

# Surprised (and Saddened) by Joy

[Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman](#), ed. by Don W. King (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009)

I've spent the better part of my career as a historian and a writer, reading personal letters, memoirs, and autobiographies. I count it among one of the greatest pleasures in this life to be able to do so. A certain friendship and kinship usually takes place when reading the thoughts of another. Over the past quarter-century, I believe I've gotten fairly good at judging people, at least according to the ways they judged themselves and others. My own judgment isn't perfect, of course. A figure I spent two years studying in graduate school, for example, still eludes me. I just could never quite get into his mind or his motivations despite the near-pure absorption his personal papers offered me. Of the figures I've spent the most time with, I found myself understanding and admiring J.R.R. Tolkien, Christopher Dawson, and Russell Kirk. Of those I've written about extensively, I never quite got founding father Charles Carroll of Carrollton or drummer Neil Peart, though I admire each immensely. I find others such as Flannery O'Connor, T.S. Eliot, Paul Elmer More (especially!), and Dorothy Day very attractive, though I've not had time to delve too deeply into each when it comes to book-length projects. More's the pity!

When I recently picked up the collected letters of Joy Davidman, best remembered as C.S. Lewis's wife, I expected to find a kindred soul, a perky intellect, and a wonderful human being. After all, Debra Winger made her abrasive—but in an eccentric and kindly way—in the 1994 movie, *Shadowlands*. Besides, I count C.S. Lewis as one of the single greatest figures of the twentieth century and, even, of world history. How could a man as great as Lewis ever befriend a repulsive

human being, much less actually marry such a person? Impossible, I thought.

Sadly, every presumption I had about Joy Davidman from *Shadowlands* and from my knowledge of Lewis proved false. Not only did I find Joy Davidman an unsympathetic figure, but I came away from [\*Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman\*](#) not only repulsed by her but actually questioning the very judgment and goodness of C.S. Lewis. Even a week after reading the book, it's hard for me to think clearly about Lewis.

Let me note two things before going on. First, my criticisms of Davidman have absolutely nothing to do with the actual, physical quality of the book itself. The editor, Don W. King, has done a fabulous job with the material, the footnotes, and the context of each letter. The book—as a tangible object—is a thing of beauty, and King deserves nothing but praise for his work editing this book. The same is equally true of the press, Eerdmans.

Second, love is clearly a mystery, and why one person falls for another is one of the single greatest mysteries and profound beauties of this whirligig of a world. I'm sure there were a million, nuanced factors involved in the Lewis-Davidman affair that I will never understand nor, frankly, have the right to understand. Still, I'm shaken, and one of my heroes has fallen several notches.

If you've seen *Shadowlands* or if you know even the most basic facts about C.S. Lewis' life, you know that Lewis began to correspond with an American science-fiction writer and poetess, Joy Davidman, in 1950. Prior to 1947, Davidman had been a Communist. After reading some books by Lewis, she left Communism and converted to Christianity. Two years after beginning her correspondence with Lewis, she left her husband (from whom she was becoming seriously estranged), and her two sons and traveled to England to meet Lewis in person. They met for the first time and enjoyed a lunch together on September

24, 1952. Joy remained in England through the fall and early winter, spending Christmas with Jack (C.S. Lewis) and his brother, Warnie.

Returning to the States in early 1953, she broke up her marriage, joined the Episcopal Church, and, the following November, moved back to England with her two sons. Joy spent yet another Christmas with Jack and Warnie, this time including her two boys as well. Over the next two years, Jack and Joy not only got to know one another well, but they also decided to marry in April, 1956. Only a civil wedding, it remains unclear just exactly how much the two loved one another. They finally made a public pronouncement of their marriage on Christmas Eve 1956, and the two had a sacramental wedding in March 1957.

Between the civil and the sacramental marriage, Joy discovered she had a rather ravenous form of cancer. Though she experienced bouts of energy during the last several years of her life, she spent much of 1957 until her death in May 1960 fighting, rather stoically, the cancer. By all accounts, Joy and Jack loved each other as true man and wife during these few years together. After Joy's death, Jack wrote one of his most famous books, [\*A Grief Observed\*](#).

Clearly, from the appearances of it all, there's a fairy-tale quality to the story, and, whatever I might think of Joy as a person, it would be impossible not to recognize her own nobility and dignity in fighting the illness that eventually consumed her.

So, then, what exactly was it that turned me off so much in her letters?

First, she's just incredibly "loud." I felt as though she yelled through every letter she wrote. And, maybe not just yelled, but actually shrieked. She's clearly intelligent, but it's an obnoxious and somewhat bullying kind of intelligence.

There's no thought or filter and no nuance or imagination. Rather, it's as though every point must be made so straight, that it must thrust and jab at every moving object. I suspect this is the lingering ideological shadow of her former Communism, but I make this only as a guess. Russell Kirk once noted that no person ever fully leaves Communism, no matter how blatantly they reject it. He seems correct, at least when it comes to Davidman.

Second, she's repulsively bigoted about everything. Here's just one example:

*Of course we cannot go back to feudal Christianity, which was itself a corruption of the original doctrine of revolutionary Christianity which substituted idolatrous worship of Christ the God for the political and economic doctrine of Christ the man. It is this return that the Catholic Church is trying to foist on us, and unless we take Christ away from them they have some chance of making headway. By the way, medieval Christianity cannot be understood without tracing the tremendous influence of Hindu thought; Judaeo-Christianity is quite different from Indo-Christianity.*

She's equally bad about Judaism. "It is not an accident that Communism had a Jewish origin and that almost all of its members in this country are Jews," she wrote.

Third, while it might not quite be labeled "racism," Joy certainly had strong views about non-whites. Here, for example, is her take on blacks in the humid parts of the South:

*Your Ocala crackers sound like meat for the anthropologist: xenophobia among them alligators. There seems no doubt that the future is with the Negroes, from your description; they have the vitality—and they can stand the climate.*

Whatever one wants to label her views, they are singularly unattractive.

And, perhaps tellingly, the last letter recorded in this book has her requesting from her ex-husband two packs of Tarot cards from the States. Whatever kind of Christianity Davidman embraced, it's certainly not anything that one could easily label orthodox.

Again, this is not an attack on the editor or the book. I learned a great deal about both Lewises, about Tolkien, about T.S. Eliot, and others. This book is a necessary part of scholarship on Lewis.

*Out of My Bone* is perfect for the mind. Much less so for the soul.



—

*Books by Bradley Birzer may be found in The Imaginative Conservative [Bookstore](#). [This article](#) was reprinted with permission from the Imaginative Conservative.*