In this book Lewis tells of his search for joy, a spiritual journey that led him from the Christianity of his early youth into atheism and then back to Christianity. This book, together with his early diary All My Road Before Me, form the closest thing we have to an autobiography.

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Surprised by Joy is C.S. Lewis partial autobiography, partial in that he recounts events from early childhood up until his conversion to Christianity as a young Oxford academic. The purpose of the book is not a straightforward autobiography, hence the relatively early conclusion of the work,
but rather an account of how Lewis, at one time an atheist, came to believe in God and finally in Christianity.

The recurring theme of the book, expressed in the title, is Lewis experience of joy, a deeply felt, intense longing or desire, that came upon him in rare and special moments, usually associated with literature and nature. The imaginative side of Lewis from boyhood on pursued this experience of joy as the highest good of life; he associated the best writing and most worthy culture with works and experiences that elicited this deeply-felt and spiritual exultation. Finally, after being convinced both intellectually and existentially of Gods existence, Lewis realized that his experiences of joy were not ends in themselves, or the final object of life, but signposts towards God.

In the book Lewis covers his ancestry, childhood, close relationship with his brother Warren, troubled relationship with his father, his education in the English public school world, his blissful studies under the retired schoolmaster Kirkpatrick, his WWI military service in France, his Oxford education and his earlier years as an Oxford tutor. Lewis writing is absorbing, penetrating, insightful and fascinating. One characteristic of the book (and Lewis writing in general) is a brilliant brevity. Most of the subjects are dealt with in a few pages and none are described with any methodical detail. Yet in these brief treatments, one gains rich impressions of the various topics covered. With one anecdote or several skillful images Lewis draws his readers into turn-of-the-century Belfast, a brutal English boarding school, the boat ride between Ireland and England, and the trenches of World War I, to give examples.

Lewis is equally skilled at depicting the development of his own personality and beliefs. A bookish, imaginative child, he cultivated a special literary taste and style through his pursuit of joy and his natural intellectual gifts. He began with the childrens classics of his era such as Beatrix Potter but later had a special love for Norse mythology and the related music of Richard Wagner. His human desire to be master of his own destiny and free from the external authority of any supernatural being was supplemented by the fashionable skepticism of the age; he became an atheist as an adolescent. But his literary taste and imaginative life ran relatively free of the influence of his philosophical outlook. Thus, on the one hand he read literature and experienced nature as if there was some objective basis for the beauty and harmony he sensed there, while on the other hand he was intellectually convinced that since the material world was all that existed, there could be no real beauty or truth behind the lovely images of art and scenery.

The climax of the book occurs when Lewis is a young academic at Oxford and he realizes that his atheism is untenable. Influenced by intelligent friends who were theists and even Christians, struck by how many of his favorite authors, including Plato, Milton, Spenser, George Herbert, George MacDonald, and G.K. Chesterton were supernaturalists or religious, and
having rejected materialism for philosophical idealism, Lewis also felt himself pursued by a personal God. Through reading and meditation, he realized that his lifelong interest in aesthetic ecstasy, or joy, was an expression of the innate longing of mankind for relationship with God, only that he had mistakenly made the experience of joy an end in itself. In reality, this joy or deep desire was a by-product or characteristic of the contemplation of God. Joy cannot be pursued and therefore cannot be captured or achieved. It is like trying to hold water in the palm of one hand or capture sunshine with a butterfly net. Rather, God is the only thing worth pursuing and when we pursue Him as the supreme end in life, we not only gain snatches of holy joy in the process, but we learn, as did Lewis, that it is really God who has been pursuing us all along.

Surprise by Joy is a masterpiece on many levels--as an account of Edwardian Ireland and England, as a depiction of English boarding school life and the generations of British leaders who emerged from this culture, as a chronicle of the education and literary development of a great English writer and thinker, as an exercise in self-reflection and analysis, and as an unparalleled example of the conversion of a priceless human soul to belief in God. It is one of the best books I have ever read and I recommend it highly.

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