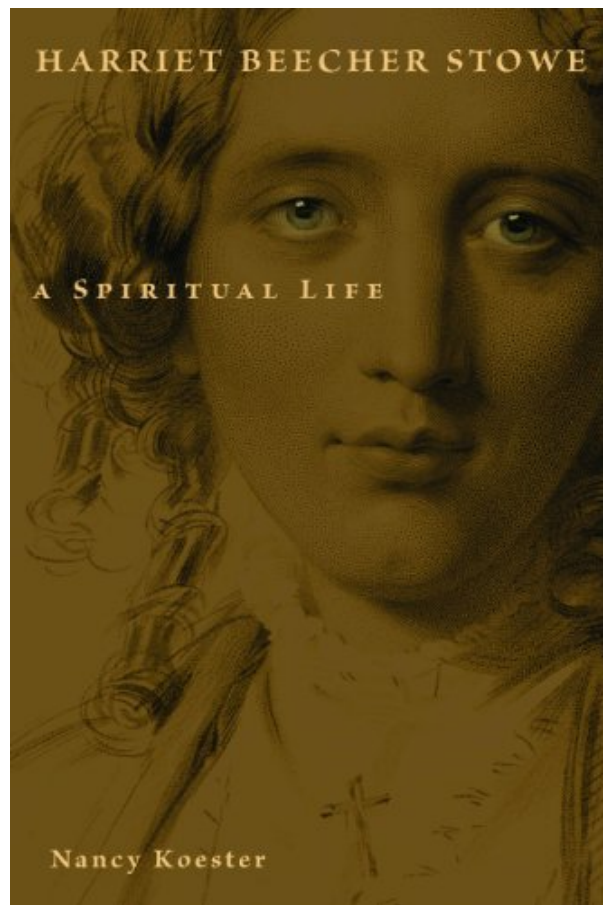
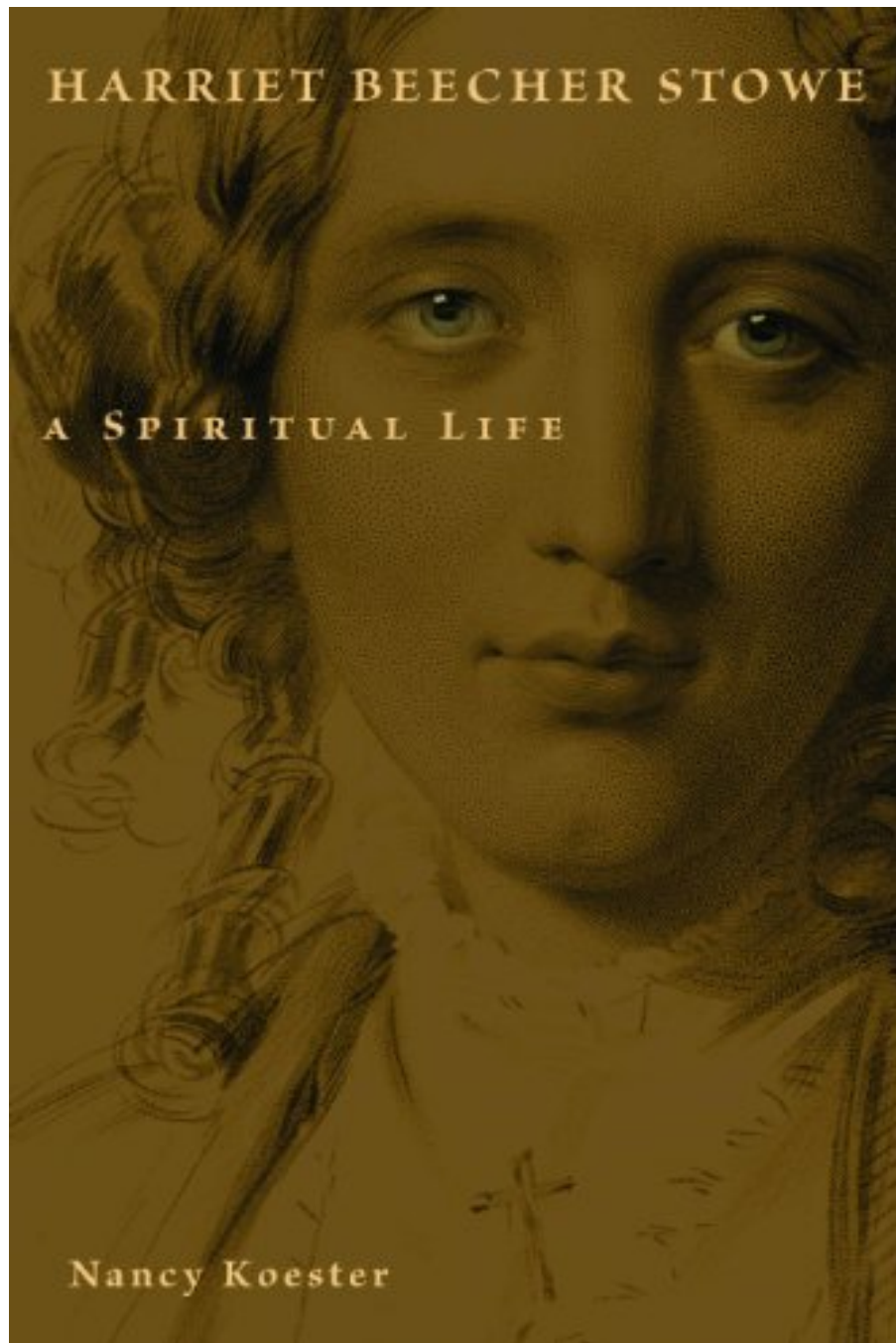


