



Forgotten Followers from Broken to Bold

Elaine Ricker Kelly

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Women witness Jesus's beginnings, resurrection, and ascension in the spiritual novel Forgotten Followers from Broken to Bold.

Elaine Ricker Kelly's religious novel *Forgotten Followers from Broken to Bold* focuses on the women among Jesus's disciples.

Mara, the story's central heroine, is Jesus's skeptical aunt. Tasked with caring for Maria, Jesus's widowed mother, she expresses disbelief about Maria's stories of Jesus's birth. But then in Nazareth, Mara witnesses as crowds also refute Jesus's divinity. When he's driven out of town, Mara joins Maria in Capernaum.

A recluse who endured past abuses, Mara desires safety more than anything else. She's skillful in her household, though she dismisses praise around her cooking. She's set up as someone who needs grace without realizing it, and the question of whether she'll become a person of faith looms—despite her declarations that she'll only accept what can be explained.

Beyond these qualities, though, Mara is only sketched in; cultural views about women color how she is perceived. She makes efforts to be invisible; there are reflections on her perceived low bride price. Her insecurities are mentioned repeatedly; who she is beyond them is underexplored. Her growth is shaped most in terms of how she questions her society. The stories of other women, including the apostles' fishwives, contribute to her developing understanding of her enigmatic nephew.

Later in the book, Joanna, the wife of Herod's chief of staff, is introduced in an abrupt and deliberate manner. She seems present most to deliver forceful perspectives, as when she expresses concern over being both Jewish and Greek. A didactic set piece, her story line is used to emphasize God's love for all people. Her story is also made to parallel Mara's: both women fear the opinions of others, both have to wrangle their feelings of being excluded, and both hope that Jesus will change the conditions for women in society. Domestic period details fill in the background of the women's stories, too, ranging from linens to everyday chores.

Indeed, the novel becomes clearer about its aims as it progresses. Mara shares her memories; she listens to other people's accounts of Jesus. In this winding and formulaic manner, the book covers gatherings of Jesus's followers; when Joanna attends them, the experiences make her want to become a follower too.

Though people's negative perceptions of Jesus are covered in the story (some consider him to be an erratic blasphemer or an illegitimate liar), when it comes to his preaching and miraculous acts of healing, the book's adherence to the Bible is clear. Though other characters are prone to overexplaining the meanings of Jesus's words, their alternating perspectives also serve to feed the question of whether Jesus's claims are true. Ultimately, the story delivers a sense that Jesus's message was so radical that it was bound to be misunderstood in his time—even his siblings are shown expressing doubt. The result is a fascinating story whose familiar elements are somewhat

refreshed by its feminine perspectives.

In the historical novel *Forgotten Followers from Broken to Bold*, women are eyewitnesses to Jesus's ministry.

KAREN RIGBY (April 14, 2023)

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