if you connect to the book, we think you will connect to the movie."

Peter Sealey, an adjunct professor of marketing at the University of California, Berkeley, and a former marketing executive for Coca-Cola and Columbia Pictures, nonetheless described the project's combination of religion and children's entertainment as "an absolute time bomb in these days of extreme sensitivity."

Mr. Sealey's advice to Disney: "Either don't do it, or come completely clean, like a 'Ten Commandments' or a 'Passion of the Christ.' It seems duplicitous just to repress the religious aspects, and certainly they will all come out in this age of the Internet and strident voices on both the left and the right."

By contrast, Martin Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center of the University of Southern California and a 12-year veteran of the Disney Company, finds plenty of precedent for mingling spiritual ideas and popular entertainment.

"P. L. Travers, the author of the Mary Poppins books, was actually a follower of the mystic G. I. Gurdjieff," Mr. Kaplan said. "Her books were imbued by mysticism, the idea that all is one and one is all. But the film became a family drama in which domestic issues, the role of the children and the prospect of the working world were the themes, rather than the great chain of being or the universality of humanity."

Of Lewis's work, Mr. Kaplan said: "There's enough story and traditional emotion in the 'Narnia' books that they can let the Christian mysticism in it either be a subtext or not a part of it at all. I suspect you can portray resurrection in the same way that E. T. comes back to life, and that practically every fairy tale has a hero or heroine who seems to be gone forever but nevertheless manages to come back."

Still, Disney is already putting out feelers to the religious audience. It has hired Motive Marketing, a California public relations firm that specializes in cultivating Christian audiences, to design and direct a faith-based marketing and publicity campaign. The company, founded by Paul Lauer, performed similar duties for Newmarket Films on "[The Passion of the Christ](#)" and for Warner Brothers on "[The Polar Express](#)."

Motive Marketing recently held a reception for some 30 members of the faith-based press and educational organizations at Disney's Burbank headquarters, where they were addressed by Mr. Adamson and Oren Aviv, the president of Disney's Buena Vista Pictures Marketing unit. According to a report in the Feb. 12 issue of the Christian newsweekly World, Mr. Aviv assured the gathering that "our goal is to make sure that we make and market the movie so that it has the same significance that the book has had."

If Disney manages to create a "Star Wars"-like, generalized hero myth of Lewis's work without alienating its Christian fans, the potential rewards are huge. "The Chronicles of Narnia" represents one of the last children's classics unexplored by cinema (though two British television series and an animated film for American television have been based on the material since 1967), and the books contain enough sweep, action and imagination to compete with "The Lord of the Rings," which was written by Lewis's Oxford friend, J. R. R. Tolkien.

Disney hopes at once to add another large cast of child-friendly characters to its corporate stable, which already includes the British imports Winnie the Pooh and Mary Poppins, while capturing the older audience that took New Line Cinema's recent "Lord of the Rings" trilogy to a worldwide gross approaching \$3 billion. As a franchise, the possibilities of "Narnia" seem almost unlimited. It's "Harry Potter" with intellectual respectability and deep cultural roots.

But how Disney plans to wrestle the Lewis books into line remains a closely held secret. There appear to be few screenplays floating through the underground of Hollywood assistants, where even the most highly protected projects can usually be found, and Disney declined to make any of the film's creative personnel available for interview. Photographs from the New Zealand set, where principal photography finished last month, haven't yet been distributed to the media.

Instead, Disney is practicing a shrewd public relations technique: the slow, carefully controlled release of information. Web sites that serve the desired fan base have been given rationed tidbits: representatives from sites devoted to fantasy films and gaming were invited to visit the New Zealand locations in October; four shots of conceptual art were leaked to darkhorizons.com at the end of November; and the ultimate fanboy site, aint-it-cool-news.com, became the beneficiary of a short film in which Richard Taylor, who's overseeing "Narnia's" special effects, shows off some of the creature models and costumes that have been developed.

From these fragmentary sources, it's possible to glean a few facts. Though the project is being directed by Mr. Adamson, a computer animation expert, for instance, the "Narnia" adventures will be filmed largely with human actors (including [Tilda Swinton](#), a critics' favorite, as Lewis's temptress figure, the White Witch, and the professionally affable [Jim Broadbent](#) as the children's eccentric guardian). Some characters, like the faun Mr. Tumnus, will be played by human actors (James McAvoy, in Tumnus's case), equipped with computer-animated limbs. Aslan, who will speak in the trained theatrical voice of [Brian Cox](#), will be a wholly computer-generated creation, as will Mr. and Mrs. Beaver (with the voices of Ray Winstone and Dawn French).

