(QUIET ELECTRIC GUITAR MUSIC FADES UP BRIEFLY) **DREW MILLER:** We call Hutchmoot “a conference for everyone,” so it follows that this is a podcast for everyone. This series features sessions recorded at The Rabbit Room’s annual conference, which celebrates art, music, story, and faith, and all their many intersections. Listen at rabbitroom.com/podcasts

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP) **JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** C.S. Lewis scholar Michael Ward is senior research fellow at Black Friar’s Hall at the University of Oxford, and professor of apologetics at Houston Baptist University. He’s the author of *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*. This is one of those rare books that changed the way whole swaths of academics and general readers understand a beloved author’s work. I know it changed the way I read the Narnia books.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** I was surprised to learn that Michael Ward has also had a career in feature films… sort of. In *The World is Not Enough*, he handed James Bond a pair of X-ray spectacles. You can see a picture of this memorable moment in cinematic history at his website, michaelward.net.

Michael Ward, thanks for being on the Habit podcast this morning!

**MICHAEL WARD:** My pleasure! Thank you for having me, Jonathan. Good to speak to you.

**JR:** I say “this morning.” It’s not even morning where you are, and who knows when people listen to this whether it’s morning or not. In any case… you wrote a book called *Planet Narnia* that came out about, what, 12 years ago I guess. And that book… (pause) It’s a book that I intended *not* to be convinced by.

**MW:** (chuckles)

**JR:** Cause you… you make a very surprising claim about the Narnia books. Um… and I actually didn’t read it for a long time because I thought there’s just no way I want to be convinced by this seemingly odd idea. And when I finally got around to reading it — actually enough people told me that it was a convincing book that I read it — and I was convinced myself. So uh… in spite of all, you convinced me.

**MW:** (laughs)

**JR:** I think maybe you have heard this before from people. They intended not to be convinced by *Planet Narnia* and were.

**MW:** That’s right, yes. One of the first people to say that was Alan Jacobs who kindly provided an endorsement for the book.

**JR:** Ah!

**MW:** He started with total skepticism, and gradually he had his skepticism demolished.

**JR:** Well, can you real quickly sort of summarize the thesis of *Planet Narnia*?

**MW:** Yep! In essence, the thesis is that there are seven *Chronicles of Narnia* because there are seven heavens, or seven planets, in medieval cosmology. And C.S. Lewis, being a medievalist, knew all about those seven heavens, those seven planets. He writes about them extensively, and describes them as spiritual symbols of permanent value which were especially worthwhile in his own generation. And those seven heavens or planets with their various qualities and attributes and influences, they shaped Lewis’ approach in each of the seven Narnia chronicles.

**JR:** You use the phrase — you said that Lewis considered the seven heavens to be spiritual symbols of… I can’t remember how you phrased it. Were you quoting him, or were you just summarizing?

**MW:** Yeah, I was quoting him there. “Spiritual symbols of permanent value.”

**JR:** “Of permanent value,” yeah.

**MW:** Yep. He says that in an article in 19three5, so that’s about 15 years before— well, it is 15 years before he published *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. And he said that, um, when publishing a long, complicated poem that he himself wrote about the seven heavens, and he gave a little explanation as to why he was bothering with so much imaginative energy spent on this seemingly old fashioned, antiquarian subject. And he said it’s because they’re of continuing value on the human imagination.

**JR:** Can you um… I suspect a lot of people listening to this podcast won’t have opinions about why the seven heavens, the seven planets are even worth giving attention to. So why… why should we care about the seven planets, the seven heavens?

**MW:** Well… it depends how deeply you want to understand the Narnia chronicles.

**JR:** (chuckles) Okay.

**MW:** Um… I mean, this is one of the things I discuss in my book. the various attempts that scholars have made over the years to find some sort of coherent design or imaginative blueprint to the Narnia series. Cause on the surface, they don’t seem to have very obvious underpinnings or overarching schemes to them. You know? Either as individual stories or as a series of seven books. You know, three of the books are very, very clearly, it would seem, dependent upon Biblical source material. You’ve got *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* retelling the Gospel story, you’ve got *The Magician’s Nephew*, as it were, retelling the Genesis creation account, and you’ve got *The Last Battle* retelling within the Narnia sub-created world a version of the final judgment and the Apocalypse in the book of Revelation.

