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## Review of Becoming Mrs. Lewis

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these spiritual realities afresh, and to compare the authors' journeys with their own. Brown's penetrating study has certainly inspired this reviewer, perhaps as it will other Lewisians, to read more deeply in the poetry of Eliot and the drama of Sayers for spiritual nourishment.

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Patti Callahan, *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2018). 406 pages. \$25.99. ISBN 9780785224501.

**E**merging from the extensive scholarship and literature regarding the person, connections, and worlds of C. S. Lewis is a recent blossoming of thoughtful works extending from the center of concern, namely Lewis and his writings, to ever widening circles around the figure of C. S. Lewis, focusing on his natal family and relatives, all of which expand and nurture our view of his life and influence. Moving one step further, and yet bringing the personal world of C. S. Lewis immeasurably closer to us, is a novel of historical fiction by New York Times bestselling author, Patti Callahan, whose main character and perspective is that of Helen Joy Davidman Gresham Lewis, the wife of C. S. Lewis, primarily focused upon the years 1946 to 1957 when she is "*Becoming Mrs. Lewis*."

Unfolding the events of the novel through Joy's eyes, Patti Callahan demystifies the inner person and emotional experiences of Joy Davidman, a figure who, until recently, was on the periphery of Lewis studies and literature. Patti Callahan excels in her sensitive treatment of Joy's spiritual quest and intricate life journey toward C. S. Lewis as she wrestles with an unhappy first marriage and an experience of mystical vision that prompts her conversion to Christianity. Davidman writes first to Lewis for advice and continues the correspondence until her visit to Oxford in August 1952 when Joy Davidman Gresham finally meets C. S. Lewis and his brother, Warren, at The Kilns. As Joy endeavors to balance her life, she ends her first marriage, moving to England permanently with her two sons, and establishes a relationship with Lewis which culminates in their own marriage.

Those events constitute the ingredients of actuality, spiced with delicately constructed hypothetical conversations and subtle possibilities of thought, all of which Patti Callahan blends to create a masterpiece of literary truth. An underlying theme of grace, sought and bestowed, is woven through the chapters, specifically highlighted in both prologue and epilogue.

Beyond the linear plot of the novel, Callahan provides a prologue in which the reader is given a taste of the multifaceted links between fantasy and actuality when young Joy and her brother, in 1926, are christened with a Narnia-like experience as they partake in a nocturnal adventure at the zoo, walking in secret to visit the lions. In this beginning, far earlier than the timeline of the Davidman-Lewis life chapters, or even the written creation of Narnia, the reader is given a premonition, a melding of time and dimension, a foreshadowing of story.

Callahan perceptively weaves into Joy and Jack's story a quest for perfect Christian understanding with the imperfect quest for human love. There is a sense that the prologue was written after the novel itself was constructed to provide a foreshadowing of future events. The author relies upon the reader's experience with the writings of Lewis to underscore a valuable point; actuality is not always that which is apparent by, or held within, factual information alone. Actuality and fantasy are inexorably linked by experience and by *Sehnsucht*.

Lewis himself responded by profound thought to the ephemeral, indefinable, longing embodied in the other-world journeys of his own novels of alternate reality and imagination. "I had the idea for Narnia long before I wrote the first book" (146). Thus, the prologue conveys a haunting sense of the interaction and shared knowledge necessary between a reader and writer to extend an understanding of the story. Should the reader not be familiar with Lewisian fantasy, the reading experience of Joy's encounter at the zoo lacks an impact that recognition imparts to the symbolism of the event. Readers participate in the story read through life experienced and through memory activated.

Following the final chapter of the story, Callahan provides an epilogue to complement the prologue. Joy reflects again upon the freely God-given gift of grace and commenting upon its manifestation in her life, "Grace does not tell us how long we have in our life, or what comes next—that's

why grace is given only in the moment. Unmerited mercy is never earned” (389).

A note from the author (393) containing suggested further readings (397), acknowledgments (400), and, finally, a thought-provoking set of discussion questions to ponder (404) complete the book. By these courtesies to her readers, Patti Callahan provides a means to continue the journey, a way to keep the story alive and primed for future discoveries regarding the separate, as well as entwined, lives of Joy and Jack Lewis.

It may be of value to the Lewisian community to look with alternate perspective at the strengths as well as questions of placement posed by this novel. What place does historical fiction occupy in the world of C. S. Lewis scholarship? What can historical fantasy and fiction, such as that written into the novel, *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*, provide to the canonical Lewis pantheon? It is certainly not a topic alien to Inklings literature: several of the Inklings, C. S. Lewis included, having immersed their own writings in the realm of fiction, fantasy, and faerie. Do we dare follow their lead and include second or third person perspectives in the forms of fictional narrative and dialogue within the sphere of Inklings informative literature?

This reviewer argues that yes, indeed, works of historical fiction as well as the literary devices of historical fiction, such as imagery, allusion, foreshadowing, metaphor, personification, diction, and epigraph, all found in *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*, have a viable and valuable place within the canon of studies focusing upon the literary and personal worlds of C. S. Lewis, his family, and his friends. When the novel focuses upon the characters that surrounded C. S. Lewis, so that he must invariably become part of their personal stories, we have an extension, a further literary dimension, added to the entirety of the novel.

A good, well-written, and well-researched story of historical fiction exemplified by the novel *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* is a welcome and valuable addition to the pantheon of Lewisian scholarship. It does not take away from our knowledge of the facts, evidence of occurrence, or scholarly reflection. The story does, however, humanize and personalize historicity in such a way that we, as readers, are given the opportunity to participate in and experience that history by the very act of reading. In effect, story provides an added human dimension to our understanding of facts, of

events, and of the human beings who lived the story. As such, story enriches our understanding of actuality.

However, it must also be remembered that there is something of a slippery slope involved, and the reader may be cautioned to recognize that there exists a temptation, when reading, to actualize the entirety of a fictionalized story. The devil is in the details. Historical fiction is the odd stepchild, in a certain sense. It contains an overall structure of history, yet the details of fiction, certain of which, if not carefully considered, may lead the reader astray. It is sometimes difficult to keep each in perspective; the reader is tempted to treat the totality of the story as either fact or fantasy. Happily, we do not have severe issues of bedeviled details in *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* as the wonder of story meets the evidence of actuality. Here, both are welcome and exist in harmony.

Patti Callahan gives the reader an adventure in the unfolding of unlikely possibilities as the story of *Becoming Mrs. Lewis* develops into Being Mrs. Lewis. One is surprised by the unexpected joy within the details of the love story. The events themselves were improbable, yet occurred, as Joy and Jack's lives were rearranged by circumstance and by gentle unseen guidance. "From the very beginning it was the Great Lion who brought us together. I see that now" (1). In *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*, the liquid substance of story meets the solid matter of actuality. Together, they merge and blend into the wondrous elixir of beautifully written, truth-inspired, historical fiction. In the conclusion of this novel, the reader is left, not with a closed ending, but with a clearer vision of an unending path, a continuing romance, and a hope for greater adventures shared by Joy and Jack Lewis.

*Becoming Mrs. Lewis* is a novel highly recommended for its helpfulness in understanding the myriad personal bonds that existed between Joy Davidman and C. S. Lewis. Callahan's written images illuminate the various facets of their love as an unexpected spiritual journey and so elevate that story from the mundane to the exquisite.

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