



War in Heaven

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Williams gives a contemporary setting to the traditional story of the Search for the Holy Grail. Examining the distinction between magic and religion, *War in Heaven* is an eerily disturbing book, one that graphically portrays a metaphysical journey through the shadowy crevices of the human mind.

War in Heaven Details

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From Reader Review War in Heaven for online ebook

Quiver says

The Goodreads blurb didn't sell it to me, this line from a New Yorker review did:

The jacket copy, anonymous but evidently written by the Faber editor T. S. Eliot, described Williams's novels as "supernatural thrillers."

And then there's the first line of the book:

The telephone bell was ringing wildly, but without result, since there was no-one in the room but the corpse.

With those two things in mind, and the knowledge that this was a merging of the search for the Holy Grail and a murder mystery, I set out with high expectations.

Only to be disappointed.

The humour is thoroughly British, to its credit, but the writing is clogged, long-winded, and mystical in places—too much so for my liking.

The murder mystery is in the opener, but turns its driving power over to the Grail storyline, with its fight between Good and Evil. I found it hard to stay interested and stop skim-reading. Also there's the corruption of young children, visions, madness, and the occult, on top of the supernatural powers and the Grail itself.

It's a cupful—it might be yours, but it wasn't mine.

Richard says

Of the three Inklings fantasy writers Charles Williams is the least known and appreciated. Yet, his series of supernatural fantasy novels are every bit as interesting and original as the books by C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

This is the first of the seven novels written by Charles Williams. (He did start one other but abandoned it after three chapters owing to a lukewarm reception by his fellow Inklings.)

"War In Heaven" is quite an opening debut. Rather than creating a unique secondary fantasy world or shifting between two universes, Williams allows the supernatural to invade his contemporary world. This allows him to explore the impact of a different reality on different characters.

The item that channels the supernatural into the natural in this novel is The Holy Graal (The older spelling of “Grail” preferred by Williams). A group of three dark magicians attempt to use it as a power base and a means of destruction. Two of the members of this evil trinity are rather stereotyped, but the third is well drawn, apparently respectable and has a believable and complex personality.

The three who oppose them are an Archdeacon, a Duke, and a Clerk in a publishing house. None of them are really particularly remarkable in any significant way and the three individuals who represent Evil are far more powerful than they.

Another group of three—a married couple with a child become a significant focus in this book—and there is one other character involved of whom none of the others is aware.

So much for the main players. For me the highlights of this book were a series of brilliantly described mystical experiences—among the best I have read in any novel. They are quite mesmerising and I found myself pulled into these astonishing moments.

The plot is cleverly introduced and effectively developed. In one section I found myself gently lulled by an apparently innocuous conversation between a priest and a police officer that suddenly generated an unexpected twist. The 3+3+3+1 character structure mentioned above creates a pattern which has mystical overtones. And the reader may note the use of the number three in other areas of the novel.

Possibly the finale doesn’t quite live up to the transcendental power of the central section but that’s only an opinion. Many might like it.

While Williams is certainly able to convey a variety of language registers including a demotic style when appropriate, he also reveals a remarkable width of academic knowledge. It is no wonder that he was so admired by Lewis.

I’ve decided to read all of the novels again as they are now fairly easily available either in hard copy or digital versions. Perhaps this fine writer may get the audience he deserves.

Brandon Pearce says

Wow! Charles Williams was a great friend of Tolkien and C.S.Lewis. He was part of their group called the Oxford Inklings. This novel deals with some fascinating material: the sangraal, and a battle between satanic and heavenly forces on earth. Quite chilling in parts. Take a look at the malleus malificarum in reference to the Witch's Sabbath parts. A bit mind boggling in spots, like reading a whole novel of Neal A Maxwell talks. Heck, he's one of the guys that converted C.S. Lewis to Christianity, he's got to be deep.

Jeannie says

This was my first encounter with Charles Williams. I read this for a Christian Fantasy class at BYU many years ago. I can still remember so much of the experience. There is no other way to describe reading a Charles Williams novel: it is an experience never to be forgotten. I once read that C.S. Lewis will take his readers up to the gates of Hell then turn tail and run; Williams on the other hand will march his readers right

through those gates and they will emerge on the other side battle weary and worn. That would be accurate.

