

Will marketing cost Narnia its Christian character?

By Jacqueline Conciatore
Religion News Service

NEW YORK (RNS)—As they aim to capture the lucrative Harry Potter market with a re-release of "The Chronicles of Narnia," publishing house HarperCollins and the C.S. Lewis estate appear intent on a marketing strategy that separates author Lewis from his Christian identity and beliefs.

A memo leaked to the media revealed HarperCollins is making a concerted effort in marketing to downplay the Narnia series' Christian themes.

But HarperCollins has flatly denied news reports that it will rewrite the Narnia books.

"There are no such plans," said Amy Johnson of the publisher's corporate relations department. In a written statement, HarperCollins said its goal and that of the Lewis estate "is to publish the works of C.S. Lewis to the broadest possible audience, and to leave any interpretation of the works to the reader. The works of C.S. Lewis will continue to be published by HarperCollins and

Zondervan as written by the author, with no alteration."

Zondervan is the company's Christian publishing arm.

The much-beloved "Chronicles" is a series of seven books, including "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe," one of the major works in children's literature. A central figure in the stories is Aslan, lion and ruler of the wood. Aslan sacrifices his life for a boy who had earlier betrayed his brothers and sisters. He is reborn and saves Narnia from permanent winter and the tyranny of the White Witch.

Confusion over HarperCollins' marketing plan, and headlines that said the publisher was evicting God from Narnia fueled a spate of news stories, commentary and online posts from aghast Lewis fans.

Roman Catholic author Andrew Greeley wrote a Chicago Sun-Times opinion piece deriding plans to "purge the Christianity" from the books.

The reporting "has caused a lot of dismay," said Carol Dean Hatcher, an independent television producer making a film about Lewis. That anyone would rewrite the original books is a "ridiculous" notion, she said.

Hatcher is no defender of HarperCollins or the Lewis estate, however. Zondervan reneged on its agreement to contribute \$150,000 to her public TV documentary, she said, because her script treated the Chronicles as

Christian allegory.

"HarperCollins thought they could dictate what the script said and what scholars had to say about Lewis," Hatcher said.

Hatcher is a graphic artist who has never made a documentary. Her deal with Zondervan also included plans for an illustrated companion book. Things were proceeding, she says, until HarperCollins forged a multimillion dollar agreement with the C.S. Lewis Company making it the primary English-language publisher of C.S. Lewis.

"That is when the estate stepped forward and said, 'We don't like this,'" she said.

According to the New York Times, HarperCollins' priorities were revealed in an executive's memo about Hatcher's script: "Obviously this is the biggie as far as the estate and our publishing interests are concerned. ... We'll need to be able to give emphatic assurances that no attempt will be made (in the film) to correlate the (Narnia) stories to Christian imagery/theology."

Hatcher said Zondervan told her during a February meeting that Simon Adley, managing director of the C.S. Lewis Company, was "negative" regarding her project. Without his approval, Zondervan wouldn't proceed. Still, she said, she was surprised when a few weeks later she received the memo asking her to turn over the eventual final script for approval.

"I didn't understand from the meeting that Zondervan was going to go

along with the whole idea of marketing Lewis as a great thinker, not a Christian," she said.

Adley told the New York Times there was no plan to secularize Lewis and noted that HarperCollins had increased sales of Lewis' "Mere Christianity."

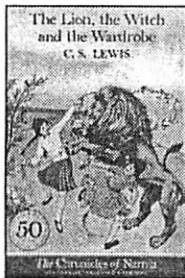
"It's fatuous to suggest that we're trying to take the Christian out of C.S. Lewis," he said. "We wouldn't have made the effort that we have with 'Mere Christianity' if we felt that way. It's just crazy."

The leaked memo also stated HarperCollins wanted the Narnia books to "come across as one of the great creations of fantasy literature, with roots in general myth and folklore," according to the evangelical World magazine.

Though HarperCollins will not elaborate on its marketing strategy, its Narnia.com site offers one illustration: A brief section about Lewis and how he came to write the Narnia books only glancingly mentions the author's Christian concerns.

Plans for the Narnia campaign include licensing of plush Narnia toys and new Narnia books. This latter idea has provoked criticism from fans who believe any new effort will fall short of Lewis' standard.

"As long as the stories have merit they'll continue to sell, but there's no one like C.S. Lewis. His stories were imbued with his beliefs. ... I don't know anyone who could take the same path," said Steve Moyer, co-owner of Chapters Bookstore in Washington, D.C.



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