

Surprised by Joy Study Guide

Surprised by Joy by C. S. Lewis

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Plot Summary

In his book titled "Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life", author and thinker C.S. Lewis sets out to describe the ways in which his childhood and education shaped his mind and trained his thinking to lead ultimately to his concluding that Christianity was the most valid and comprehensive answer to his inherent longing for the experience he calls Joy. He follows the thread through his youth and into adulthood as he experiences Joy, first in his imaginary and literary world, later in nature. Finally, after long searching for joy intellectually and aesthetically, those searches pointed to the transcendent Source and Author of joy, the God of Christian scripture.

His mother was a mathematician from a refined, English family and died of cancer when he was young. His father was a boisterous Welshman, clever, but distanced by the quirky mental habits that made communicating with the author a lifelong challenge.

Lewis' description of his education starts at his time at a soon-to-fail private school under a master he called "Oldie." Oldie was slipping mentally and cruelly treated both his students and his family, but Lewis learned both a small amount of math from him and to take refuge in his reading. Next Lewis spent a short time at a private school called Campbell, which he enjoyed and where he witnessed honest and fair bullying in an era which ran parallel to the time he spent with the cousins on his mother's side, who would teach him his few social graces.

His experience at the school taught Lewis both to be happy in the moments he was away from school and to endure those moments when he was not. It was at Wyvern that Lewis' religiosity began to be a burden to him because of a belief impressed upon him that prayer should come with a certain feeling of belief. This idea about prayer led him to feel compelled to stay awake at night until he felt sufficiently convinced of his sincerity. It was the exhaustion from that misled quest that led him to finally shake off his religious conviction and rest easy in atheism.

He calls his time at Wyvern and his boyhood, his Dark Ages, and recounts coming out of their glum and joyless darkness in the chapter called "Renaissance," beginning when he read "Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods," and discovering Wagner's music for it. It brought him into Norse mythology and the beauty of nature even more deeply, and inspired him to seek that kind of joy incessantly. Lewis' next teacher shared his atheism and taught Lewis logic in thought and speech. This was Kirk, or "The Old Knock."

Lewis was next for Oxford, where he studied philosophy and linguistics and used his skill at living in the moment to retain his happiness and ease while he waited for his time to go to war. His war time showed him even more surely how virtuously he wanted to live, having witnessed the decline of a quality mind into madness and fear of hell. His faith was not a reality until further reading and contemplation forced Lewis to conclude that the writers who had the best understanding of the human condition usually had a belief in the existence of a Creating Mind.



That was the initial admission that made him examine Hinduism and Christianity together and finally conclude that the style of writing and historical coherence made Christianity the inevitable logical conclusion. Lewis concludes his book just at the moment that he has completed telling the story of his conversion from atheism to Christianity, having told only the story he set out to tell and nothing more.



Characters

C.S. Lewis

Clive Staples Lewis was a Christian writer and thinker, as well as a student of world literature since his early youth, and here tells the story of his coming to Christianity. He wrote this book at the request of several of his readers and students. He was born in Ireland to very different, although both intelligent and well-read, parents, and so books were always a major part of his life. He and older brother shared their love for imagination and building elaborate worlds and cultures from the characters and mythologies they could dream up. From a very young age, Lewis' imagination and his reading brought him flashes of momentary pleasure and longing for a deeper experience of that same pleasure, simply Joy. He found friends all his life who taught him other means of appreciating literature and nature and finding more and more of the same invitation to Joy. He was educated in private English schools and by tutors of the highest caliber before spending a tour at war and then attending Oxford college. His academic life inspired in him a passion for thought and examination, logically working through questions and using the resources around him to answer his questions as fully as possible, and so he devoted himself, almost involuntarily to the search for a Joy that would be lasting. That is the narration he lays out in this book, and that brings him, ultimately and by purely academic and rational exploration, to his devotion to the Christian idea of God. In a natural fruition of his lifelong education, he became a teacher himself of the subjects of English literature, philosophy and theology.

