

BOOKSHELF

Soulbane revives the devil in C.S. Lewis

By Judith McKibbin

THE SOULBANE STRATAGEM, by Norman Jetmundsen: Alresford, UK, John Hunt Publishing, Ltd., 2000, S, 240 pages.

For anyone who, in viewing popular culture in the last few decades, has observed a trend and thought, "There - that has to be the devil's work," Norman Jetmundsen's *The Soulbane Stratagem* will provide validation of some opinions as well as some uncomfortable moments. Jetmundsen, a Birmingham attorney, has created an update of C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, the instructive mis-views of the devil Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood. Jetmundsen's book, published in Britain recently by John Hunt, Ltd., a firm specializing in children's books, suits both adolescent and adult tastes. *The Soulbane Stratagem* explores what the devil probably sees as his best opportunities to corrupt souls in the world 50 years after Lewis' interesting account. To pique a reader's interest further, Jetmundsen gives his book a plot outside that contained in the devil Soulbane's instructions to his lieutenants.

He invents a lively mystery adventure centered around the discovery of Soulbane's advisories to Foulheart, a sort of foreman devil. Cade Bryson, a skeptical, non-religious American graduate student stumbles onto Soulbane's papers in the library of the Magdalen College at Oxford University. Cade's discovery leads him to explore C. S. Lewis' life and writings with the help of a cleric who knew and admired Lewis. While Cade pursues subsequent communications, he falls in love and also becomes acquainted with his own spiritual nature.

However, Cade's story is a side dish to the main menu of Soulbane's communications with his underling devils. Soulbane's gloating will inspire some chagrin as well as some distinct "Amens," for among the traps he **would** have his lesser devils promote are rampant technology, extreme forms of fundamentalism and evangelism, relativism, secular humanism in education, the destruction of

family, the rush to litigate petty issues (this from the pen of a lawyer), and the illogical fight between creationists and evolutionists. Humans have, Soulbane reports, invented clever traps of their own which his underlings need only to exploit. To paraphrase Pogo in a sideways fashion, the devil has found his friend, and it is the human race's penchant for extremism.

Lewis prefaced his *Screwtape Letters* with a warning that there were two ways to err in one's attitude toward the devil: one is to deny his existence; the other is to be too fascinated by the way he operates in the world. As rationale for creating the *Screwtape Letters*, Lewis quoted Martin Luther: "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to test of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn."

Because Jetmundsen's Soulbane rants about the bumbblings and misjudgments of past and present devils, one may in fact jeer the devil's mismanagements. And, as Soulbane's spluttering fury at his incompetent predecessors reaches "Taz"-maniac levels, the reader indeed may feel scornful of his childish malevolence, but it is a tentative, nervous scorn. That nervousness is an indicator of the thought-provoking nature of Jetmundsen's examination of contemporary mores.

Soulbane's words are, as Lewis deemed Screwtape's letters, "moral inversions," and Jetmundsen reminds his readers that the devil is a liar, even when communicating with his own kind. Readers with understanding of the difference between truth and mere fact will find this book rewarding, perhaps even lifechanging. Less open-minded, or very careless readers may find it merely provoking. Jetmundsen has produced a readable, spiritually instructive work which should find a wide market. Read it with a thoughtful teenager, read it with a thoughtless teenager; it should prove instructive to all parties.