But I am always amazed that Williams could perform such a feat and still maintain such high standards. I believe it is because he didn't glorify evil in any way. His books deal with that ongoing war between good and evil and the fight for the souls of men. And a reader has no doubt that his message is about choosing good. Although I have not read many of his books (up until recently they have been difficult to find), Charles Williams remains one of my all time favorite authors.

D.M. Dutcher says

Apparantly the Holy Grail is mucking around in a parsonage in Fardle. An urbane publisher/satanist finds out and steals it. Meanwhile he's taken a fancy to a boy whom he tries to corrupt for some reason. The Archdeacon of the parsonage isn't really happy about this, and steals it back, and then things get weird as the publisher's two friends get involved. Oh, and there's a police inspector investigating a murder, and Prester John.

If you've ever read *That Hideous Strength* by C.S. Lewis, you've read a far better and more consistent version of this book. There's too much weirdness and arbitrary rule-making going on, not all of it good. Apparently all the good side can do is pray and be passive to the point of incredulity, while the evil side can use actual magic and spiritual attacks only to be defeated by a *Deus Ex Machina*. The side plot with Adrian seem arbitrary too—it's obvious from the end the boy is supposed to grow into someone great, but then why is so little time spent on him, and how does he not get corrupted considering the company Gregory hangs out with? And I get the point of what happened with his mother, but then why should she be spared while a certain personage dies pretty horribly later on in the book?

Plus, I know the Archdeacon is supposed to be a hero, but he spends way too much time in passive appreciation and reverie, and not enough being a hero. Lewis in *THS* actually explained this by saying that prayer is what causes the fire from heaven to come down, but the Archdeacon really seems pulled around by the nose.

It's written well enough, although to me it didn't start till the Archdeacon stole the chalice back. But it didn't hook me enough to get over the oddness and arbitrary nature of the plot.

Manuel Alfonseca says

ENGLISH: Although Williams is unbeatable when describing the process of damnation of a human being, in this novel there are some things I did not like:

- a) The *deus ex machina* that solves the problem introduces himself as Prester John, Galahad, the Graal, the bearer of the Graal, Mary, and at a certain moment also identifies with Christ. I find this mixture of real and fictional characters quite inadequate.
- b) I did not always like the behavior of the protagonist (the archdeacon).
- c) I find little credible that a devil possession can be provoked just by rubbing a wound with a certain ointment.

ESPAÑOL: Aunque Williams es inigualable cuando describe el proceso de la condenación de un ser humano, en esta novela hay algunas cosas que no me gustaron:

- a) El *deus ex machina* que resuelve el problema se presenta a sí mismo como el Preste Juan, Galahad, el Grial, el portador del Grial, María, y en cierto momento también se identifica con Cristo. Me parece una mezcolanza de personajes reales y ficticios bastante poco afortunada.
- b) El comportamiento del archidiácono protagonista no siempre me ha gustado.
- c) Que una posesión diabólica pueda provocarse frotando una herida con cierto ungüento me parece poco creíble.

Jeff Miller says

"War in Heaven" is a novel written by Charles Williams in 1930. This was his first novel and from what I have read, it was rated as his best novel. I had been meaning to get around to reading this author mainly since he was one of the famous Inklings and a sale on his books helped me to get around to it.

This novel is a supernatural thriller and involves the Grail being found in a country parish in England. It starts with the finding of the body of an unidentified man in a publishing house and a set of coincidences in this publishing house lead to the finding of the Grail by an Anglican Archdeacon. This novel moves beyond just a thriller with two opposing groups, but has a deeper theological level. The battle of good versus evil is played out over the acquisition of the Grail which passes between the two sides. The use of the Grail by the forces of evil displays characters that are not your stereotypical villains. There is the banality of evil about them that makes what they do even more scary. The Archdeacon is also not exactly your typical hero in a thriller. Certainly a Christian hero willing to sacrifice and turn the other cheek and who has true meekness that means fighting for the truth and not surrendering to evil.