And judging from the concept art, Mr. Adamson will be creating a world far, far from the sunny storybook kingdom of the "Shrek" films. The London Blitz, which drives the four children of the Pevensie family to seek refuge in the country, will be portrayed in explosively realistic terms. A painting of a battle scene grimly suggests the violent combat of the "Lord of the Rings" series, with supernatural and human figures brought together in a teeming, epic landscape. And in his short film, the effects supervisor Mr. Taylor shows off a number of realistic, or perhaps just plain real, weapons, including a sword that figures prominently in the film's title treatment and looks as if it could do some serious damage. (Mr. Taylor is affiliated with Weta Workshop, the New Zealand special-effects house that also created the props and costumes for "The Lord of the Rings.")

Based on the available material, Disney seems to be going for a strict "sword and sorcery" look, as the genre is known to its fans: dark, muddy, full of clanking metal and grunting extras. Though the climactic battle scene occupies only a page and a half of Lewis's original text for "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," it seems certain to figure much more strongly in the film. This looks like Disney's way of appeasing the teenage sword and sorcery fans, who have a large, well-organized presence on the Internet and whose early support of the project is crucial.

The next wave of leaks will probably offer glimpses of the film's more childlike, whimsical side, Disney's traditional strengths. Expect concept art of the fauns, the beavers and the other more cuddly creatures to start emerging in the next few months as a way of inviting younger children and their parents into the film. Disney will almost certainly have to increase the cute quotient of these creations, who are barely characterized in Lewis's narration. This is where Disney's pre-eminent stable of animators will go to work, forging fuzzy creatures that will project vivid, embraceable characters in the film, and lend themselves to easy modeling for the toy manufacturers.

But will that merchandise be palatable if it comes with religious connotations? As a publicly held company that must appeal to the widest possible market, Disney does not want to take a side in the culture wars, as it demonstrated when it declined to distribute Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11." Indeed, Disney's privileged position in American culture is due in large part to the apolitical image of innocence and cheerful naïveté that the company has cultivated since Uncle Walt was in charge. To seem to endorse one religious or political opinion over another, as Mr. Sealey of Berkeley said, would be to risk returning the Disney brand to the routine contentiousness of the everyday adult world.

HarperCollins, the American publisher of the "Narnia" books, stepped into just such a controversy in 2001 when a memorandum from an executive with the its HarperSanFrancisco imprint surfaced with the assertion that "we'll need to be able to give emphatic assurances that no attempt will be made to correlate the stories to Christian imagery/theology." As reported by Doreen Carvajal in The New York Times on June 3, 2001, the memorandum was part of HarperCollins's successful effort to squelch a documentary and teaching aid about Lewis being developed for the publisher's Christian division, Zondervan Publishing House. A HarperCollins spokeswoman, Lisa Herling, responded then, "The goal of HarperCollins is to publish the work of C. S. Lewis to the broadest possible audience and leave any interpretation of the works to the reader."

Indeed, in HarperCollins's recently published adult edition of the novels, with all seven united in a single volume of biblical (or at least "Harry Potter") proportions, there are no references to Lewis's deep and celebrated religious beliefs. The only supplementary material is a brief essay by Lewis on the art of writing for children.

But at the same time, "Mere Christianity," a compilation of Lewis's wartime radio talks on his Christian faith, remains a successful title for HarperSanFrancisco, catching up with the "Narnia" books on Amazon.com. And there are a number of Christian-oriented guides to the "Narnia" series in print, including "A Family Guide to Narnia: Biblical Truths in C. S. Lewis' 'The Chronicles of Narnia'" by Christin Ditchfield, a syndicated Christian radio host.

If Disney is tempted to tap the growing power of the Christian market, it will almost certainly receive a warm welcome. "The 'Narnia' books are very well loved in evangelical households," said Mark Moring, the managing editor of christianitytodaymovies.com, an online film guide offshoot of the evangelical magazine Christianity Today. "Just about everyone I know at work and at church read these books as children, and now they're reading them to their children. They are definitely on the A-list."

Mr. Moring finds the prospect of a "Narnia" stripped of its Christian dimension "a dumb thing to do. It would be self-defeating."

But the company will probably proceed gingerly. Look for, at most, study guides to be prepared for Sunday school classes, local discussion groups to be organized and blocks of tickets to be offered to churches at a discount (a technique that figured heavily in the box-office triumph of "The Passion of the Christ"). Those who want to see Aslan as a Jesus figure or the White Witch as his satanic opponent will find little to encourage or discourage their interpretation, even though that interpretation was its author's own.

"They're seeing it from 10,000 feet, from which the religious themes are no longer specific to Christianity, but part of the great Joseph Campbell tradition of universal myth," Mr. Kaplan, of the Lear Center, said of "Narnia's" new caretakers. "When you get to that level, it's broadly acceptable to the public."