

Looking for the King, an Inklings Novel
A Review by Margaret Carbaugh

Did you ever wish you could sit in an English pub and share a pint of brew with one of your favorite authors?

Well, author David C. Downing has done just that. Even better, through his novel, *Looking for the King*, he let me draw up a chair and listen to not just one, but two of my favorite authors: C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis's spiritual mentor and author of the *Lord of the Ring* trilogy.

The place is obviously England, specifically the country in and around Oxford, 40 miles outside of London. The time, the early days of World War II, before America's entry on the side of the Allies. The "Inklings" referred to in the title comprise a group of Oxford dons including Lewis and Tolkien who meet regularly in a nearby pub to enjoy a hearty round or two and to talk about their favorite subjects—literature and God.

The plot follows the exploits of an agnostic Yank named Tom McCord, who travels to England to research a travel book about sites related to the King Arthur of legend. His search takes on an added urgency when we realize that Tom is not the only person interested in Arthurian relics.

Most readers will connect the dots fairly quickly, especially if they remember the premise of the Indiana Jones movies. (Recall Hitler's obsession with the search for the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail?) Here, we have a similar race, not to find the Ark or the Holy Grail, but to possess the Spear of Destiny. The Spear is reported to be the Roman instrument used to pierce the side of Christ. Tom aims to find it to help solve a series of disturbing dreams reported by his research assistant. His competitors are racing to get to there ahead of him because they believe claims that the Spear gives victory to the army who possesses it. Of course, The Inklings are a group of highly intelligent literary scholars, and they feed Tom the clues that help him solve more than one level of the mystery.

The strength of this book is in its careful scholarship. The character sketches of Tolkien and Lewis show that Downing has really done his homework on both men and on their beliefs. In the pub scenes, I truly felt as if I were eavesdropping on intimate and earnest conversations between good friends who just happened to be two of the most brilliant writers of our time.

Another book you may want to check out is *Jackie's Gift*. In this short picture book, Sharon Robinson tells the story of the first Christmas of a black family who moves into a previously all-white area of Brooklyn and their effort to befriend their Jewish neighbors. It's really incidental that the author is the daughter of Jackie Robinson.