I quite enjoyed this novel, but thought it was just a bit flawed with the introduction of Prester John later into the novel. I really didn't think the character added much to the story and if anything weakened it a little. Reading this novel it also reminded me of some of C.S. Lewis "Space Trilogy." After reading this novel I found that others also thought that Lewis was certainly influenced by this and William's other novels.

There is also some interplay with Catholicism and Anglicanism as one of the people that helps out the Archdeacon is Catholic. There is even a slight reference to *Apostolicae Curae*, which was not named but hinted at in one of the conversations. Certainly a sticking point for high-church Anglicans, but this small exchange was not contentious.

I also find it rather interesting that the themes of the occult and Christianity played out in his own life. When in his early thirties he was a Rosicrucian and belonged specifically to the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross one of the several groups involved in theosophy at the time. It was not uncommon for some Christians to belong to one of these groups and also attend a Christian church. It appears that was the case with Charles Williams and he had only stopped attending these meetings three years prior to publishing this book.

So I look forward to reading some of his other novels which are also described as spiritual thrillers.

Tom says

Made me think. Very dark at some points (it's a book for adults, not children or maybe even teens), but has a satisfying conclusion. The characters think and speak in a very traditional English style, which is a lot of fun. Each character's motivations and thoughts are essentially the insightful representation of some ideal, good or bad.

As has been said elsewhere, Williams' style is reminiscent of "That Hideous Strength" by C.S. Lewis. I think anyone who liked one would likely enjoy the other.

It's in the public domain in Australia; I've purchased a used copy on Amazon (it's available for about \$4) to own a license and downloaded it from Project Gutenberg Australia to have it on my Kindle. (The Charles Williams anthology sold on Amazon is copied directly from Project Gutenberg Australia.)

Corey says

“Oh, damn and blast!” he cried with a great voice. “Why was this bloody world created?”

“As a sewer for the stars,” a voice in front of him said. “Alternatively, to know God and to glorify Him forever.” (p. 95)

Bryan Frink says

In some ways similar to "The Exorcist," Williams' "War in Heaven" crosses genre, being both a horror book and a theological speculation. It doesn't have the driving force of "The Exorcist," but its roots are the same: a Manichean Christianity in which good guys and bad guys war over the souls of the undecided.

The book is quite personal, focusing the battle upon a small group of English men and women, along with one child, who are drawn together by the re-emergence of the Holy Grail--or "Graal," as Williams preferred. But this is no King Arthur tale. The Graal, having been the serving vessel at the Last Supper, is a power object: a focus of spiritual forces that may be used for good or evil. The evil, as in most of these books, is somehow more interesting than the good... but that was probably Williams' intent. If power for power's sake were not intriguing, who would bother?

The character of the country clergyman interested me thoroughly-- a bit of the calm Sage which has entered Western literature via Eastern thought. He was a very believable hero -- though, once again, no shining armor.

Though I share almost none of Mr. Williams' theological views, I very much enjoy his storytelling. The book may be 70+ years old, but human nature has changed very little in those years.

Taryn says

War in Heaven by Charles Williams wasn't the easiest book for me to read. It has a lot of long sentences, not a lot of dialogue, and a lot of talking about things I don't know (or words I don't know). And it talked a lot about the devil.

However, it really was a tremendous story about faith, and good and evil, and Jesus, and the Eucharist, and the communion of saints. I will never be the same after reading that book. Honestly. It's affected my faith forever, for the good.

Eleanor says

This book really didn't do anything for me (sorry Richard!). I found Williams' style a bit clunky - a good example is the fancy dialogue between Kenneth and the Duke when they first meet - and the whole Christians versus devil-worshippers theme had no appeal whatsoever for me. I managed to get through to the end, but only just.

Just not my cup of tea, but I can well understand that it would be quite compelling for people who share Williams' beliefs.

Christopher says

Really a wild, fun book. This is Williams at his best.

Also read in Summer of 2009.

