

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SUSAN PEVENSIE?

*by*[*Matthew Alderman*](https://www.firstthings.com/author/matthew-alderman)2 . 17 . 09

It’s one of childhood’s great narrative shocks. Susan Pevensie is no longer a friend of Narnia. The bad news comes, almost offhandedly, as the series ends amid the cheerfully eschatological curtain-calls of *The Last Battle.*How could *he*—C.S. Lewis, Aslan, maybe God—do *that*to dear old Su? To Queen Susan the Gentle, Susan the sure-sighted archeress?

Surely you remember her. She is the second-eldest of the Pevensie children, the pretty one in the family, dark-haired, tender-hearted, and occasionally cautious to the point of being a bit of a wet blanket. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, she is given the representative gifts of a bow, arrows, and a magic horn that summons help wherever you might be. These gifts signify her strength, femininity, and prudence.

Yet she is conspicuously absent from the roll call of Narnian heroes we encounter in Aslan’s heavenly country. She is, Aslan says, “no longer a friend of Narnia.” Susan, we remember, is excluded from heaven for growing up, for liking lipstick, nylons, and parties.

Susan’s fate helped spur friendly neighborhood atheist Philip Pullman to write his own anti-Narnia, the ramshackle *Dark Materials*trilogy with its sin-as-freedom metaphysics and straw-man take on Christian morality. In his reading, Independent Modern Woman gets a raw deal from a British weirdo with major lady issues. From the way he goes on about Lewis, you’d think the author of *The Four Loves*was an underdeveloped asexual freak bent on keeping his readers in a kiddie time-warp sealed away from the great god Sex.

But all we are told in *The Last Battle*is this: Susan has turned her back on Narnia in favor of nylons, lipstick, and party invitations. Boys, much less the joy of sex, don’t even merit a mention. More disconcerting is her quietly alarming capacity for self-deception: We are told that she also dismisses her fifteen-odd years of memories as Queen in Narnia as the product of childish fantasy. This detail gives a more poignant shading to Susan’s downfall. As Polly Plummer, one of the senior “friends of Narnia,” puts it in *The Last Battle*, Susan is set to become not a real adult, but a perpetual teenager locked into “the silliest time of one’s life.” She is a child’s caricature of adulthood. “I wish she *would*grow up!” cries Polly.

The problem is not that Su’s world was, say, the world of *Gidget*, but that it could become

what *Sex and the City*looks like in the unflattering light of reality. A never-ending quest for party invitations looks awfully flimsy when stacked up against the deeds of Narnia’s own strong-willed women—like Susan herself, once.

Even then, Lewis indicates, it’s hardly hellfire for Susan. He wrote to a young reader in 1957: “The books don’t tell us what happened to Susan. She is left alive in this world at the end, having by then turned into a rather silly, conceited young woman. But there’s plenty of time for her to mend and perhaps she will get to Aslan’s country in the end . . . in her own way.”

Her fate is not some sexist special treatment. Whenever I have returned to the series as an adult, I continually discover that Narnia’s protagonists are far more flawed and complex than I remember from my childhood reads. Wet-blanket Susan has her grouchy moments, and Peter has a fair number of blind-spots. Even little Lucy, jealous of her older, more beautiful sister, is not beyond a touch of vanity in the *Dawn Treader*. Fallen human nature has its consequences, as Aslan reminds us with an occasional low growl.

At the end of the *Dawn Treader*, Aslan tells the departing Lucy and Edmund that their time in Narnia was given to them so that they might better know Christ in their own world. The same is true of their older siblings, and all the other human friends of Narnia. High King Peter and his royal siblings scarcely had time to grow up into saints before their lives were cut short. But Aslan has his reasons. I sometimes wonder if the greatest beneficiary of all that happened in that magic land was actually Susan the Gentle, left behind to live her life with the wisdom of Narnia.

Spiritual childhood—which is never childish—may take years to appear. God’s grace is bestowed on us as we struggle and fumble our way through life, descending upon us in the strangest places and coming to fruition when we least expect it. And, in that circuitous, delayed redemption, Susan is most like us as we rise and stumble over our own versions of lipstick and nylons and rise again through God’s providence. Like us, she is made for something better, for she is a queen and, even more honorably, a daughter of Eve.

It pleased the great Emperor-over-the-Sea to let her wander in exile until the time was ripe for her return. Only he knows when that might be. Susan’s future is unknown, as are ours, save to God. In spite of her rejection, I think she might yet have carried the treasure of her time in Narnia into true adulthood. For repentance—even from the sillier, frillier sins—may have the strangest roots.

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