So the Scriptural parallels in those three stories are very clear and obvious, but those are only three out of seven books. When you turn to the other four books in the Narnia series, it’s not very obvious how those relate in the same way to Scriptural sources. And that’s why lots of critics and scholars have said, well, there must be some uniformly, uh… explanatory scheme that Lewis used, because he’s not a slapdash or random writer and thinker.

**JR:** Right.

**MW:** There are various different theories of being advanced, like the seven deadly sins or the seven sacraments or any seven that people can think of, basically.

**JR:** (laughs)

**MW:** But the one seven which is all over Lewis’ writings — namely the seven heavens — amazingly had not been looked at seriously before I did.

**JR:** Mmhm. So how does understanding this, the seven heavens, um… change our understanding of, you know… pick a Narnia book. Um… (pause)

**MW:** Okay. Well, um… (pause) I suppose in some ways, the most obvious is um… *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.

**JR:** Okay.

**MW:** Um, now it must be pointed out to begin with is what the seven heavens were, what planets they represented. And the best way to explain that is the seven days of the week, because of course it’s after these seven planets that we name the days of the week. Why is Saturday Saturday? Because it’s named after Saturn. Why is Sunday Sunday? Because it’s named after the sun. Monday is named after the moon.

**JR:** Yeah.

**MW:** And likewise with the other four, though it is a bit less obvious in those four cases, because for some reason we use the Norse planetary deities rather than the Roman ones. But if you think in Spanish or French, it’s obvious how Tuesday is Mars’ day, Wednesday is Mercury’s day, Thursday is Jupiter’s day, and Friday is Venus’ day. So those are the seven heavens: the sun, the moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn.

And so *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, let’s talk about that. You could almost guess which planet that was written to correspond with by the title. *The Voyage of the DAWN Treader*. You know, this is a journey toward the Eastern edge of the world where the sun rises. And you know, the last few chapters of the book are absolutely drenched in sunlight. The children on board the ship, they scoop up pale falls of water from the sea, and they find that it’s more like drinking light than drinking water.

But earlier on in the story too, there’s been all sorts of solar elements if you have eyes to see them. For instance, in that episode where they discover a magic pole on an island which turns everything into gold. And of course gold was the sun’s metal. The sun would burn base metal into gold, according to medieval thinking. Um… and… likewise, there’s that episode in the Dark Island where Lucy prays a desperate prayer and then a beam of light falls upon the ship, and she looks along the beam of light and sees Aslan within it. And when they meet Aslan at the Eastern edge of the world, he’s scattering light from his mane.

The sun imagery, the gold imagery, the imagery of divine illumination is everywhere in that book. And once you see the solar symbolism as Lewis’ imaginative blueprint, then *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* becomes an even more beautiful and brilliant book.

**JR:** Yeah. Well, um… I do love the way the um, the planets enrich our understanding of these stories. How did you even come to notice these patterns? What was the— where did that even start?

**MW:** Well, I suppose it started fundamentally in my awareness that scholars had been looking for some kind of overarching scheme to the series. And I myself had made a half-hearted attempt to find a Shakespearean basis to the septet, because I love the Shakespearean allusions within the Narnia chronicles. But although I could make that work reasonably well for three of the books or four of the books, it didn’t work very well for all seven. And I eventually abandoned that idea and gave it up as a bad job.

Many years later when I was doing my Ph.D. research into Lewis, I spent 18 months looking at his understanding of wordless communication and how he thought some of the most important things were best said silently or implicitly. And so after 18 months after exploring that department of a sort, I then one night was lying in bed reading his poem about the planets, when I suddenly thought, golly! There are seven medieval heavens and there are seven Narnia chronicles. Could it be possible that they relate to each other one to one? And it became pretty clear to me that they did.

