

Surprised by Joy

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 02 October 2018 07:22 - Last Updated Tuesday, 09 April 2019 04:33



A conversation with **Patti Callahan**, author of



Becoming Mrs. Lewis: The Improbable Love Story of Joy Davidman and C.S. Lewis

By Margaret Evans, Editor

Like so many of my favorite people, Patti Callahan Henry entered my life thanks to Pat Conroy. Though her reputation as a *New York Times* bestselling novelist preceded her, we met at Pat's 70th birthday celebration a few years ago, quickly learned we had some things in common – Alabama, for one – and just sort of clicked, like women sometimes (but not always) do. I interviewed Patti for the Conroy Center's Porch Talk blog when she published her 12th novel, *The Bookshop at Water's End*, and our friendship grew, but it wasn't until I heard about her latest project that I knew we were truly kindred spirits.

Writing under the name Patti Callahan, my friend has just published *Becoming Mrs. Lewis: The Improbable Love Story of Joy Davidman and C.S. Lewis*.

I may have mentioned here, a time or two, that I'm fond of Lewis. (Okay, I'm an obnoxious fanatic.) Patti will be here in early November as a presenter at the Pat Conroy Literary Festival. She recently spoke with me about

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Becoming Mrs. Lewis . . .

Margaret Evans: Patti, the early buzz is amazing! A starred review from *Publisher's Weekly* and raves galore. Bestselling novelist Paula McLain (*The Paris Wife*) says you've found the story you were born to tell, calling the novel "luminous and penetrating." Sarah McCoy (*The Baker's Daughter*) says the book left her "wonderstruck." I felt the same way while reading *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*. How did you conceive the idea of a "true life novel" narrated in the voice Joy Davidman, as imagined by Patti Callahan?

□ **Patti Callahan:** I have been a lifelong C.S. Lewis reader and slowly, but surely, I continued wanting to know more and more about this man until I began to become curious about his wife. If you read *A Grief Observed*, you will bone-deep-know how very much he loved her, and how destroyed he was by her death. Who was this woman who so enchanted Lewis?, I asked myself. And as I began to research and learn about her, I found conflicting reports. I decided the best way to get to know her was through her words — her poetry, essays, novels and a huge volume of letters. The more I came to know her, the more I loved her and

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wanted others to know her also.

▢ **ME:** I would imagine the book brought some unique challenges. Not only are you telling the story of two people who actually lived – not fictional characters, as per usual – but one of them, Lewis, is something of an icon, with fans who are fiercely devoted and protective of his image. Add to that the challenge of writing a book that would please mainstream readers *and* Lewis fanatics, who tend to take their Christianity pretty seriously. Too much religion, you turn off the mainstream reader. Too little? You disappoint your Lewis-loving “base.” How did you deal with all of the above?

▢ **PC:** Oh, now I’m having anxiety. (Laughs.) But yes, these were the questions that sat in my office with me every day, and the questions I told to “hush” because I couldn’t write with them by my side. I had to pretend no one would ever read it, that only Joy and I had any say in what the book contained. I also used a touchstone when I wandered too far from the main idea. The touchstone was this question — how and why did this woman set off on a transformational journey that changed her life and the life, heart and work of one of our most beloved authors of the 20th century, C. S. Lewis? I wanted to know how they met, how they fell in love and married. I wanted to know all of this from her point of view, and focusing on that kept me from the great fear of stepping on Lewis aficionados’ toes. This is *her* story. It is not meant to be a conversion story or a sermon on pursuing God, but a narrative about a flawed and complicated woman who was seeking the truth. (I mean, aren’t we all?)

▢ **ME:** Absolutely. And Lewis has played a big role in my own search for truth. But I didn’t know much about Joy Davidman beyond what I’d seen of her in the movie *Shadowlands*, starring Debra Winger and Anthony Hopkins. Had you read much Davidman – or much *about* her – when you began working on the book, or did you have a lot to learn?

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