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**Abigail Santamaria,  
*Joy: Poet, Seeker, and the Woman Who Captivated C. S. Lewis.*  
Review by Doug Jackson  
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Abigail Santamaria, *Joy: Poet, Seeker, and the Woman Who Captivated C. S. Lewis*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2015. 343 pp. ISBN 978-0151013715.

I have never liked Joy Davidman. Abigail Santamaria's new biography of her does nothing to change my mind. It does, however, do a great deal to inform my antipathy.

I have long held that one can sort biographies of C. S. Lewis into two schools based on their portrayal of the two main women in Jack's life. One is either anti-Mrs. Moore/pro-Joy (this group takes Warnie Lewis as their patron saint, viewing Janie as a suffocating Mrs. Fidget and Joy as a boon companion) or pro-Mrs. Moore/anti-Joy (this group clings to A.N. Wilson, for whom Minto was the Mrs. Robinson scorned, cast aside by C.S. Lewis's conversion.)

Santamaria sweeps all of this to one side by the very reasonable expedient of writing a book that absolutely is not about C. S. Lewis. Of course, he gets his name in the subtitle (and in capital letters, no less) because he sells, and because if she hadn't married him, no one would be writing or reading about Davidman. But the book, marvellously, is not about the Oxford don who made Christianity cool. Santamaria manages that most difficult of all tasks for a biographer: She lets a giant into the story without making it a story about giants. Indeed, the honesty and depth of Santamaria's accounts of how Joy stalked, shot, skinned, stuffed, and mounted her marital prey make her much the larger figure in the relationship - a complaint that others have registered but no one until now has addressed with such commitment and depth.

The reader discovers that the subject is a real person - not, perhaps a very nice one, but an undeniably actual one - long before she takes ship like the Pirate of Eros, sailing the high seas to grapple and board her prize. Santamaria has

dug into letters and diaries, has read obscure publications, and has interviewed first-hand participants in Davidman's story in order to provide a fully-orbed picture of her subject. One feels that he knows not only Joy, but her compadres in the Communist Party and her hapless first husband, William Lindsay Gresham.

And about the latter: Santamaria cuts a fearless swath through the creation myth of Lewis fandom, which insists that Joy be a deeply wronged woman, a damsel in distress whom Lewis rescues from the British Home Office, cancer, and a regular Bill Sikes of a husband. Instead, Santamaria offers a nuanced picture of Gresham as the deeply imperfect partner of a strong-willed wife who emotionally cuckolded him (at least) long before he took up with her cousin, and continued to write hectoring letters to him long after she took up with Lewis. In his struggle with depression, his alcoholism, his womanizing, and his weakness, along with his great talent and winning charm, Gresham for the first time comes across as more than the stock villain in a melodrama. I said this book did not make me like Joy Davidman any better. It did make me like, or at least feel for, William Gresham a good deal, and that strikes as an act of charity on the author's part.

The book does hold one minor disappointment. The reader would like to have a more detailed account of Davidman's conversion from atheism to Christianity. Santamaria covers the facts, consisting mostly of Joy's mystical crisis during one of her husband's binges, but the very honesty of the record about the very marginal alteration in Joy's behaviour makes it ring a trifle hollow. Lewis, of course, gave the world a highly detailed - and almost

entirely interior - account of his own return to faith. With Davidman, all we see is a subsequent membership in the Presbyterian church without much mention of the outworking of her newfound spiritual life.

Perhaps the most amazing thing about the book is that Santamaria pulls all of this off without obvious intrusions into the narrative. Her writing is so clean, so readable, so downright invisible that I often had to stop and remind myself that I was not watching Joy or Bill or Jack do or say this or that; I was reading what Abigail Santamaria *said* they said or did. The style never trips the reader with the ugly phrases or false wording that can send one stumbling out of the spell of a lesser book. Instead, the masterful and crisp prose allows the reader to live in the world it depicts for as long as there are more pages to turn.

Perhaps the highest compliment one can pay *JOY* is to say that the final chapters, the ones after she marries Lewis, may be the least interesting. If this is so, it is not because they do not cover the ground, but because previous Lewis biographers have adequately told this story. Such sections cannot compare to Santamaria's detailed and incisive accounts of the largely unexplored landscape of Davidman's earlier life. But this is no criticism; in fact it pays tribute to the point with which this review began: *JOY* is no C. S. Lewis biography in drag designed to con avid fans into buying yet another book that tells the same story. Santamaria offers something entirely new. In so doing, Santamaria gives the world what will surely be the definitive biography of Joy Davidman for a long time to come, very likely for good.

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