And so I wasn’t directly seeking it out at that point in my Ph.D. researches, but the very fact that I had had this sort of question at the back of my mind for many years meant that as it were when I positioned my mind um… according to Lewis’ own mental, intellectual orientation sufficiently, then I suddenly saw what he was up to. And it was a eureka moment, and I felt stunned because I was suddenly seeing in the Narnia books all manner of further sophistication and meaning when I thought I already knew what they had to give.

**JR:** Yeah. So um, I think you know, Michael, this is a podcast about writing for writers.

**MW:** Mmhm.

**JR:** And so I’m interested to — as I was reviewing um, *Planet Narnia* in preparation, I was kind of looking and thinking in terms of how is it that, what was— how is any of this relevant to writers. In other words, not just as readers or literature scholars, but as writers. And I was especially interested in the idea and question of why was Lewis quiet about this pattern. And I’m especially interested in the idea that you delve into that the music of the spheres, the seven planets in the medieval tradition and much older than medieval tradition — the idea was that in their movements they were making music. And music that we, as those of us who live on the earth can’t hear. Those of us who live below the moon can’t hear.

And so of course, as you mentioned in your book, the silent planet is Earth. Right? And if you’re elsewhere in the universe besides the earth, you can hear the music. But you can’t hear the music here. Um… and I think that’s, I think that’s very relevant to the world of a writer, right? The idea that we are, as writers, we are somehow making audible the music that’s there all along. We’re not inventing music. We are uh, making… the music is there, and we’re making it something that readers can hear. Um… and you quote T.S. Eliot who spoke of “music that is heard so deeply that it is not heard at all.

So that’s not a question. I guess I’m just opening that topic.

**MW:** Okay. So… I think there are two main ways in which to answer the underlying question beneath what you just said. Why would Lewis do this, and what does it have to offer any writer? And the two things I would say are one, literary, and two, theological.

From a literary point of view, Lewis believed that success in writing came about through um, secretly invoking powerful associations. He said that the expressions in literature should not merely state, but suggest, and if the mechanism in the poem was too visible, then we would be turned off. It’s like what Keats said, the poet Keats: “We dislike art that has a palpable design upon us.”

“What the reader is made to do for himself has a particular importance,” Lewis said, “and an influence which can’t evade our consciousness won’t go very deep.” So for all those reasons, he valued as a writer — when writing about anything really! — that silences, suggestions, and secret associations so that the reader would not feel patronized or over-manipulated. It’s a Socratic approach, isn’t it?

**JR:** Yeah.

**MW:** That you ask questions of the reader or the student, as it were. You don’t spoon feed the reader or the student with everything you want them to receive. You set them up, you set them going, so they learn almost without realizing that they’re learning. That’s the best method of writing and teaching, generally.

**JR:** Yeah.

**MW:** So that’s the literary reason for doing this. If Lewis wants to communicate the characteristics of the seven planets, well, he could do it directly. And indeed, in other departments of his output, he did do it directly. There’s a whole chapter on the heavens in his introduction to the medieval worldview, *The Discarded Image*. And as I said, he wrote a whole poem explicitly detailing the various influences of the planets.

But in *Narnia*, he wanted to communicate the planetary personalities in a more subtle and artistic way. You know, there’s that whole saying that the art is in concealing the art.

**JR:** Yeah…

**MW:** You mustn’t show you’re working too obviously, or the reader will wise up to you and the magic won’t work. There’s got to be some misdirection as all magicians know. There’s got to be some sleight of hand, and then you’re impressed! You marvel at what the conjurer has been able to bring up. So that’s the secret to all good imaginative writing, whether it be in fiction or poetry or drama or film writing or whatever. You don’t want to be too direct. You want to be tangential and implicit.

So that’s a literary reason for doing this, and what writers can learn from Lewis’ example. But then, theologically, there’s a whole dimension to it as well. Which is that, you know, Lewis used these seven planetary archetypes not just to amuse himself from a literary and historical point of view, but because he wanted to say something about his Christian faith. He’s talking about the Christian life in each of the Narnia books, fundamentally, in how the children related to Aslan.