His Brother (Warren Lewis)

Lewis' brother is never named in the book, but is his primary and closest companion, particularly in their childhoods. The boys shared a passion for the imaginary, and that haven became even more therapeutic and necessary when their mother died in their early childhood. His brother was a lover of all things to do with India, and so while Lewis was populating his imaginary world with anthropomorphized animals in clothes and calling it Animal-Land, his brother was appointing Rajas and imagining richly appointed castles and tents. His brother loved their closeness, and when, in their boyhood, the brother learned that Lewis did not find the same pleasure in Wyvern, their second private school, that he had, it broke his heart in a way that put a strain on their friendship that would last a few years. They both worked hard to mend their treasured relationship, however, and by the time they were through their boyhood, they were very close again. Later, when the brother was an officer, when Lewis was a student with Mr. Kirkpatrick, Lewis' brother would come to pick him up when he was on on leave and take Lewis to Ireland by boat. There was a period when his relationship with their father was strained for reasons having more to do with their father than with Lewis' brother and it served, as did so many episodes in their relationship, to solidify the closeness of the brothers.



Lewis' relationship with his brother provided an archetype for the friendships Lewis would have throughout his boyhood, teaching him the camaraderie and the ability to take refuge in and wisdom from a close friend that would serve him well his entire life. He was also Lewis' best idea of immediate family, since they lost their mother when they were very young, and their father's personality made him virtually inaccessible as any type of resource for his sons.

Mr. Lewis

Lewis' father was an Irishman of the emotional and story-telling type who Lewis was sure was a pleasure to his friends, but was nonetheless a continual source of frustration and discomfort for his boys. It was because of his father's uncontrolled emotions and temper during and following his mother's sickness that Lewis first became uncomfortable with the expression, even the experience of any type of emotion. His father was the steward of a very active mind, to the point that whenever his boys were talking to him, he was so accustomed to figuring things out before he had heard everything, he would write the rest of a story in his head based on only snippets of what was actually being said. The result was that he not only believed, but raised and related to his sons based on a whole collection of fictions that his sons were helpless to correct.

Mr. Kirkpatrick

Kirk, or the Knock, or the Great Knock, was a tutor of the boys' father when he was young, and then was an invaluable teacher to both the Lewis boys. C.S.'s older brother went to him when it was revealed that he was not learning at Wyvern, and Lewis followed as a result of the same fact, and thrived under the tutelage of a man who was determined to teach him to think and communicate clearly and logically, learn other languages, and become an independent learner. Since these were all things Lewis wanted for himself, their relationship proved a treasured stepping-stone, and Lewis was able to go on to Oxford on scholarship.

Smwegy

The teacher at Wyvern who taught Lewis English literature and the noble ability to transcend class distinction by the way one chose to comport oneself and interact with others.

Miss C

The teacher at Chartres who introduced Lewis to the possibility that several religious philosophies could exist in one's mind side by side, although she did so unintentionally, and as a result of being a young and exploring believer herself.



Oldie

Lewis' first school headmaster, and the most cruel; he was the one to teach Lewis what little math he mastered and lost his mental stability soon after Lewis' time at his school.

Arthur

Lewis' first very close friend and sharer of his love of Norse mythology; he was also the one to teach Lewis about the good, solid English novelists and about seeing beauty in the familiar.

the Cousins

H, K and G, the cousins lived close to the Old House and taught the boys social graces. They were the children of Sir W.E. and Lady E., or Cousin Mary, the boys' mother's first cousin.

A.K. Hamilton Jenkin

The friend at Oxford who picked up the education of Lewis' appreciative mind where Arthur left off in teaching him to appreciate everything in front of him for the fullness that it is.

Owen Barfield

The friend who served to complement Lewis' appreciation of literature by appreciating everything Lewis didn't. He became an Anthroposophist, and he and Lewis debated that, as well.

A.C. Harwood

Another friend at Oxford, Harwood was the friend who was unflappable, and another who became an Anthroposophist.

