

**Don King (ed.), *Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman*,  
Review by J.E. Topping.  
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Don W. King (ed.), *Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman*.  
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9780802863997.

After a biography of Ruth Pitter, Don W. King now presents a portrait of another remarkable woman writer and major inspiration of C.S. Lewis, Joy Davidman. In this delightful and beautifully produced volume, Prof. King introduces, presents and unobtrusively annotates Davidman's collected letters, which span a period of twenty-four years, from 1936 to her death in 1960. The 'self-portrait in letters' is rounded out by her seventeen-page autobiographical essay 'The Longest Way Round', originally written for a 1951 volume of memoirs entitled *These Found the Way: Thirteen Converts to Protestant Christianity*. This essay presents a path to conversion remarkably similar to Lewis', marked by an incisive, no-nonsense intellect on the one hand and an eager imagination on the other:

Yet it's strange how completely I failed to see where my emotions and desires were leading. For what I read, eagerly and untiringly, was fantasy. Ghost stories and superscience stories; George MacDonald in my childhood, Dunsany in my teens. I believed the three-dimensional material world was the only thing that existed, but in literature it bored me. I didn't believe in the supernatural, but it interested me above all else. Only it had to be written as fiction; the supernatural presented as fact outraged my convictions. By disguising heaven as fairyland I was enabled to love heaven. (88)

Davidman's intellect and an imagination, however, were reared in a very different environment than that of interwar Oxford. A secular American Jew, she identified early with a philosophical atheism and, quickly following, Communism as its most promising socio-political realization. Having won the Yale Younger Poets Competition and the Russell Loines Memorial Award (given by the National Institute of Arts and Letters) for her early poetry collection *Letter to a Comrade* (1938), Davidman became an important literary voice in the Communist Party of the United States of America, between 1941 and 1943 publishing poems and reviews in nearly every issue of the Party's semi-official weekly, *New Masses*. Her witty, often acerbically critical voice, so memorably portrayed in *Shadowlands*, was fine-tuned in this context, and still makes for entertaining reading. (One of Davidman's favourite targets were Hollywood films - *That Uncertain Feeling*, for example, 'is a soufflé that has been left standing too long.... Its final consistency is such that you

could sell it as an old rubber tire, and not even a goat would notice the difference in taste'.) But that criticism turned, before too long, against the CPUSA itself; within two years of meeting and marrying her first husband, Bill Gresham, Davidman became severely disillusioned with communism as a philosophical and moral system, and left the Party. Reading Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* for the first time in 1948, she wrote with shock to a friend that the book proved only 'that Marxism was philosophically nonsensical, logically unsound, historically arbitrary, and scientifically half false from the start and the other half overthrown by Einstein's first work' (79).

What followed was a 'direct and shattering experience of God' (79), whom Davidman intuitively conceptualizes in terms similar to Lewis':

Francis Thompson symbolized God as the "Hound of Heaven," pursuing on relentless feet. With me, God was more like a cat. He had been stalking me for a very long time, waiting for his moment; he crept nearer so silently that I never knew he was there. Then, all at once, he sprang. (93)

In the years following her conversion, Davidman's marriage to Bill Gresham was placed under ever more severe strain, primarily by his increasing alcoholism and dissoluteness and the consequent, perennial insolvency of the family. Unfortunately, only few letters trace this disintegration until Davidman's eventual decision for a prolonged trip to England to alleviate their problems - a decision spiralling into the complete breakdown of their marriage when Bill and Joy's cousin, Renée, fall in love during her absence. The bulk of Davidman's letters from England - first as a single mother of two, and later as C.S. Lewis' wife - are painfully practical missives to her (former) husband, reminding him of his financial duties to her and his children, as well as sympathetic and incisive letters of comfort and advice to Renée. Practically no letters to C.S. Lewis are preserved.

Despite these limitations in the available material, the portrait Davidman's letters paint is scintillating and many-layered, and displays the entire palette of a mind that Lewis justly described as 'lithic and quick and muscular as a leopard'. Don King's clear introduction and apparatus, and his pertinent, learned and unobtrusive annotations, make this a volume equally useful to the scholar and the general reader. It cannot be recommended warmly enough.

J.E. Topping  
Wolfson College, Oxford