But it was a fundamental part of Lewis’ belief about the Christian life that… we can’t study God as if God were a subject to be got up, you know? Like you would study a railway timetable. You can’t put God on a laboratory table and cut him open and look at him as if from an external spectator’s point of view. You can’t do that with God, because God is the source of all being. God is the very means by which we know anything at all. So our knowledge of God is in a fundamentally different category from our knowledge of created things, but it is by God that we have the capacity to know at all in the first place.

So for Lewis, there is a fundamentally participatory element to our relationship with God that we are already in God in one sense before we know anything about God. We have an enjoyment of God before we have any kind of contemplation of God. And it’s that kind of intrinsic, innate, inescapable, participatory knowledge of God that Lewis is symbolizing by means of the planetary symbol in each Narnia chronicle.

Um, so the children in each book — and indeed, we the reader as we read each book — we don’t know that we’re being, as it were, upheld by a mighty solar spirit in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* which is informing everything and coloring everything and shaping everything to a particular end. We don’t perceive that with our contemplative intellect. We experience it from within. We’re just thrown into a solar world, as it were, and we’re left to breathe it in unconsciously, as it were.

And that’s how, in many respects, our knowledge of God goes. We know him much more like breathing an atmosphere than we know him like studying a subject. That’s Lewis in his book on the Psalms. And so again, all that I said about the literary purposes behind this, the indirection and the secret associations, which pertain to all good writing. They pertain doubly so to the communication of a Christian’s relationship with God.

**JR:** Hmm. This idea of the enjoyment of God before — we enjoy God before we can contemplate God — is pretty interesting. It seems to be pretty relevant to the work of a writer with theological concerns. A storyteller with theological concerns.

**MW:** Mmm!

**JR:** And as you say, Lewis, in his academic work, was speaking directly of these matters, and in his stories he was creating an atmosphere we could breathe and inhale.

**MW:** yeah. Absolutely.

**JR:** And in that atmosphere, that’s what really does its work on us. That fact that we can inhabit this world rather than treat it as a subject. That’s good stuff. I love it.

**MW:** Yes. And I think that’s one of the ways that inexperienced writers — junior writers and less good writers — they fall down when they’re trying to communicate aspects of the Christian life, because they turn their fiction into a thinly disguised Scripture lesson. Or, you know, they want to communicate points of doctrine. And there’s nothing wrong with that in itself, of course. Lewis does plenty of that himself. The point is that before you ever get to those, you know, discrete moments of theological apprehension, you’re already living a life in which God is, as I said, you know… the one in whole we live and move and have our being, to quote Paul in the Acts of the Apostles.

You know, long before we have knowledge about God in a theologically astute sense, we already have knowledge of God, by virtue of the fact that we are God’s creatures, that God has made us and is sustaining us in being from moment to moment. It’s that much more fundamental and essential component of the spiritual life that I think so many would-be Christian writers fail to appreciate. They think it’s all about, as it were, ticking boxes on a doctrinal grid, or communicating particularly intense moments of spiritual experience. And as I say, there’s nothing wrong with those things in and of themselves, but they are secondary. They come after this more foundational element of the relationship.

**JR:** Yeah. You know, Flannery O’Connor talks about the idea that you don’t have to understand a symbol for that symbol to do its work on you.

**MW:** Yeah, absolutely. And sometimes the symbols work best when you'd on; t even know they are symbols.

**JR:** Sure! Yeah. And it takes a certain amount of confidence… do you really believe the world is shot through with meaning? And if you do… then one think that that means is that it’s not my job to create meaning. It’s not my job to… you know, if I truly believe the world is shot through with meaning, then I can depict the world God made, and the meaning, in one way or another, will make its way out.

**MW:** Let’s hope so! If you’re a half-decent writer, it will make its way out. But there’s nothing inevitable about that.

**JR:** (laughs) That’s true.

**MW:** You know, that’s why there’s such a thing as a bad writer.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. But this idea… this seems relevant. And you were quoting a writer, Farrer: “Our ignorance of what we are does not make us cease to be, and our unawareness at the profound levels of our imagination neither abolishes them, nor prevents them from acting upon our wills, nor even upon the wills and minds of others.” And your point there being, you know… this was in the context of you talking about why Lewis didn’t feel the need to explain himself with these, the seven heavens. And the fact that we don’t know… reality exists outside us, and whether we acknowledge it or not, it is having its impact on us. And it seems to me to such a large degree, the writer’s job is to make obvious or make visible that which most of us aren’t paying close enough attention to notice.

