



Holly Bird on...

The Woman Behind the Man? Or Beside Him!

Having fallen in love with this love story, Holly Bird finds out more about Patti Callahan's beautifully written novel *Becoming Mrs Lewis*.

What was it that inspired you to write about the life of Joy Davidman and the relationship between her and C.S. Lewis?

I had always known that C. S. Lewis loved and married late in life, and that it was a tragic love story. I wanted to know more about it – their love story is so inspiring and improbable! I thought I was writing about the improbable love story, but then I realized that I was actually writing about the fiery transformational journey of an incredible poet and writer. Joy's life and how she overcame hardship inspired me to tell her story from her point of view. When I "met" Joy, I knew that her story had only been told in bits and pieces, and that she had been relegated to the "dying wife of C. S. Lewis" and "the woman behind the man". She was far from either and I wanted to tell the story of the woman beside the man!

How true to life is the book?

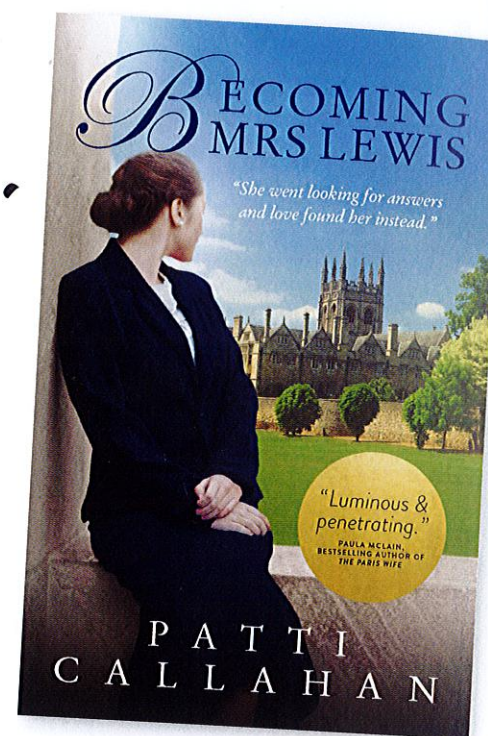
The novel is incredibly true to life. I spent years doing the research to make sure that the skeleton of the story was solid. I didn't change anything significant at all. The areas of the novel that are imagined or inspired are the areas where we have very little information – for example: the exact words of their letters or conversations.

The book isn't just about a person's search for spiritual truth and discovery, nor is it simply a tale of love and yearning. These are weaved together and form the depth and dimensions of these wonderful characters. The parallel between this search for God and the desire to honour him with biblical living and falling in love with a kind and gentle man struck me. How did this draw together in your writing?

My intent was to weave together these themes of love for a man and love for God – a search for what love means at all. Joy needed to awaken to the understanding that she could not love fully until she surrendered to her identity as "Beloved of God". Joy's search is stated at the very beginning of the novel – "We were meant to be free." And from there, I hope the theme runs through all that happens to both of them. When I felt the story was meandering, I would return to the themes of love, freedom and shedding of all masks (epitomized in *Till We Have Faces*).

"At night I returned to my sonnets. If there would ever in some far future come a day when someone read them and set them against my letters to home, would they feel the disparate and divided parts of my self?" Is this essentially what you did?

Yes! I love that you brought out that line! Joy is complicated to say the



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least. She spent her life searching for meaning and freedom and made many mistakes. Just like most of us, she wanted to act from her truest self, yet she was judged harshly by that generation and by family. Her choices might not have been ours, and yet she did the best she knew how. I believe that if anyone read our journals or heard our inner thoughts, they would often seem quite disparate from the public persona on social media. I felt the same for Joy between her public letters and her private sonnets.

You have conveyed the strong emotions and yearnings of Joy so beautifully; have you drawn on your own experiences in order to do this?

I am sure that my emotional experiences and subconscious yearnings work their way into any story, though I felt that Joy was very clear about her complex inner journey. I drew mostly from her poetry and letters. Joy was articulate and honest in her poetry, and I wanted to honour that from her point of view, not mine.

Would you say this novel is any way set apart from the others you've written?

Oh yes! This is the first historical fiction I have written about a very real person's life. And not just real, but revered. It was both daunting and exhilarating.

Would you say there is a particular Christian message you're trying to convey to your readers?

There is never a particular message I am trying to convey. I believe that stories are living things and they affect people the way they are meant to affect them. I say that however I do want people to meet the complicated, fiery and brilliant Joy Davidman on her own terms – I want readers to feel the answer to her question – "If we should ever grow brave, what on earth would become of us?"

Patti Callahan (who also writes as Patti Callahan Henry) is the New York Times bestselling author of fourteen novels. She has published short stories, articles and essays, and became a full-time writer after an accomplished career in nursing.