G.K. Chesterton

The first overtly Christian author to make a conquest of Lewis and make him examine what made Chesterton's perspective so attractive.



Objects/Places

The Old House

The first house the boys lived in, smaller than the country house, but close to the cousins.

The Country House

The house the boys associate with their childhood, larger and more gracious with a big yard and lots of rooms and space for the family's exhaustive collection of books.

Oldie's

The boys' first private school, it was a glum and oppressive place with very few happy memories for the boys.

Campbell

The school Lewis was in between Oldie's and Wyvern, it was Lewis' idea of the best of English public schools.

Wyvern

The school at which public education in England came to its worst place in the form of the faggery and Bloods system whereby the dominant students were allowed to continuously humble and torment the younger. It was also the school where Smewgy taught.

Fantasy books

Books full of dwarfs, elves, fairies, talking animals and worlds closely intertwined with nature were significant contributions to Lewis' young imagination.

Norse mythology

Histories, mythologies, poetry and all things Northern were Lewis' favorite brand of reading beginning when he came across "Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods" and was reborn into the acquaintance with joy that had been his in his childhood.



Wagner

The magazines that told the stories of the operas of Wagner became Lewis' constant treasure until he finally heard his first Wagnerian music, and continued to seek out his interpretations of his favorite Norse stories.

English novels

Austen, Bronte and Waverly were among the good, solid authors who Arthur taught Lewis to enjoy for their merry magnification of the simple pleasures of English life.

English Poets

Lewis' thinking was largely influenced by the time he spent reading Yeats, Shelley, Malory, Morris and Bergson as well as other English poets.

Nature

Lewis found beauty and truth in nature in ways that evolved very consistently with his philosophy and tastes as he grew through his stages of appreciating literature and contemplating the meaning of life.

The War

Lewis spent time in the trenches as an officer observing men at their most vulnerable sharing themselves with each other stripped bare to their most vulnerable state.

Oxford

Lewis' undergraduate and graduate studies happened in the context of some of his most stimulating friendships and was the time and place for his eventual conversion to Theism and ultimately to Christianity.



Themes

The Value of Friendship

Throughout his life, Lewis was shown the value of being one of a pair or of a "happy few" to his education. His brother was the first of his companions, and the two of them leaned on each other heavily during their mother's illness and following her death. It was their friendship that allowed them to keep their joy and perspective when the adults in their world were essentially destructive influences. Arthur followed him, and was the first to share Lewis' love of literature, but was also able to broaden Lewis' appreciation of nature, the countryside and music. Being familiar with the role as a part of a small group unlike the culture in the main, Lewis befriended others who shared his peculiarities, as demonstrated by his friendship with the boys who shared his love for poetry and plays at Chartres.

In the war, Lewis was able to enjoy what should have been a completely unpleasant, even traumatic experience entirely because the men who were there with him extended friendship to him on his arrival, and their determination to commiserate with each other assured their loyalty and comfort to each other throughout the rigors of the war. Perhaps most significantly were his friendships at Oxford, which broadened both his academic thinking and his ability to entertain the possibility of a spiritual world view. The men he befriended at Oxford were men he connected with at other points and who, through their passionate and equal exchanges of ideas, built the kind of trust that allowed them to become each other's teachers. Conversely, it can be observed that his teachers became his friends as demonstrated by the kinships that developed between Smewgy and his whole classroom of boys, and between Lewis and the Great Knock. Their enjoyment of the interaction between teacher and student made their relationship something to be savored and cultivated.

The Value of Reading

Lewis' lifelong devotion to ravenously devouring whatever good literature, poetry and exposition he could get his hands on shows itself to be a distinctively valuable moulder of his mind over the course of this book. In his childhood, his books provided Lewis both with and escape from the sadness of his childhood and with the tools to create the imaginary world that became itself room for him to play. In his boyhood, he explored fantasy and English novelists, then the Norse mythology, then poets and philosophers, the Greek classics and an ever-broadening collection of thinkers. At every stage of his taste and curiosity, he exhausted everything he could find in the category.

