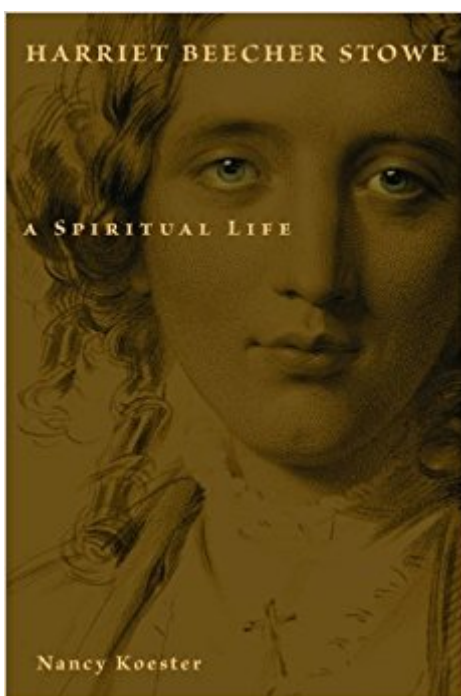


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# Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life (Library Of Religious Biography (LRB))



## Synopsis

Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life, won the 2015 Minnesota Book Award for General Non-Fiction. "So you're the little woman who started this big war," Abraham Lincoln is said to have quipped when he met Harriet Beecher Stowe. Her 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. Overnight Stowe became a celebrity, but to defenders of slavery she was the devil in petticoats. Most writing about Stowe treats her as a literary figure and social reformer while downplaying her Christian faith. But Nancy Koester's biography 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. Having meticulously researched Stowe's own writings, both published and un-published, Koester traces Stowe's faith pilgrimage from evangelical Calvinism through spiritualism to Anglican spirituality in a flowing, compelling narrative. Watch a 2014 interview with the author of this book here:

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** The subject of this accessible and absorbing interpretive biography was perhaps the most famous American woman of the nineteenth century and by far the most famous member of a family of distinguished -- indeed, notorious -- clergymen and Christian educators. Naturally enough, then, the lens through which Koester illuminates her subject is that of the

Christian life. Harriet Beecher (who married another clergyman, Calvin Stowe) remained seriously committed to living out the Christianity all the Beechers embraced. That meant dedication to her spouse and children and also advancing the progressive Christian causes—women's education and suffrage, abolition, black civil rights. Chafing to do her part after 18 years of motherhood, Stowe recruited female relatives to help her so she had the time to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the biggest American best-seller of the nineteenth century. It made her a celebrity overnight. She followed it with further novels, short stories, travel accounts (enabled by her fame), home-management advice books, and plenty of advocacy journalism. Meanwhile, she struggled mentally with the stringent Calvinism of her father—a development relieved somewhat by her understanding that living out Christianity, including utter trust in Jesus, was more important than theology. Koester engagingly and intelligently discusses each major novel, each family crisis, each journey, and each spiritual change, including a fluctuating interest in spiritualism after the deaths of two of her sons, without a whiff of academic fustiness. A top-notch read. --Ray Olson

-- James M. McPherson Pulitzer Prize winner for *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* "The daughter, sister, and wife of prominent clergymen and theologians, Harriet Beecher Stowe outshone them all in her impact on American religion and reform. Her life and work were framed by a spiritual quest that led from her ancestral Calvinism to high-church Episcopalianism and even spiritualism. Nancy Koester's lucid narrative and penetrating analysis carry the reader along unfailingly on this fascinating quest."-- Debby Applegate Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* "It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was in her lifetime the most famous and influential woman in the United States, bar none. But she has been largely forgotten today. Nancy Koester's comprehensive biography brings Stowe's personal story to life for a new generation while re-creating the fierce religious and cultural battles that inspired her to write the Great American Novel that helped turn the course of American history."-- Booklist (starred review) "An accessible and absorbing interpretive biography. . . . Koester engagingly and intelligently discusses each major novel, each family crisis, each journey, and each spiritual change, including a fluctuating interest in spiritualism after the deaths of two of [Stowe's] sons, without a whiff of academic fustiness. A top-notch read." - Christianity Today Feb 25, 2014, Harold Bush Harriet Beecher Stowe, Spiritual Adventurer Koester's biography should assume its rightful place as the best overall account of Stowe's spiritual interests and thought. Though written in part for serious scholars, ordinary readers

should find it engaging as well. And that's a good thing: because, as many critics now agree, Stowe deserves recognition as one of the most influential spiritual writers in our nation's history. - Gospel Coalition Review, Nov. 20, 2013 Matthew J. Hall Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life

Stowe emerges from Koester's account as a profoundly human character. Though known as an author, Stowe is presented first and foremost as a woman of her time - as a wife and mother. In fact, one of the strengths of Koester's biography is the way she explores the attention Stowe felt regarding her duties as a mother - and what she perceived to be a God-given calling to write. Even more, Stowe understood this calling to be for a specific purpose. It was her duty, she believed, to write in such a way that would effect a change in the moral conscience of Americans, most of whom she concluded were entirely apathetic to the moral scandal of slavery in America.

