

A CONVERSATION WITH NANCY KOESTER

What inspired you to write *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life*?

American history fascinates me, especially the anti-slavery movement and the Civil War. And I've always loved reading biographies, because they tell a personal story against the backdrop of history and culture. But it was a conversation with an editor from Eerdmans Publishing Co. that inspired me to write *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life*. The editor told me that they wanted someone to write a Stowe biography, and I decided to write a book proposal, and things took off from there.

Describe the research you undertook in writing it.

Stowe was a prolific letter writer, and her correspondence is collected in many places. Some of her letters are published, but many are not. So I read her letters in special collections at the Stowe Center in Hartford, the University of Virginia, the Rutherford B. Hayes presidential Library in Fremont, OH, and the New York Public Library. To research topics connected with Stowe's life, I used the Princeton Seminary Library, Firestone Library at Princeton University, the Cincinnati Historical Society, and Cincinnati Public Library. I visited places where Stowe lived in Hartford, Cincinnati, and Brunswick Maine. And yes, I did use the internet. It was convenient, but not as much fun as actually going someplace. I read all of Stowe's novels, and quite a few books by 19th century American women. I read quite a bit about slavery in the U.S. I bought lots of used books about

Stowe, and read and marked them all up. No wonder it took me nine years!

What did you enjoy most about writing this biography? Did you encounter any challenges in writing it?

I enjoyed getting to know the Beecher family; Harriet's parents, her brothers and sisters became real to me. My biggest challenge was that I was sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material. I wrote too much and had to cut back so that the story line did not get smothered in details.

What do you hope your readers take away from *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life*?

I hope that readers will be fascinated by life in the 19th century, especially from a woman's experience. I hope readers will feel like they get to know Stowe as a person of faith, courage and resilience. She made mistakes and had blind spots, of course, but she attacked slavery with her pen and in so doing, she made history.

"I hope readers get to know Stowe as a person of faith, courage, and resilience."

Please share a little bit about your journey to becoming a published author.

My dad was a journalist and a pastor, and as a child I loved to hear the sound of his big

manual typewriter, especially the bell that rang every time he slapped the carriage return to start a new line. He would give me some manuscript pages and ask me to find his mistakes and make suggestions. He made a game of it, and got me interested in writing. My journey as a writer has taken me from sermons and Bible studies (when I was a pastor) to lectures and syllabi (as a professor) to writing a textbook on religion in America. But *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life* is far and away the best work I have done.

How does being a Minnesotan and the particular community in which you live inform your writing?

As a young adult I did a lot of canoeing in the Boundary Waters (Canoe Area Wilderness). This gave me joy in the beauty of the wilderness, but paddling over huge lakes against the wind, or portaging through clouds of mosquitos taught me patience and perseverance. More recently, I have been part of the Twin Cities Shape Note Singers. Thanks to Shape Note, I came to know and love some of the music that Harriet Beecher Stowe sang as a child, in that wild, stark sound like bagpipes wailing.

How do you most enjoy spending time when you're not writing?

I love going for walks in Como Park, singing Shape Note music, making pizzas, and, of course, reading novels and history.

Could you share a little about your current work or plans for a future project?

My book, *The History of Christianity in the United States*, is being re-released August 1, 2015 from Fortress Press. I've been busy finding new images and short primary sources for that book. My next book will be a biography of Sojourner Truth, the former slave and advocate for women's rights and the abolition of slavery.

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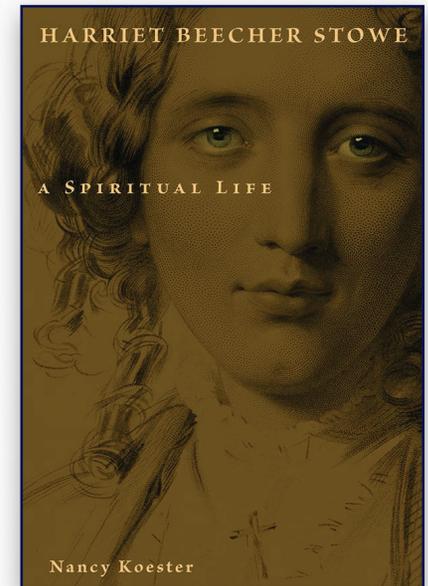
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27TH ANNUAL Minnesota Book Awards

GENERAL NONFICTION WINNER

Category sponsored by Minnesota AFL-CIO



Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life

by Nancy Koester

Wm. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING Co.

A READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE PREPARED BY
THE FRIENDS OF THE SAINT PAUL PUBLIC LIBRARY

SUMMARY

Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* converted readers by the thousands to the anti-slavery movement and served notice that the days of slavery were numbered. Most writing about Stowe treats her as a literary figure and social reformer while downplaying her Christian faith. In this compelling biography, Nancy Koester highlights Stowe's faith as central to her life—both her public fight against slavery and her own personal struggle through deep grief to find a gracious God.

Portrait of Harriet Beecher Stowe by Francis Holl, c. 1855.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Stowe was shaped by the New England Calvinism of her father, Lyman Beecher. What particular beliefs and attitudes about this religious ethos made an impression on you? Was it a positive or a negative impression? Why?
2. Consider Stowe's adolescence. How did you see her character taking shape in chapter 3? How would you describe Stowe's religious faith during this time of her life?
3. Why is the Lane Rebellion so important for Stowe's story, even though she was not directly involved in it?
4. What was it like for you to read about the cholera epidemic, and the death of Stowe's child? How did this experience change her?
5. Comment on Stowe's understanding of slavery and race in the section that begins on page 112. Aside from the obvious fact that some of her views are outdated, what were her beliefs and how did she act on them?
6. What was Stowe trying to accomplish in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? What strategies did she use?
7. How did Stowe experience what today would be called sexism, as people responded to her book? What do her own responses reveal about her character?

8. When Stowe's son Henry died of accidental drowning in 1857, Stowe was plunged into a crisis of faith that lasted several years. What was most painful to her, where did she find comfort, and how did she change in the process?
9. How would you describe Stowe's family life—her relationship with Calvin and with her children? Do those relationships fit what you might expect for a 19th century woman?
10. Why was Stowe so powerfully drawn to spiritualism later in her life? Why did she tell her readers to avoid spiritualism, but not follow her own advice?
11. Stowe made three extended trips to Europe and spent many winters in Florida (which must have seemed like a foreign country to a New England Yankee). How did these experiences change or challenge her?
12. Describe the relationship between Stowe and one or more of her siblings—for example, Catharine, Henry, or Isabella). What were the high and low points of the relationship(s)?

ABOUT NANCY KOESTER



Nancy Koester is an ordained pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and has taught religion and church history at Luther Seminary in St. Paul and at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. She is also the author of *Fortress Introduction to the History of Christianity in the United States* and, in the field of spirituality, she has published *Journeying Through Lent with Luke* and numerous Bible studies. Visit www.nancykoester.com.



Nancy Koester at Meet the Finalists on March 20, 2015.

27TH ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

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