Lewis made a study of his favorites, finding everything he could so that instead of only tasting things he particularly liked, he sought to completely understand them, almost befriending the authors and taking them as teachers. Even when there was an author he didn't like, he finished the work, even if, as in the case of "Don Juan," he wrote a



note in its back to remind him never to read it again. The teachers for whom he talked about having the most affection were the ones who read, and he communicated great admiration for the teaching of Mr. Kirkpatrick for giving the Greek classics in such large gulps. It was those huge chunks that taught him the Greek language so quickly and gave him such a fluent knowledge of the language. He also learned German and French by reading novels in those languages with the Kirkpatricks. Finally, it was reading that stimulated his thinking that finally led his thinking to the conclusion that the world must be the result of a divine mind and ultimately to a philosophically, historically and logically sound understanding of God.

Joy as a Pointer to God

The majority of Lewis' life was peppered with experiences of joy that he was constantly trying to recapture and grasp for longer than the flashes of an instant for which they lasted. Each of the literary pleasures he discovered, the new perspectives on nature, the moments of felicity at the discovery of another pleasure of any kind led him to wonder whether this might be the thing that would allow him to hold on to that bliss forever. Particularly when he was reborn into his acquaintance with joy following the dark ages of his boyhood, he looked for joy in all manner of counterfeiting experiences. He tried sensual pleasures and satisfaction in the erotic, and read all he could find about magic when he took up an interest in the Occult and its mysteries, but he was never able to satisfy the very specific appetite in his soul for that pure and complete joy he had only been able to taste. It is ultimately that search that leads him to search for the root of the desire, identify himself as a creature sharing consciousness with humanity imbued with free will, the ability to think abstractly and differently from those around them and unable to produce morality himself. As he came to understand purity of lifestyle and understanding as sources of holiness, and holiness as the most complete realization of the joy he had tasted, he eventually refined and trained his philosophies to the point that God became the obvious source of joy, and joy the road sign placed along Lewis' road to point him to God.

Style

Perspective

C. S. Lewis is, by the time he writes "Surprised by Joy," an accomplished writer on the topic of Christian theology, having arrived at his knowledge on the subject the same way he gained his exhaustive knowledge of world literature, by as comprehensive a study as he could make by seeking out everything he could find by authors who challenged him, and at the guidance of the learned people by whom he was constantly surrounded. Educated at Oxford and friends with some of the greatest minds of his era, Lewis continued teaching as he published his books, and so was known broadly by students and readers worldwide. He wrote on the topic of his journey to Christianity at the request of his readers and students with the intention of leading them along the very specific trail through his life that resulted in that very particular conclusion. He narrows his focus, then, as he walks through his life, acknowledging at points throughout the book that other hugely significant things were happening alongside the events he was recounting, but they were not relevant to his subject, and so he was leaving them out. He was also providing his life's bibliography and the logical and philosophical trains of thought that led him to his conclusion with the intention, no doubt, of pointing to the teachers who pointed him to the wisdom that would shape the rest of his life.

Tone

Lewis tells his story without sentimentality or the slightest note of hubris, but humbly and even, at moments, as a humble confession. He lays himself as bare as an honest and complete telling of his story requires, careful to disclose even the faults in himself that led him to mistaken thinking, not shying away from a single topic. He even anticipates the questions in his readers' minds and answers them on the spot, interrupting the telling of his story to complete the understanding of the reader before moving on. He tells his story just as one would expect an inquisitive learner and dedicated teacher to tell it. His personality and mood at each phase of the story is clearly communicated, so the reader feels as if it is watching a mind develop just as it would be thinking at every stage of life. Even so, he retains his wit and wisdom, and interjects the understanding of each era as he sees in on reflection, even if such an understanding was absent at the time he was experiencing the stage. There is also a note of gratitude and awe at the ways he recognizes the arrangement of his path before him. When, as a child, he felt as though his father was almost guaranteed to lead him astray because of his hopelessly-flawed reasoning mechanism, Providence still arranged for teachers such as Mr. Kirkpatrick and the friends he made all along his path to guide him into precisely the knowledge he needed to emerge with the understanding he was so eagerly seeking.