**MW:** Well… I’m not sure I would entirely agree with you.

**JR:** Okay.

**MW:** (laughs) Cause the whole point of my book *Planet Narnia* is indeed to make visible something I believe is there in the Narnia books. But C.S. Lewis himself carefully hid it. He did not make it visible, but he nonetheless made it knowable. That’s what I’m trying to get at.

**JR:** Yeah. Fair enough.

**MW:** We know things, even without knowing that we know them.

**JR:** Yes. Thank you. That’s…

**MW:** In that quotation you just gave from Austin Farrer, “Our ignorance of what we are does not make us cease to be, and our unawareness of the profound levels of our imagination neither abolishes them, nor prevents them from acting upon our will.” So, there he’s saying, um… (pause) One’s awareness is not the key thing.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**MW:** It’s the very fact of imaginative power that matters, not the degree to which we are aware of it. And that goes back to my point about Keats and the palpable design. If the author, if the writer, makes their design too obvious, too… um, too uh… visible…

**JR:** Yeah.

**MW:** So that the reader does become aware of it, as it were, then the reader begins to feel manipulated or patronized. There’s nothing subtle about it. There’s nothing profound about it. Because it’s all there on the dashboard, on the screen of his mind. There’s nothing getting below the radar. So the point is to communicate your point without making it obvious.

**JR:** Thank you, I love that clarification. Thank you for pushing back on that, because that’s great. The difference between making something knowable and making something visible is an interesting distinction, and a helpful one.

**MW:** Yeah, and it all ties back into this fundamental distinction in lewis’ thought, the distinction between looking at something and looking along something. And this was a distinction he discovered in his mid-twenties, and he said that as soon as he discovered it, he immediately regarded it as an indispensable tool of thought. And you can’t properly understand C.S. Lewis unless you understand this distinction in his thought, between looking “at” and looking “along.”

He uses an image of a beam of light in a tool shed. It’s written in a short article called “Meditation in a Tool Shed.”

**JR:** Yeah.

**MW:** You probably know it, but for readers who might not be familiar with it, let me just quickly summarize. He’s standing in his tool shed one sunny day. It’s bright outside, but it’s dark inside. And through a crack in the top of the door, he can see a beam of light sliding down into the tool shed, and he can see little particles of dust floating in the sunbeam. And he uses that as an image of one kind of consciousness we have, which he calls contemplation, when you’re outside of an experience inspecting it from a distance.

And then he moves his position so the beam of light is no longer falling on the floor of the tool shed but directly on his eyes, and instantly he says everything changed. He no longer saw the tool shed, and most importantly of all, he no longer even saw the beam of light! Because he looked along the beam of light, and looking along it, he saw something quite different. He didn’t see the beam. He saw that which the beam of light illuminated, the crack at the top of the door, and the leaves on the tree moving in the wind outside.

And that’s what he calls “enjoyment consciousness,” looking along the beam. When you’re standing inside an experience, your’e not holding it at arms length, inspecting it with supposed scientific neutrality. No, you’re participating in it. You’re inhabiting it. It’s becoming personal to you. And that’s the much deeper and more humane way in which we know things. Uhh, but it inevitably involves a kind of invisibility, because once you’re inside the beam, the beam vanishes. It’s no longer an object of your vision. it’s now the medium of your vision.

And that’s so fundamental to Lewis’ whole approach as a thinker and writer, that every would-be writer, I think, ought to study that meditation in the tool shed and look up the implications for their fiction or poetry.

**JR:** Is it fair to say that in *The Discarded Image*, in the chapter on the planets, he was looking at the beam, and he was looking along the beam in the Narnia books?

