

# Much more to him than Narnia

Rachel Mann on a 'Christian colossus' and his wife

**Women and C. S. Lewis: What his life and literature reveal for today's culture**  
Carolyn Curtis and Mary Pomroy Key, editors  
Lion £9.99  
(978-0-7459-5694-7)  
Church Times Bookshop £9

**Joy: Poet, seeker and the woman who captivated C. S. Lewis**  
Abigail Santamaria  
SPCK £19.99  
(978-0-281-07427-3)  
Church Times Bookshop £18

THE truth is that, outside the Christian bubble, C. S. "Jack" Lewis is primarily remembered for Narnia, and *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* in particular.

These two new books comprise, at the very least, an aide-mémoire that captures the Christian colossus that Lewis once was. Further, they underline how far we have travelled from a world in which a new religious book by Lewis was an international event.

In recent years, Lewis has been accused of misogyny and sexism by the likes of A. N. Wilson, Philip Pullman, and J. K. Rowling. Carolyn Curtis and Mary Pomroy Key's collection of short essays attempts to address this accusation from within a Christian world-view.

Curtis and Key marshal some impressive names in Lewis's defence. Alister McGrath, Malcolm Guite, and Monika Holder appear alongside more than 25 other voices. Although most are academics, or

Lewis specialists, the style is popular; and Holder's essay on Lewis has much fun suggesting that "It's not Lewis who's sexist: it's us."

Although this book offers a readable breeze through every aspect of Lewis's life — his relations with his mother, his poetry as well as his prose, and his love for Joy Davidman, and so forth — it is not without problems. As it circles round the literary and biographical facts of Lewis's life, many of the essays plough over the same ground. Repetition can be beautiful, but in this book it's often tiresome.

The extent to which Curtis and Key "redeem" Lewis from claims of misogyny and sexism is moot. Many essayists acknowledge that Lewis was a man of his time. Much is made of his sparky friendship with Dorothy L. Sayers, and his love for Davidman. There is, however, a seam of low-level "complementarian" theology — the belief that men and women are "equal", but have different callings — that sticks in this feminist's craw.

None the less, the book presents a diverting opportunity to rethink Lewis for a popular, modern audience.

Abigail Santamaria's *Joy* is a quite different offering. It is a relentlessly focused and detailed biography of Joy Davidman, the woman who (as the book's tagline has it) "captivated C. S. Lewis". This serious and substantial work takes the reader far beyond the familiar romance of the film and play *Shadowlands*, and the brilliance of Lewis's meditation on Davidman's death, *A Grief Observed*.

COURTESY OF SUSAN DAVIDMAN CLEVELAND



Bright and determined: Joy Davidman, the love of C. S. Lewis's life, seen here with her first husband, Bill Gresham, on their wedding day, in 1942. From *Joy*, reviewed here

The central conceit of Santamaria's book is simple: Davidman — the exceptionally bright and determined daughter of upwardly mobile US-immigrant parents — was a lifelong seeker after a fairyland of fulfilment and magic.

Santamaria plausibly traces Davidman's desire for wholeness through her sometimes fraught childhood, her hopes for her poetry career, her involvement with Communism, and her ultimate turn to Christ. There is also a striking account of her flirtation with the writings of the founder of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard.

Oscar Wilde wittily claimed that "biography lends to death a new terror." It is clear that Santamaria is genuinely fascinated by her subject. Davidman's story — especially her

capacity to battle through the social slights generated by virtue of her being both Jewish and a woman — makes for potent reading.

But this is no hagiography. In places, Davidman comes across as an exasperating figure. She is by turns arrogant and brash, and there is a profound sense that much of her early promise gets lost — and one can see why.

Yet that helps this book's readability. Davidman, both pre- and post-conversion, was no plaster saint. Rather like Lewis, the great obsession of her later life, Davidman was a woman more interested in the search for completion than its achievement.

Many will expect the measure of this book to be Santamaria's handling of the Davidman/Lewis tryst.

There is no doubt that she brings fresh energy to the narrative.

For example, it is clear, from the first, that Davidman's undoubted intellect gained her entry into Lewis's masculine world. Yet Santamaria reminds us that he also rebuffed some of her initial affections. Davidman possessed the mercurial self-centredness of the artist, and this did not necessarily charm Lewis.

Yet the power of the Davidman/Lewis relationship lies in the fact that it was a song of experience rather than innocence. Despite the stuffy atmosphere of mid-century England (which Davidman was inclined to romanticise), theirs was a thoroughly modern love story.

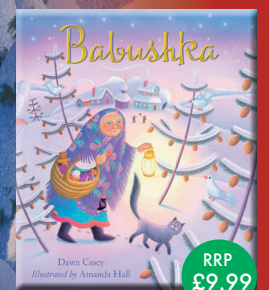
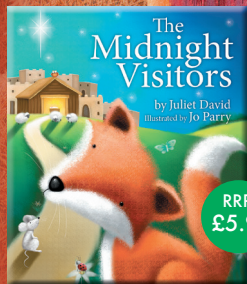
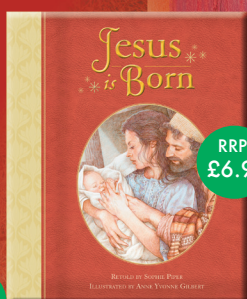
There is much to be glad about in Santamaria's study of Davidman. It begins to unpick the tendency to treat her as an adjunct to Lewis, the "great man". It is at times an exhausting work. Dividing it chronologically rather than thematically, Santamaria is occasionally hamstrung by the sheer level of detail her research has unearthed.

Nevertheless, this groundbreaking study contributes not just to established Lewis studies, but brings to the foreground the cost of being a talented woman in a patriarchal world. It makes its case for the possibility of Christian faith in a compromised world with elegance and skill.

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