

Austen, Lucy S. R. *Elisabeth Elliot: A Life*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2023. 515pp. + 7pp. (front matter) + 83pp. (back matter).

It is a mark of human nature to want heroes—people who are, perhaps, bigger than life; people who, while not perfect, always beat the “bad guys” and win in the end. Similarly, believers often want their Bible characters to be such heroes—Abraham sacrificing Isaac, Moses parting the Red Sea, David fighting Goliath. However, God’s presentation of these and other characters rejects the hero-worshipping motif. Instead, God shows us the flaws and failures along with the victories and triumphs. So it is in Lucy S. R. Austen’s *Elisabeth Elliot: A Life*. Austen paints a vivid picture of a complex woman whom God greatly used, showing both her triumphs and her flaws.

Austen is a wife, mother, and writer from the Pacific Northwest. She earned a B. A. from the University of Washington and wrote *British Christian Authors* and *American Christian Authors* for Hewitt Homeschooling Resources. The latter book led Austen to write a short biography of Elisabeth Elliot, but she soon realized that while much had been written about Jim Elliot and his missionary companions, very little had been written about Elisabeth herself.¹ This discovery launched Austen on a years-long intensive dive into Elliot’s writings, along with interviews of her friends and family. The result is this comprehensive and compelling biography (perhaps surprising since Austen’s book is not an authorized biography).² Undoubtedly, however, Austen’s contribution will be a foundation for future works on Elisabeth Elliot.

Austen was unable to access most of Elliot’s journals, instead relying “heavily on Elliot’s published work in surveying her thinking over the course of her life” (1). Other source material comes from *Devotedly: The Personal Letters and Love Story of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot* by Valerie Shepard (Elliot’s daughter) as well as materials found in the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton University, Elliot’s alma mater. Finally, interviews with Valerie Shepard and Elliot’s third husband, Lars Gren, are referenced, as well as personal recollections by friends and family members. Austen skillfully weaves these source materials into an engaging whole, though at times she tries to fill in the gaps that result from missing information. In such instances Austen acknowledges those attempts, and, for the most part, seems to draw the best conclusions possible.

Austen organizes her work into three sections. Chapters 1–3 comprise the first section, covering Elliot’s life from her birth until she leaves for Ecuador (1926–1952). The second section (1952–1963) details Elliot’s time in Ecuador and is the most thorough and compelling; clearly, the “Betty” who went to Ecuador was not the same as the one who returned to the United States. The final section, covering the years 1963 until her death in 2015, shows the results of these life changes. Throughout these sections, key emphases emerge and merge—among them literary pursuits, missions, grief, and divine guidance, which will be the focus of this review.

¹ Lucy S. R. Austen, interview with Nick Fullwiler and Peter Bell, “Guilt, Grace, Gratitude” podcast, June 29, 2023; accessed April 12, 2024, <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/gggpodcast/episodes/Lucy-S--R--Austen--Elisabeth-Elliot-A-Life-e2684je>.

² Elisabeth Elliot’s authorized biography is written by Ellen Vaughan in two volumes: *Becoming Elisabeth Elliot* (Nashville: B&H, 2020), and *Being Elisabeth Elliot* (Nashville: B&H, 2023).

Elisabeth “Betty” Howard was born into a happy and highly literate family. Both her grandfather and father were editors of the *Sunday School Times*, and “the Howard household revolved around books and writing” (19). As a result, Elliot read widely from both sacred and secular materials. Amy Carmichael’s writings were a favorite throughout her life, and her younger brother, Tom, frequently recommended books for her to read. In God’s providence, this laid the foundation for and enhanced her later writing ministry. Austen, an avid reader and gifted writer, spends considerable time on Elliot’s writings, providing invaluable information on the background, process, and reception of these various books and articles. For example, while many people familiar with Elisabeth Elliot have read her first book, *Through Gates of Splendor*, fewer are aware that she was not the originally intended author, and Austen’s account of how the book came to be is fascinating. Another of Elliot’s early works, *The Savage, My Kinsman*, blacklisted her for a time among her fellow evangelicals. In addition to helpful background information, Austen provides invaluable and insightful analyses of Elliot’s works. A helpful chronological bibliography appears at the end of her book. This love of books and reading of both the author and her subject highlights the value of extensive reading among Christians.

Elliot was also born into a missions-minded home. Austen traces Elliot’s path toward missions beginning in the book’s first section but makes it the primary focus of the second. In this section, more familiar episodes emerge, particularly Elliot’s time at Wheaton, but Austen also references other interesting yet lesser-known events, such as Elliot’s time at the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Kansas immediately after graduation, followed by more training at the Prairie Bible Institute. Austen skillfully weaves together these influences, along with Elliot’s marriage to Jim Elliot, but her chapter titled “Where Is Rehoboth?” serves as the vital transition between Jim’s martyrdom and Elisabeth’s eventual departure from Ecuador, and it lays the groundwork for the many changes in her life that follow. This chapter title comes from Genesis 26. Here, Isaac and his servants dig well after well, only to have others come and claim them. Finally comes the well at Rehoboth, one that was not fought over, leading Isaac to declare, “For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land” (Gen 26:22 ESV). Here Elliot saw a parallel to her own situation after Jim’s death. While her willingness to take her young daughter to live among the very people who had killed her husband (the Waorani) usually elicits awe and admiration, it was a time of both growth and frustration as all of her earlier missionary efforts seemed to dry up. Her training as a linguist seemed to go nowhere, and her relationship with Rachel Saint, with whom she worked while living among the Waorani, was never smooth. And while others thought of the Waorani as ignorant and backward, Elliot began to see that their way of life was actually well adapted to their environment and that she had much to learn from them. Even so, it became clear that living among them was not a viable long-term option, particularly given the relationship with Saint. In a letter to her mother written while she lived among the Waorani, Elliot wrote, “It sort of makes me chilled when I think that possibly I’ve been here just to write a book [*Through Gates of Splendor*] and get my name identified with this heroic effort! . . . It does seem strange that I’ve really done almost nothing else but write books, when I’m supposed to be a missionary”