Helen says

It seems odd to me that though I've loved the two most prominent Inklings (Lewis and Tolkien) for many years, I'd never ventured into the works of the others until now. It took a most unpleasant illness and the resulting long weekend to get me to sit down with this book. I am most glad that I finally did.

War in Heaven is densely populated with complex characters, complicated plotting, and weighty moral issues. A pall of darkness hangs over London, the lives of the characters, and this book as first a corpse is discovered under an unfortunate book-editor's desk, and then the Graal turns up in a little country church. It would be impossible too give a concise summary, but suffice to say that the plot involves Satan-worshippers, a secretly evil archaeologist, the corrupting of a child, a vanishing chemist's shop, a mysterious lotion, a young man in a grey suit, an eccentric Duke (shades of Bertie Wooster), and almost anything else you can think of.

Though the story is often very dark, with the powers of Hell waxing strong and terrifying, there are moments of levity to balance the gravity. It is interesting to note the similarities between this and the third book in Lewis's Space Trilogy; it is obvious Jack drew heavily upon his friend's writing style. It is also interesting to note that Tolkien disliked Williams, and it is possible that Lewis's growing friendship with Williams signified the end of his closeness with Tolkien. For more about the relationships between these Inklings, I would heartily recommend reading Alan Jacob's *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis*. I'm currently reading *Descent into Hell*, another of William's books. We'll see how it compares.

Dave says

The edition that I read has a cover quote from T.S. Eliot about Charles Williams's novels: "There are no novels anywhere quite like them. They are very good thrillers...they are exciting. They are the work of a man who had something very serious to convey."

Well, I haven't read any others by him, but I could add one more sentence of description. They are whackadoodle.

What is this like? Sort of like G.K. Chesterton, with spirituality and absurdity thrust into workaday England. Like C.S. Lewis, deeply concerned with telling an adventure story and with discussing the reality of Christianity; but Lewis usually roots things more concretely, less metaphysically. Like E.M. Forster's stories where the faun or the Greek god inserts himself into reality. Like magical realism, kindasorta.

Anyway, this is a whackadoodle story of a murder in a publishing house that rapidly turns into a battle between God and the Devil (not just good and evil), involving Anglicans, Catholics, Romantics, Agnostics, Satanists, Jews, Nihilists, Children, and Prester John, the keeper and embodiment of the Holy Grail. Not to give anything away (not that I could, honestly), but I wish the detective story was as thoroughly worked out as the religious and mystical interplay. I couldn't wait for it to end (mystico-religious speech ages quickly), but I love the matter-of-factness of certain parts, like when the detectives try to find the drugstore. Plus there's this opening sentence, which is up there with the best I've read: "The telephone bell was ringing wildly, but without result, since there was no one in the room but the corpse."

Sheila says

Charles Williams died in 1945, aged fifty-nine, and I acquired three of his novels recently from a second-hand stall. This is the first one I've read. I found myself thinking of the differences between modern writing and the stories of not-too-long ago, remembering reading Dickens as a young teen and coping fine with long descriptions that would later bore my sons, knowing as I read that "this is a good author" therefore trusting the story to come. Not that Charles Williams writes like Dickens, but his stories do have longer paragraphs and more description than modern fiction. If War in heaven is anything to go by, they also have fascinating plots, up-to-date mysteries—even a Holy Graal—and complex characters with no simple bad guy/good guy denotations.

That last point makes me think they may represent better story-telling than many recent Christian novels I've read, though some of the plot-lines make me wonder if they'd be accepted by a modern Christian publishing house.

In case you can't tell, I really rather enjoyed reading War in Heaven. The author paints the English town and countryside very convincingly, making me think of home. And he writes the dialog delightfully, with half the truths lying unspoken between the lines. There's a murder on page one, and an absolutely perfect first line that declares the phone's ringing unanswered "since there was no-one in the room but the corpse." And even as mystery piles on mystery, that corpse lies waiting to be identified, the cause of death unknown till the story's end.

There's a country pastor, a Duke, a mad archeologist, strange chemists brewing even stranger potions, and

innocent book publishers just trying to get on with their lives. There are deaths as well, not just the corpse; crazy chases; magical mists and mysterious strangers. And there are long and fascinating conversations like sitting by the fireside listening in while those with serious opinions opine.

