When Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe during the United States Civil War, he reportedly quipped, “So you’re the little woman who started this big war.” In Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life, Nancy Koester presents a biography of the famed author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin that bounds with delight from page to page. The book is easily accessible to a popular audience and moves chronologically through her life and the lives of those closest to her, yet is thoroughly researched and offers rich sources for the interested academic. While the book is driven by events more than a thesis, it is a thoroughly spiritual biography focused upon Harriet’s faith, as one would expect from a book in the Library of Religious Biography series. Though Harriet’s relationship to Jesus changed over time, it always shaped her, her writings, and her advocacy for social reform in profound ways.

More than simply following Harriet (as the author prefers to call her), Koester weaves her story into the stories of her hugely influential Beecher family and her social milieu, and so touches upon the social and spiritual state of many average Americans of that time. The story begins with a glimpse of Harriet’s parents, Roxana Foote Beecher and the indefatigable pastor Lyman Beecher. Harriet quickly emerges as a precocious writer—even at age nine—steeped in her father’s Congregationalist theology. Like her siblings, she yearns for conversion and peace with God. Moving from Litchfield, Connecticut, to Boston, and then to Cincinnati, Harriet continues wrestling with God as she becomes an adult, an uneasiness that continues into her marriage with Calvin Stowe. Ultimately, though, she finds increasing peace when she decides to quit striving and rely upon God’s grace. Her initial anxiety at being a woman involved in public advocacy gradually fades, beginning with an anonymous letter to the editor against a race riot mob and culminating in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, her 1852 protest novel woven together from stories she had heard throughout her life. Her novel rekindled the consciences of Northerners against the evil of slavery and made her an international celebrity meeting with figures such as Charles Dickens and the queen of England. Yet she also faced the all-too-human difficulties of quarrels with and concern for her extended family and of spiritual struggles—including her rejection of Calvinism, dabbling in spiritualism, and eventual embrace of Episcopalism. Despite these challenges, Harriet continued writing and advocating social reform throughout her life.

This book, if a bit overlong for its many details and rabbit trails, is a delight to read. The prose prances with crisp sentences, playful extended metaphors, and lively italics and exclamation points. One hardly notices that it skips upon an immense scholarly foundation, as evidenced by more than one thousand footnotes throughout the book. Koester treats religion sensitively and places the narrative firmly in the center of Harriet’s and many others’ lives, a refreshing contrast to much mainstream scholarship that either ignores religion or reduces it to expressions of other motives. She avoids overly simplistic categories of heroes and villains by helping readers understand her various subjects, whether old-school Calvinists, Episcopalians, troubled seekers, rationalists, or spiritualists. Harriet’s siblings, such as the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher, adopted more liberal versions of Christianity than their father Lyman, but all made major contributions to society and respected their evangelical past. For example, Harriet’s sister Catharine was a major innovator in women’s education who, though unconverted herself, nonetheless encouraged revival in order to make her students better citizens. Rather than simply making a book about one woman, Koester touches upon the spiritual climate of New England, and, to some extent, the nation, during this period, and skillfully uses a religiously attuned biography to delve into the soul of an era.

Koester discusses the irony that Harriet’s antislavery activism in the form of the novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin was successful in part because the culture viewed her critique as emotional rather than rational, and therefore appropriate for a woman in the 1850s. Yet, her fiery response to those who attacked Uncle Tom’s Cabin as inaccurate produced a brilliant—and thoroughly rational—response in A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a book documenting that the actual conditions of slavery were far worse than in her fictional novel. Undaunted by her critics and encouraged to write and travel by her supportive husband and family, Harriet shines as an example for women determined to fight injustices today. I encourage you to buy and read Koester’s brilliant book, which shows the importance of religious convictions for social reform and the power of a woman, even in a patriarchal society, to change herself and the world.

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