Structure

While the story is told as a chronological narrative of Lewis' life, it is at times divided into chapters laid side by side in order to describe the very separate goings on in Lewis' inner and outer lives. He divides his life into eras based on the stages of his education, and, since there were several, it is a tidy division and allows for the reader to see each as an episode containing its own phases of appreciation of types of literature and responsible for its own evolution of understanding. His search for joy is always an inner narrative, and he separates it from the outer experiences such as school, his friendships and his family. He compares them to images like a canal running next to a river. He is careful to include in each a listing of the authors who are speaking to him at the time, so as to provide a stream for the reader to follow of independently knowable flavors that colored his phases. The structure serves his purpose very well, and since he adds names to his numbered chapters, it is easy to return to a specific era with very little leafing through the book.



Quotes

"But nowhere, either in my brother's work or my own, is there a single line drawn in obedience to an idea, however crude, or beauty. There is action, comedy, invention; but there is not even the germ of a feeling for design.... This absence of beauty, now that I come to think of it, is characteristic of our childhood." *The First Years*, page 4

"Nothing was forbidden me. In the seemingly endless rainy afternoons I took volume after volume from the shelves. I had always the same certainty of finding a book that was new to me as a man who walks into a field has of finding a new blade of grass." *The First Years*, page 8

"I knew nothing about Balder; but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale and remote) and then, as in the other examples, found myself at the very same moment already falling out of that desire and wishing I were back in it." *The First Years*, page 15

"With my mother's death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis." *The First Years*, page 19

"My father piqued himself on what he called 'reading between the lines'. The obvious meaning of any fact or document was always suspect: the true and inner meaning, invisible to all eyes except his own, was unconsciously created by the restless fertility of his imagination." *Concentration Camp*, page 28

"Even adults, I fancy, would not find an evening party very endurable without the attraction of sex and the attraction of alcohol; and how a small boy who can neither flirt nor drink should be expected to enjoy prancing about on a polished floor till the small hours of the morning, is beyond my conception.... To me it was all inexplicable, unprovoked persecution.... I positively felt that I could have torn my hostess limb from limb." *Mountbracken and Campbell*, page 45

"On the whole I got on well with my school fellows, though we had our full share of those lifelong friendships and irreconcilable factions and deadly quarrels and final settlements and glorious revolutions which made up so much of the life of a small boy, and in which I came out sometimes at the bottom and sometimes at the top." *I Broaden My Mind*, page 55

"No one ever attempted to show in what sense Christianity fulfilled Paganism or Paganism prefigured Christianity. The accepted position seemed to be that religions were normally a mere farrago of nonsense, though our own, by a fortunate exception, was exactly true." *I Broaden My Mind*, page 60



"The dreams of childhood and those of adolescence may have much in common; between them, often, boyhood stretches like an alien territory in which everything (ourselves included) has been greedy, cruel, noisy, and prosaic, in which the imagination has slept and the most unideal senses and ambitions have been restlessly, even maniacally, awake." Renaissance, page 68

"Why, by the way, do some writers talk as if care and worry were the special characteristics of adult life? It appears to me that there is more *atra cura* in an average schoolboy's week than in a grown man's average year." Bloodery, page 85

"I will not indulge in philippics against enemies I never met in battle. ('This means, then, that all the other vices you have so largely written about...' Well, yes, it does, and more's the pity; but it's nothing to our purpose at the moment.)" Light and Shade, page 97

"His mind so bubbled over with humor, sentiment, and indignation that, long before he had understood or even listened to your words, some accidental hint had set his imagination to work, he had produced his own version of the facts, and believed that he was getting it from you." Release, page 116

"Many thousands of people have had the experience of finding the first friend, and it is none the less a wonder; as great a wonder (pace the novelists) as first love, or even a greater." Release, page 125

