



Which way to Narnia?

Oxford student Megs Devonshire believes in mathematics, not fairytales, until her brother introduces her to a magical world – and sends her on an important mission

The tea kettle screams, and Mum pours boiling water into the cup over the tea leaves nestled in the silver strainer and watches the steam rise. “Go on now. Take your cuppa and visit with your brother.”

She pulls her worn grey sweater tighter around her and buttons it near the neck as though she’s holding herself together with the Shetland wool of her father’s old farm lambs. I kiss her red cheek and she takes a linen handkerchief and wipes her eyes, then blows her nose into it with a resonating sound. We both laugh. “Go on now,” she says.

The room is warm. During the day it’s the sunniest part of the house – intolerable for a few weeks every summer and favourable in the winter. It’s shaped like a perfect square (and I know a perfect square) with plaster walls painted an ivory colour. The single bed is handmade by our Grandfather Devonshire, fashioned of oak with four posters squiring up like the squire at Magdalen. The hand-hewn oak floors are covered with a sheep’s-wool rug, fluffy in the places not often trod and flattened where our feet walk again and again. The blanket on his bed is striped, alternating blue and green, pulled high over the crisp white linen sheets that Mum irons smooth. The wardrobe across from the bed and between the windows, once belonging to Mum’s sister, Dotti, has the trees and birds of a forest glade carved into its wooden doors.

I think how each of these things is a part of our family, each made or passed down through a Devonshire or a MacAllister line that reaches us now.

George’s face is placid, and he rests on his pillow lightly, as if he hasn’t enough weight to dent the down feathers inside. His eyes are closed, and I watch him sleep. His easy breaths go in and out. “George,” I whisper.

He opens his eyes, and his grin is wide. “I knew you would come home if

I asked. I told Mum so.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I take his hand. “Mum says you are too busy with school. Mathematics exams are very hard, she says.”

“They are, but I’m right here.” “I need you to do something for me.”

He sounds like an old man, or if not old, then just like Dad.

“Anything.” I drop into the hard, wooden chair next to his bed.

“Have you ever seen him?” he asks. “Seen who?”

“The man who wrote about Narnia. The man who wrote the book.”

“C.S. Lewis. Yes, I do see him quite often.

He walks quickly with his pipe and his walking stick along High Street and Parks Road, as if he’s always late for something.”

“I need you to ask him a question.”

“George, I don’t really know him. I just see him about. He teaches at Magdalen, and they don’t allow women students there. I’m at Somerville. They are a mile and worlds apart.”

“It’s the same. It’s Oxford University.”

I can’t argue that point. And I’m not one for arguing

as it is. “What do you want me to ask him?”

“Where did Narnia come from?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Have you read it?” He asks as if his question is the answer.

I shake my head. “It’s a book for children. I’m consumed with physics and the way numbers hold together the universe. I’m learning about Einstein’s theories and... I haven’t had time to read some children’s book.”

“You’re rarely wrong, sister, but you are now. It’s not a children’s book. It may look like it on the cover, but it’s a book for everyone. Please, Megs. I need to know if Narnia is *real*.”

“Of course it’s not real. It’s a story, like *Squirrel Nutkin* and that book you like about the girl who dropped into a hole in the ground.”

“Alice,” he says. “This is different. I know you think the whole world is held together by some math formula.” His voice has an unaccustomed annoyance in it. “But I’ve thought about this a lot, and I think the world is held together by stories, not all those equations you stare at.” He’s rarely angry, and this may not even be anger but something sparks up like a quick flame.

“My, my, I see.” I feel my eyebrows lifting.

‘I open the book that has consumed my little brother, that has him hiding in the wardrobe and telling me about fauns and beavers and winters where Christmas never comes’



Megs doesn’t really feel she belongs at the iconic British university. ‘It’s not that I don’t want to wear the latest fashion of pleated skirts and cute cardigans and have a smart exchange with a handsome boy in a waistcoat, but I just wasn’t made that way.’

“You’ve definitely given this some serious thought.”

“Please. Just ask Professor Lewis, Megs. This book of his is different. It’s as real as Dad’s apple tree outside, as real as Mum’s flowers, surely as real as this house. I need to know where it came from.”

George doesn’t have to say anymore because I realize the answer he wants means life and death to him. If my little brother needs to know where Narnia comes from, I will find out.

“I will ask him.

I promise.”

From that moment, the weekend slips through my fingers like I’m trying to hold on to morning fog. I stay with George, and I study until my eyes burn. I flop around the house in an old wool sweater and fuzzy slippers. I think sometimes of the others at university who are having a chat in groups, I feel so disconnected from them. It’s not that I don’t want to wear the latest fashion

of pleated skirts and cute cardigans and have a smart exchange with a handsome boy in a waistcoat, but I just wasn’t made that way. It’s all so uncomfortable. I don’t understand how girls get their hair in sleek ponytails or wear it in bouffant while my dark curls spring wild in the wind around my round face. Their skin is smooth and porcelain while the freckles on my cheeks and nose will not be covered with powder.

They call me cute; I’ve heard them. But not beautiful, never that. Mathematics doesn’t care what I look like or what I wear, and that’s what I’ve been focused on all weekend. On Sunday, right before I prepare to leave, I sit down and open the book that has consumed my little brother, that has him hiding in the wardrobe and telling me about fauns and beavers and winters where Christmas never comes.

“I can read to you before I go to the



‘Please. Just ask Professor Lewis, Megs. This book of his is different. It’s as real as Dad’s apple tree outside, as real as Mum’s flowers’

“I can read to you before I go to the

train station,” I tell him. “Would you like that?”

He smiles. “Yes.”

“Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy...”

I mean to read for just a few minutes, to show him I’m not such a prig about math, that I can read a fairytale as well as anyone else. A few minutes, I said.

Just a few.

But when I look up hours later, having missed the train, and the final pages resonate in the room with my tears blurring the last lines, I understand my brother. I understand it all.

We must, absolutely must, find out where Narnia came from. **H**



Once Upon a Wardrobe (Harper Muse) is the latest historical fiction from American author Patti Callahan, who has written 16 books, including the bestselling *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*.

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