Excellent Read And Well Worth The Cost.

Although best known as the wife of C. S. Lewis, Joy Davidman was an accomplished writer in her own right, with several published works to her credit. Out of My Bone tells Davidman’s life story in her own words through her numerous letters — most never published before — and her autobiographical essay The Longest Way Round. Gathered and expertly introduced by Don W. King, these letters reveal Davidsdans persistent search for truth, her curious, incisive mind, and her arresting, sharply penetrating voice. They chronicle her religious, philosophical, and intellectual journey from secular Judaism to atheism to Communism to Christianity. Her personal engagement with large issues offers key insights into the historical milieu of America in the 1930s and 1940s. Davidman also writes about the struggles of her earlier marriage to William Lindsay Gresham and of trying to reconcile her career goals with her life as mother of two sons. Most poignantly, perhaps, these letters expose Davidman’s mental, emotional, and spiritual state as she confronted the cancer that eventually took her life in 1960 at age 45. Moving and riveting, Out of My Bone reveals anew the singular woman whom Lewis deeply loved and who influenced his later writings, especially Till We Have Faces.

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My Personal Review:
I've "lived" with this book for a week, and I still cannot stop staring at the undated jacket photo of young (twenty-something?) Joy Davidman. She's staring soberly into the camera, the flash reflecting in her watery eyes. She's stunningly beautiful and hauntingly present. A store browser might be swayed to buy the book on the merits of the jacket alone. But there's so much more to be revealed by reading the hefty volume of letters written by Joy Davidman, whose reputation might have been lost to history had she not married C. S. "Jack" Lewis, famed author of the Chronicles of Narnia series.
The first letters were written in 1936; at age 21, she already has a master's degree from Columbia and is corresponding about her poetic aspirations with Stephen Vincent Benét. This brings up a notable feature of the collection: it is designed for lay readers as well as literary types. The editor provides footnotes that give basic information on virtually all correspondents. If you don't happen to know the import of Benét in his time --- a Pulitzer Prize winner --- it's laid out for you right at the bottom of the page.

By age 30, she is a prize-winning poet and has published her first novel. She's a member of the Communist Party and an editor for its American magazine New Masses. She has married a fellow writer and Communist, William Lindsay Gresham, and is a mother. Many of the early letters focus on her own writing pursuits and also reveal her as a no-nonsense editorial mentor-critic. For example, she is quoted as saying, "What the words do not contain, you cannot add with punctuation."

One of the most interesting portions of the book is not a letter but an essay, "The Longest Way Round" (published in THESE FOUND THE WAY: Thirteen Converts to Protestant Christianity, 1951), that recounts her journey from atheism (as a secular Jew) and communism to Christianity. The essay ends on this note: "My present tasks are to look after my children and my husband and my garden and my house --- and, perhaps, to serve God in books and letters as best I can...."

But it isn't long before Joy's marriage falls apart, and in 1953 she and her sons move from suburban New York to London. A large portion of the book reprints Joy's letters to her estranged and then ex-husband, Bill Gresham, who has been drinking, is in love with (and, eventually, marries) Joy's cousin Renée, and whose writing career is floundering. In first and/or last paragraphs, she's forever asking him to pay the requisite child support. But once you get beyond that, you discover a complicated woman who wins the heart of "Jack" Lewis, with whom she has been corresponding for several years.

And the rest, as they say, is history. Readers looking for correspondence between Joy and Jack will be disappointed. As editor Don W. King notes in his lengthy introduction, "Lewis was notorious for not saving letters (he tried to burn the letters sent him three weeks or so after he received them), and most of Lewis's letters to Davidman have not survived." But don't let that deter you if you have any interest in things literary or Lewis.

A final note of interest: A previously out-of-print biography of Joy Davidman (AND GOD CAME IN by Lyle Dorsett) has been recently reissued by Hendrickson Publishers.

--- Reviewed by Evelyn Bence
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