"If ever a man came near to being a purely logical entity, that man was Kirk.... The idea that human beings should exercise their vocal organs for any purpose except that of communicating or discovering truth was to him preposterous." The Great Knock, page 130

"But in Surrey the contours were so tortuous, the little valleys so narrow, there was so much timber, so many villages concealed in woods or hollows, so many field paths, sunk lanes, dingles, copses, such an unpredictable variety of cottage, farmhouse, villa, and country seat, that the whole thing could never lie clearly in my mind, and to walk in it daily gave one the same sort of pleasure that there is in the labyrinthine complexity of Malory or the 'Faerie Queene'." The Great Knock, page 141

"Arthur taught me to see their charm.... He meant the rooted quality which attaches them to all our simple experiences, to weather, food, the family, the neighborhood. He could get endless enjoyment out of the opening sentence of 'Jane Eyre', or that other opening sentence in one of Hans Anderson's stories, 'How it did rain, to be sure'." Fortune's Smile, page 146

"I said to my country, in effect, 'You shall have me on a certain date, not before. I will die in your wars if need be, but till then I shall live my own life. You may have my body, but not my mind. I will take part in battles but not read about them'." Fortune's Smile, page 152

"Only when your whole attention and desire are fixed on something else — whether a distant mountain, or the past, or the gods of Asgard — does the 'thrill' arise. It is a by-



product. Its very existence presupposes that you desire not it but something other and outer." Check, page 162

"Any conception of reality which a sane mind can admit must favor some of its wishes and frustrate others." Check, page 166

"What I like about experience is that it is such an honest thing. You may take any number of wrong turnings; but keep your eyes open and you will not be allowed to go very far before the warning signs appear. You may have deceived yourself, but experience is not trying to deceive you. The universe rings true wherever you fairly test it." Check, page 171

"Everyone you met took it for granted that the whole thing was an odious necessity, a ghastly interruption of rational life. And that made all the difference. Straight tribulation is easier to bear than tribulation which advertises itself as pleasure." Guns and Good Company, page 182

"But the Second Friend is the man who disagrees with you about everything.... Actually (though it never seems so at the time) you modify one another's thought; out of this perpetual dogfight a community of mind and a deep affection emerge." The New Look, page 193-4

"What I learned from the Idealists (and still most strongly hold) is this maxim: it is more important that Heaven should exist than that any of us should reach it." The New Look, page 204

"...most of the authors who might be claimed as precursors of modern enlightenment seemed to me very small beer and bored me cruelly... The upshot of it all could nearly be expressed in a perversion of Roland's great line in the 'Chanson' — 'Christians are wrong, but all the rest are bores.'" Checkmate, page 207

"Joy itself, considered simply as an event in my own mind, turned out to be of no value at all. All the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring." Checkmate, page 213

"...Though it was a terror, it was no surprise to learn that God is to be obeyed because of what He is in Himself. If you ask why we should obey God, in the last resort the answer is, 'I am'. To know God is to know that our obedience is due to him. In His nature His sovereignty de jure is revealed." The Beginning, page 224



Topics for Discussion

Do you think it is more or less likely in today's world for faith to be arrived at as the result of study and inquiry as it was in Lewis' life? Explain.

Lewis spends a good deal of time discussing writers and their qualities that stimulated him in them. What qualities in a writer make a perspective worthy of attention in your perspective? Do you think you are improved for having read the authors you read?

Lewis posits that "Christianity is the completion or fulfillment of Paganism." What do you think he meant by that?

The examples of friendships in Lewis' life were friendships as mutual exchanges of inspiration and wisdom. Do you think that is what friends expect from each other today? Is that your experience of friendship?

Do you think the public school system today is better or worse than the public school system of Lewis' experience? In what ways?

How does the distinction between enjoyment and contemplation help to clarify the question Lewis is trying to answer? Does it change your understanding of the world in any way?

How does one's experience of family and friendship color one's understanding or expectations of God? How has your experience affected yours?