Get to know this amazing and influential woman and get a feel for such a turbulent time in US history, all in just 326 pages! (the rest are end notes, etc.) Well worth reading, we get to know Harriet Beecher Stowe, both the public side, from events in her life and from the several books she wrote, and the private side, from her thoughts expressed in letters and diaries. Koester's biography takes seriously Ms. Stowe's world view and explains her point of view, her theology, how it influenced her life and how it meshed or didn't with the then prevailing views -- all in very reader-friendly terms. Koester weaves Stowe's personal events and writings into the larger tapestry of US and world historical events. Stowe's writing and public campaigning against slavery made her both famous (and infamous) and influential in the mid and late 1800s. But she was more, so much more, than just an anti-slavery activist. Some surprising elements included trips to Europe, when and how Harriet spoke (or didn't), whom she met, whom she befriended on these trips; that she wrote for and what she wrote for the first edition of the Atlantic Monthly; what she thought of President Lincoln; what she thought of women's suffrage and its leaders; what other books she wrote; and her Florida connections. The life story, as told by Koester, moves along, propelled by events. But the author adds helpful insights and summaries throughout. The review on the back cover talks of "Nancy Koester's lucid narrative and penetrating analysis" -- that describes it perfectly. If I had any complaint it would only be that, after getting to know Ms. Stowe so well I would have liked a lengthy or extensive quote from her diary or letters, just to hear her talk at length, as we seemed, in the end, to know her so well, to have lived with her through so much. There are many shorter quotes and summaries of such writings throughout the book, however. Moreover, the book has extensive end notes (a true scholarly work, though very readable) and a brief five page index - neither of which

distracted me while reading this compelling life story.

Book in perfect condition. Very detailed, interesting reading about Harriet Beecher Stowe and her family. I've enjoyed getting to know how she came to write Uncle Tom's Cabin and many other works that I didn't know about.

Nancy Koester brings a powerful heroine to life in this fascinating biography. All too often, women in the 19th century, even women who were prolific writers and correspondents, are described only by their domestic details and their theology and philosophy brushed aside. Many authors are drawn into the temptation to create a kind of charming picture of an unusual woman hoping that she will be remembered for her actions as opposed to her theories. Dr. Koester goes far deeper into the complex character of Harriet Beecher Stowe, describing her religious struggles, passions, doubts, theories and ultimate decisions. Anyone who wants to truly understand just how well-educated, intelligent, thoughtful and powerful a woman like Beecher Stowe could be should read this well-written bio.

Very engaging, well-written book about this important American author, who deserves more notice! Nancy gives enough background information to put Harriet and her family in the times they lived.

On page 186, Koester refers to a remark made to Stowe by William Lloyd Garrison as a "cheap shot." It seems odd language for this type of book, and somewhat biased. Garrison appears to be responding to Stowe's determination that his approach would take away the slaves' Bible and leave nothing in its place. Koester points to a contradiction in Garrison's reliance on conscience. She doesn't seem as troubled by Stowe's insistence that freed slaves should be Christian, the type of Christian that Stowe herself is, or that Stowe, a white woman, should be the one to make that decision. Whatever your opinion may be concerning the merits of Uncle Tom's Cabin, it seems impossible to deny that Stowe's goal was the end of slavery. And I know of no one, who wasn't African American, who was more devoted to that cause than Garrison. It would have been nice to see a more balanced approach in that section of the book. Would slaves have only accepted freedom on Stowe's terms? Koester writes of Stowe's disappointment at the rupture that occurred between Garrison and Frederick Douglass. Stowe, according to Koester, thought that it was important to remain united for the cause. This passage presents Stowe as a champion of unity, but Koester doesn't seem to question Stowe's divisive problems with some of the other leaders of the

Women's Movement. On page 279, Koester writes of the poet Lord Byron---"Byron had no regard for the true meaning of words." There are no quotation marks bordering the statement, but there is a footnote annotation immediately after. My guess is that Koester is attributing the idea to Stowe, but I can't be sure. That seems like an outlandish statement. On the same page, Koester writes that Stowe "from infancy was taught to revere the word, written or spoken." The part of the book that I find most objectionable is on page 284. Koester writes of Victoria Woodhull, [a famous figure in the Women's Movement], that she "had a checkered career." As evidence, Koester says that Woodhull had been a practitioner of magnetic healing, had married several times, was a spiritualist medium, had been set up, along with her sister Tennie, in the first women's brokerage firm on Wall Street by Cornelius Vanderbilt, and had, again with Tennie, run a newspaper so radical that it became the first to publish the Communist Manifesto in English. In addition, Koester points out, Woodhull had been elected president of the American Association of Spiritualists, and had run for President of the United States. Koester leaves it to the reader to sort out the checkers. She refers to Woodhull as "the woman," and leaves the number of marriages at several rather than give the number --- I think it was three. One other item that Koester mentions as evidence of Woodhull's "checkered past" is that Woodhull's sister Tennie was "rumored to have been a prostitute." Could you use a rumor about an individual's sibling against that individual and suggest that it is part of a "checkered past?" Koester doesn't refer to Stowe in the same derogatory manner, even though she points out that Stowe also became involved in spiritualism, and that her brother Henry, possibly the most powerful minister in the nation, was alleged to have had an extramarital affair with at least one member of his congregation --- an allegation that more than one member of his own family believed to be true.

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