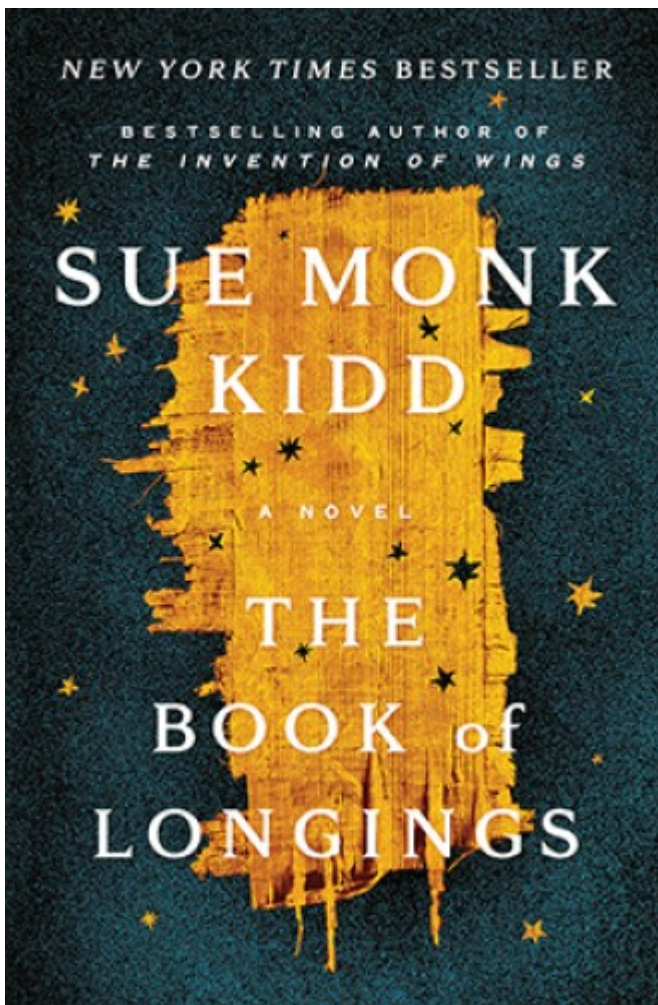


Sue Monk Kidd imagines Jesus with a strong-willed wife

***The Book of Longings* offers a rare glimpse into the interior lives of women in the biblical world.**

by [Kaethe Schwehn](#) in the [August 12, 2020](#) issue

In Review



The Book of Longings

A Novel

By Sue Monk Kidd

Viking

Readers of biblical historical fiction carry vastly different expectations—often unknowingly—when it comes to the author’s responsibility to the biblical text. Some wish to live more deeply within the historical world of the Bible while remaining inside familiar narrative and theological lines (whatever those might be). Others expect the novel to disturb, challenge, and subvert their presumptions. After all, if Jesus came to destabilize the familiar, perhaps that’s what literature about Jesus should do as well. Both of these types of preconceptions can be seen in the critical reviews of Sue Monk Kidd’s new novel.

The Book of Longings tells the story of Ana: daughter of Herod Antipas’s head scribe, sister of Judas Iscariot—and wife of Jesus of Nazareth. Ana harbors a secret longing to be a writer. The book follows her from the mosaic floors of Sepphoris to the crumbling village of Nazareth to the shining streets of Alexandria. In each location she struggles to find a place for her writing amidst her other callings as friend and wife, home-keeper and child-carrier, muse and hermit. Along the way, Ana participates in many familiar moments from the Bible: she is baptized along with Jesus in the Jordan, she tends to a wounded friend with the help of a kind Samaritan, she is welcomed into the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and she dabs at Jesus’ bloodied face when he falls on his way to Golgotha.

Conservative readers of the Bible are likely to find the insertion of a self-confident wife into the story of Jesus rather appalling. But a survey of Goodreads (where, with nearly 15,000 ratings, the book hovers at 4.3 stars) and the *New York Times* best-seller list (where the book happily perched for several weeks) reveals that most readers are gobbling up the book.

Yet not all liberal Christian readers are on board, either. Ron Charles of the *Washington Post*, for instance, falls squarely into the second camp described above—those who believe biblical historical fiction has the responsibility to poke and prod and disturb us. He claims that the events and characters of *The Book of Longings* fall into neat lockstep with popular understandings of liberal theology and feminist spirituality; absent is the “discomfiting radicalism of the Gospels.”

And Charles isn’t wrong. Ana doesn’t want children, so she takes a variety of roots and herbs to prevent pregnancy; she is horrified when a friend is raped and throws a

bowl of blood in protest; most of all, she is aware of her own longings and advocates for them. Meanwhile, Jesus is a pacifist with a booming laugh and kind eyes who takes in stride Ana's desire to remain childless and encourages her vocation by bringing home pot shards for her to write upon. In a moment of confrontation with Ana, he admits, "I too have kept you from being yourself" (words likely to make even a 21st-century wife swoon).

There is certainly a tidiness to Jesus' theology that at times feels a bit too easy and familiar. In an author's note about her research for the book, Kidd writes:

It was something of a wonder to discover that the human Jesus has so many different faces and that people, even historical Jesus scholars, tend to view him through the lens of their own needs and proclivities. For some he's a political activist. For others a miracle worker. He's viewed as a rabbi, social prophet, religious reformer, wisdom teacher, nonviolent revolutionary, philosopher, feminist, apocalyptic preacher, and on and on.

Kidd chooses to offer readers a warmhearted, nonviolent version of Jesus, a man ready to welcome the marginalized and call out corruption, a character who will feel familiar to many liberal Protestants. But in doing so she follows a pattern set forth by scholars, philosophers, and novelists for hundreds of years. Her depiction of Jesus is not a failure. It is a choice, and one that accurately reflects the moment in which Kidd resides.

If you, like Charles, tend to pick up biblical historical fiction in the hopes that your own understanding of Jesus or your theological predilections will be challenged, this book may disappoint you. But here is what the book offers: first and foremost, a rapidly paced plot full of action and meaningful choices on the part of the protagonist.

In fact, there is almost something Markan about the pace and energy of the book. The chapters are short and separated by very little white space on the page. The biblical events the novel mentions are already filled with tension, but Kidd adds a considerable amount of her own. There are secret missives inscribed on thin sheets of ivory, narrow escapes through moonlit gardens, arsoned orchards of date palm, and papyri buried in the depths of honeycombed caves.

The novel is incredibly rich in period detail: mattresses stuffed with coriander and mint, frescoed basilicas and dank mikvahs, the rhythmic grinding of millstones and the musky scent of dung fires, eyes lined with kohl and skin anointed with olive oil and myrrh. Those who desire a biblical tale that immerses them in a world that is barely cracked open in the Bible itself will love this book. So will those who enjoy strong female characters and intricate plots.

And for those of us who have spent years of our lives immersed in a biblical world dominated by male actors, getting to see these spaces through the eyes of women, getting to see women plot and comfort and mourn, scheme and rage and write—this is a profound experience. And it's not one, I might add, that was conveniently taken care of with the publication of *The Red Tent*. The recent publication of *Naamah* (the story of Noah's wife) and *The Book of V* (in part about Queen Esther) suggest that there remains a need to offer readers entrance to a revisioning of the Bible in which women are visible and active participants.

Women were there, too. We were human, we were complex, and we mattered. I want in.