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Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life, won the 2015 Minnesota Book Award for General Non-Fiction.

"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:

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Most helpful customer reviews

7 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating Woman, Fascinating Times

By Carl Albing

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.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Enriching on many levels

By Nancy Olson

What an enjoyable book--from so many perspectives! It is an intriguing tale of a gifted person trying to live by her faith and convictions in the midst of cultural and political whirlwinds. Stowe was an intelligent and talented woman living in a man's world, a religious questioner in a context where voicing questions and doubts was vocationally dangerous for her family, a persuasive writer who needed deep wisdom to discern where to apply her penetrating words. We are treated to her development over the years into a powerful social critic where she saw the opportunities and limits of public involvement.

Koester writes with a lively style and fondness of metaphor. Of Stowe's attempt to escape her grief after son Henry's death Koester writes, "grief was a stowaway; it rode along in Harriet's heart." Or her brother George, "who needed perfectionism like a drowning man needs a sack of bricks."

As a lover of American history I appreciated the connections Koester makes to the various historical events and Stowe's personal experiences which contributed to, and are found in, Uncle Tom's Cabin. At times it seemed like a thriller with foreshadowing of how events would be played out later.

I learned much from this book and from the life of Stowe, perhaps nothing greater than how we can (and need to) change and grow over the years, and that through deep reflection and personal challenges our faith and understanding of life get richer and deeper. I used to appreciate Stowe for her contribution to American history. Now I appreciate her as a wise mentor as well.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Intriguing and Insightful Reading

By Judy Bangsund

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. I have been curious about Harriet Beecher Stowe since reading Uncle Tom's Cabin last year; Nancy Koester's book offers many insights into her life and the times in which she wrote. She gives a thorough and well-researched biography of Stowe along with summaries of Stowe's many books and articles. Koester's writing is delightful; to quote her own assessment of Stowe, Koester knows how to turn a phrase.

What sets this biography apart is indicated in the subtitle: *A Spiritual Life*. Stowe was a woman of deep Christian faith, but it was far from a simplistic faith. The complexity and motivational force of Stowe's faith is woven into all she did and wrote. I found this inspiring and intriguing -- what Stowe lacked in stature (she was a small woman) she more than made up for in courage based on faith.

Koester's book is spiritual without being sentimental; scholarly without being stuffy; both inspiring and intriguing. I highly recommend this book.

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