**MW:** Yes, absolutely. That’s precisely the distinction. That in *The Discarded Image*, the chapter on the heavens, he’s laying out from a literary/historical point of view how the medieval people understood the seven influences, the seven heavens. And in that poem that I mentioned, he’s giving his own contemplative account, but this time from a poetic point of view, not a scholarly point of view.

And indeed in the Ransom Trilogy, the Cosmic Trilogy, he uses the seven heavens again, and again, does it directly and explicitly so the reader is aware that this is the subject of what they’re reading. But in Narnia, he uses the seven heavens in a way which circumvents our contemplative consciousness. He just throws us into a jovial, Jupiter-filled world in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, and a Mars-filled world in *Prince Caspian*, and a sun-filled world in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. And so on, seven times over.

So he’s practicing, as it were, what he preaches elsewhere about the importance of communicating not through *savoir* knowledge, but through *connaître* knowledge. You know, that distinction between the two modes of knowing, *savoir* and *connaître* in French — to know about something, savoir to know of something, *connaître*, knowledge by acquaintance. It’s the same in Spanish: *saber* and *conocer*. You get it in lots of languages actually. It’s built into the very structure of the language, those two modes of knowledge that we have.

But in English, for some reason, we don’t have that distinction. We have to flesh it out by talking about knowledge by acquaintance, which is enjoyment consciousness, and knowledge about things from the outside, which is contemplation consciousness.

**JR:** Um, that’s… that’s such a helpful distinction. Um, real quickly, is it in *The Discarded Image* that Lewis talks about our notion of outer space as being somehow empty. What came along in the 20th century is so different from the earlier understandings of the universe in which, um, there’s color and dance and music and movement. Even the word “outer space” suggests an emptiness that wasn’t a part of the medieval way of thinking about the universe.

**MW:** Absolutely, yes yes yes. Because Lewis was a scholar of the 16th century, he knew all about the uh… the shift from the Copernican cosmos to the uh… to the post-Copernican, and then the Newtonian, then the Einsteinian cosmos that we now believe ourselves to be living in. He followed these paradigm shifts and scientific, cosmological understandings very closely from his scholarly point of view. And yeah, he hones in on this word “space” as an indication of one of the things that changed in the process. To the medieval mind, you didn’t look up and out into empty space. That word wasn’t available to you. It was a 17th century word. It was coined by the poet Milton in *Paradise Lost*, in that modern sense.

**JR:** I did not realize that Milton was the originator of that…

**MW:** Yeah. Lewis points it out in *The Discarded Image*, and the Oxford English dictionary backs him up. (laughs)

**JR:** (laughs)

**MW:** So before the 17th century, you literally could not have said that you were looking up into space, because that word was not available to you. You would have been looking up into the heavens, the firmament, and there you would have had a very different experience. You would not have felt that you were looking up into hollowness and blackness and vacuity. You would have felt that you were looking into a realm of profound signification. And indeed, this place of the music of the spheres, this perpetual glory that the seven heavens were singing constantly to themselves and to God which we on earth couldn’t hear, because we were always here. It was inaudible to us because it formed the backdrop to our… auditory experience absolutely. it’s like when you live next door to an airport or a railway station.

**JR:** Yeah.

**MW:** Sooner or later, you just tune out the noise of the aircraft or the trains. Ummm, and Lewis talks about people who are born next to the great Cataract on the Nile. He says that they’re born hearing the great sound of the waterfall, and it’s only when they grow up and move 10 or 15 miles away so they can no longer hear the sound of the waterfall, that for the first time in their lives, they hear the sound of the waterfall. Because they now have a negative with which to contrast their positive experience of hearing that sound. And until you have that negative, you’re actually not aware, again with your contemplative consciousness, of what it is that you’re knowing or experiencing.

**JR:** Um, is that *The Discarded Image* where he talks about the people who live by the Cataract on the Nile?

**MW:** Uh, I think it’s actually in an essay — a lecture he gave called “Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages.” But there may be something about it in *The Discarded Image*.