It's a zany mad-cap adventure, told slowly and leisurely. And I find myself wondering if, in a world with fewer authors and fewer books, perhaps it was easier to know "this is a good author" and trust the tale to come. Perhaps we need our fast pace and instant action when we read today because the reader's probably not heard of the author before. If we're not caught straight away in the story's net what reason will we have to invest the time?

Ah well, that's my two-pennorth. And when I get time, I'll invest it in reading and reviewing another of Charles Williams' books.

Joy says

Williams was in the writing group with Lewis, Tolkien, and Sayers, so I was eager to read this novel. But, as it turns out, I was very eager to finish it. It's the traditional story of the search for the Holy Grail, but in a contemporary (1930s England) setting. The story jumped around a lot, and since none of the characters were of great interest to me, it was hard to follow the jumping around. I had to make a chart to keep up with them and try to keep me interested. I suspect this is one of those books that you either love or hate. Hate would be a bit strong for me,

but it won't be a re-read, nor do I want to pursue more in the series.

There were a few interesting quotes: "The English police are corrupt enough, of course, but the trouble is one doesn't know where they're corrupt, and you may hit on the wrong man." "During the previous day it had become evident in Grosvenor Square that a common spiritual concern does not mean a common intellectual agreement." "It annoyed him as his father had annoyed him by wasting emotions and strength in mere stupid, senile worry."

[Name Redacted] says

This book began well enough, but quickly became all but interminable. It was a long, inexplicably slow slog, and the brief-but-regular moments of wit and brilliance simply couldn't make up for how unaccountably difficult I found it to finish. The fascinating approach to magic and Satanism was likewise overwhelmed by the grotesque anti-Semitic caricature "Manasseh". Add to that the fact that Williams (a friend of Tolkien & Lewis) seems to subscribe to a sort of 19th/20th century transcendental Christian pseudo-mysticism I have always found impenetrably silly (eg: Prester John features in the novel, but Williams has the character simultaneously exist as the Priest-king, John the Beloved, Mary, Jesus, God, the Graal itself, etc.)... And, well, this book earns itself two stars. Not a must-read, but it wasn't all bad and readers with different tastes might love it.

Jonathan says

A lovely old fashioned evil publisher, opposed only by an Archdeacon, a Duke and various other persons, plus some forces possibly of angelic origin, or possibly pretending, it isn't really clear to me though the novel probably wants you to assume the former.

It is only fair to state that the body count is two murders by the forces of evil and one murder by the forces of good, though one of the first murders could have been prevented had the possibly angelic personage been actually interested in helping rather than swanking around irritating everyone and making gnomic predictions.

A knowledge of theology will add to your appreciation of some of the arguments and discussions, but it isn't required. The author is not fond of pretended Jewish doctors, nor of Chemists. The Chemist's shop is quite a strong character in its own right.

The evil publisher is generally quite kindly, and apart from the aforesaid murder, acquits himself well in the field of babysitting, teaching the child bits of pieces of magic, its own parents show no interest in the child whatsoever, so one is inclined to overlook his driving the mother temporarily mad with a touch of poison.

All in all there is a little bit too much deus ex machina, if indeed it is deus, but all fun all the same.

Kent says

Charles Williams is kind of like the Frank Peretti of the early 20th century, though his supernaturalism is more Anglicized and mysterious. Williams, a member of the Inklings, that small group of writers that included his friends Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, helps us to see that the wall between our world and the invisible spirit world has many unlocked doors, if indeed a wall even exists. [This reminds me of Genesis 32:1-2: Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. When Jacob saw them, he said, "This is the camp of God!" So he named that place "Two Camps."]

In this novel, the struggle between good and evil, Christ and Satan, is played out in the lives of ordinary individuals, some who have surrendered to Christ, some who have surrendered to Satan, and some who are oblivious to the reality of anything beyond their five senses. The plot involves the discovery of the Holy Graal in an Anglican church in a small English town.