(344). This letter to her mother is one of many windows into her evolving view of missionary work,³ making Austen's work a must-read for those either interested or involved in missions. Elliot learned early in her experience that missions was not about transferring American culture elsewhere, an outgrowth of 1950s American optimism, which viewed missions "as an excellent vehicle for spreading democracy and winning the Cold War" (295). Rather, as Austen points out, "for Elliot, this missed the point entirely. It was not American culture for which she had risked losing Jim. It was not American culture she was risking her life and Valerie's to spread. It was the love of God for people, expressed in Jesus Christ. She wanted to present Christ in context," that is, the context of whatever group of people being reached with the gospel (295–96).

No doubt, Elisabeth Elliot's life was marked by intense grief. Her marriage to Jim lasted only two years and three months, but its effects lasted the rest of her life. An intensely private person, Elliot had to contend with *Life* magazine reporters documenting a tragedy not yet confirmed. Elliot then decided to continue the work she and Jim started, but she had no sending church, not even a mission board to give her guidance and support. Austen relates the early challenges of well-meaning people who added to Elliot's workload (all while she mothered a young child). Others would not talk about Jim at all, and still others felt sorry for her, "an attitude she found almost unbearable" (226). Perhaps if Elliot had known more about trauma and its effects, her response to Jim's death (and even her second husband's death) would have been different, but she approached grief with a form of stoicism typical of her generation. I, too, have experienced loss, widowed at the age of thirty-two, and I have learned that grief changes a person and motivates reevaluation of core beliefs and life direction. While Austen does not overtly link the changes in Elliot's life direction and beliefs to grief, she demonstrates it as she traces Elliot's redirection toward a writing ministry, her return to the United States, and her changes in theology.

Divine guidance, another major theme, emerges in the book. Elliot was deeply influenced by, among other things, Keswick theology that emphasized deep heart-searching as one pursued God's calling. This may have influenced Elisabeth's relationship with Jim, which is honestly portrayed in the book. Austen writes, "Betty and Jim were afraid that the easier or more comfortable path must be deceptive, second best—and that second best was the same thing as *wrong*. Although they were genuinely in love with each other, there was perhaps also a part of them that was in love with being in love, and with the idea of a glorious sacrifice, of giving up their one true love for Jesus" (77). After Jim's death, "she felt that if she could get her response right [to his death], her obedience would facilitate the good things God planned to bring out of the situation; if she got it wrong, it would prevent those good things and waste Jim's death" (232). Her introspection, Austen contends, caused her to internalize her grief and suppress her emotions. Over time, however, Elliot came to recognize "that her emotions were not signs of sin or failure" (301). In addition, Elliot turned from her initial belief "that when faced with two otherwise acceptable paths, the follower of Jesus is obligated to choose the more difficult" (303) to understanding "that God was not a hard taskmaster; that where her desires

³ Austen also mentions another shift in Elliot's thinking about missions after studying Isaiah 43:10: "Perhaps to be a missionary was ultimately to be a witness to the nature and character of God. A witness observes and reports. This she could try to do. The discovery of this verse in this context produced a lifelong paradigm shift for her" (310).

were not proscribed in Scripture she could do what she wanted and still be within his will; that God could be trusted to see that she did not stray from the narrow path” (374). This change in thinking eventually led Elliot to leave Ecuador and pursue writing. The earlier introspective thinking seeped back into Elliot’s second and third marriages, however. Her third marriage to Lars Gren was a mistake—or so Elliot related to some of her friends (481, 501). That, along with Elliot’s battle with Alzheimer’s, provides some of the most painful and poignant moments of the book.

While believers would prefer a Genesis-24-type life—one where God clearly directs and quickly answers specific prayers for guidance—*Elisabeth Elliot: A Life* demonstrates that the Christian journey is often one of wondering, “Where is Rehoboth?” Throughout this book, Austen traces the journey of a beloved, influential believer along with the ups and downs, the triumphs and mistakes, that her journey entailed. “Elliot had weaknesses and strengths,” Austen concludes. “She got things right and she got things wrong, and she did not necessarily know which were which. Nor do we. We are too small to see very far” (525). Elisabeth Elliot’s story, as related in this book, should cause us not only to examine our own failings but also to rejoice in the God that she clung to throughout her journey. She was loved with an everlasting love, and always, underneath were the everlasting arms (525).

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