**JR:** Yeah. Um… well, uh… (pause) I just feel like there’s something really important here — I know there is — for writers to understand this idea of a, um… of making, giving readers a way of experiencing these realities that are swirling all around us. And um… well, you’ve already given us a way to think and talk about that, and I appreciate it. This is really valuable stuff. And this idea of looking along the beam… that’s where a storyteller… a good storyteller is a person who knows how to step into the beam and show what he or she sees along that beam. And the ability to step outside the beam and look at the beam… that’s relevant too. As you pointed out, Lewis does both of those things, and does both of them exceedingly well.

**MW:** Yes, indeed. It’s largely because he had spent so long of a time studying the seven heavens and their various symbolic significations, and he had been trying his hand at communicating them in various ways — academically, poetically, and in his trilogy of interplanetary adventures — that when he came to write about them implicitly, he was able to do it so skillfully.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**MW:** Because if he hadn’t been so steeped in these seven symbols, I think… it wouldn’t have worked so well. He would have been in danger of turning the books, as it were, into allegories of the seven heavens. But they’re not allegorical representations of the seven heavens. They… it’s an almost unprecedented thing that lewis has done, I think. That’s one reason why the Narnia books are such classic works. They are… they’re doing something meaningful in the history of fiction. It’s absolutely brilliant what he was doing. But I think he could only have done it so well if he hadn’t spent so many decades of his life contemplating the planets from the outside so that when he chose to go inside, as it were, he could do it so harmoniously with such familiarity that he himself didn’t need to think about it with his contemplative consciousness very much because he himself knew them, he intuited them from inside already.

**JR:** Yeah. Right. Alright well, Mike, we’re getting close to the end of our time together, but I always like to end these conversations with the question, “Who are the writers who make you want to write?”

**MW:** (chuckles) Well, of course C.S. Lewis would have to be one, probably at the top of the list, having read him so closely for so long. And one of the things I like about Lewis is that he writes in so many genres and forms. You know, he’s a master of different styles of writing. That’s one of the most… enviable qualities that he has as a writer, I think.

But to get away from C.S. Lewis for a moment… well… (pause) It would almost be easier to ask the question from the other way around. Which writers *don’t* encourage me to write? (chuckles)

**JR:** (chuckles)

**MW:** Because any writer who is worth his salt or her salt, um, inspires one to write in different ways. Cause as soon as you see writing done well, there’s a little spur to… imitating them or emulating them. It’s the bad writers who don’t inspire me to write. Writers who are clunky and too obvious, or else self-indulgent and they have no care for the reader. But any writer who is, as I say, half-decent or three quarters decent or a positive genius like C.S. Lewis would encourage me to write. Um, I think my own gift as a writer — I’m sad to say, my own gifts are more in literary criticism than in fiction and poetry. I wish I were cut out to be a fiction writer or a poet. Maybe I’ll discover within me at some point, within the next few years, those talents. I’m not sure I’ve been given them. Um… I seem to have been equipped with a different skillset of literary critical gifts, of writing prose and nonfiction rather than poetry or fiction.

(THEME MUSIC STARTS TO FADE UP)

**JR:** Well, um, I… I have to say, your criticism in *Planet Narnia* has meant a lot to me, and so thank you for writing that book. And thank you for taking a little time to talk to me today about Lewis and about writing.

**MW:** My pleasure, Jonathan! Thank you so much for having me!

(THEME MUSIC)

**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We’re so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song “Too Good” as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.

**DM:** This podcast was produced by The Rabbit Room, where art nourishes community and community nourishes art. All our podcasts are made possible by the generous support of our members. To learn more about us, visit rabbitroom.com, and to become a member, rabbitroom.com/donate.

(THEME MUSIC OUT)

**DM:** In The Rabbit Room, we love introducing listeners to independent artists who are doing great work. Artists like The Arcadian Wild.

(FIDDLE, MANDOLIN, AND GUITAR MUSIC)

**DM:** Combine staggering musical prowess with lyrical wit and deep spiritual resonance, all given voice by a mandolin, fiddle, and guitar, and you’ve got The Arcadian Wild.

(SONG FADES UP)

**DM:** Their latest album *Finch in the Pantry* is a work of excellence from start to finish. Check it out wherever you get your music, and visit thearcadianwild.com for more information.

(SONG FADES UP AND OUT)