

# Christianity Comes to Amazonia

Martha Ackelsberg

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a review of

*Five Wives: A Novel* by Joan Thomas. HarperCollins Publishers, Ltd. 2019

*Five Wives* is a compelling novel about Operation Auca, a missionary project undertaken by evangelical Protestants in Ecuador in the mid-1950s. It seamlessly mixes the story of those events with the imagined thoughts and responses of both the original participants and their children and grandchildren.

In so doing, Joan Thomas succeeds in exploring both the power and the dangers of the religiously-based certainty (some might say fanaticism) of the missionaries. In the process, she also raises important questions about the relationship between missionary activity and capitalist development and depredation in the Amazon.

The missionaries were mostly young couples, a number of them with babies and small children, who had grown up in the U.S. in evangelical Christian families. Each of them heard the call in their own way. Some went first to other parts of the world, but all ended up in Ecuador convinced they were called to save the Waorani people who lived deep in the Amazon and who had repelled all previous efforts on the part of outsiders even to find them, let alone get to know them.

We learn very early in the novel that five men who made the original contact were massacred within the first few days of making camp near the Waorani village. In chapters that alternate among reports from the missionaries' journals, stories of the lives of their children and grandchildren, and their backstories, Thomas explains how the missionaries came to believe that it was their special, chosen role to break through the isolation of the Waorani and save them for Christ. She writes of the efforts of their wives (the *Five Wives* of the title) to dissuade them from undertaking the proselytizing in the way they did, and the long-term consequences of the mission, both for the native people and the missionary families.

What I found extraordinary about the book is the way the author succeeded in telling the missionaries' story, as it were, from the inside, so that the reader comes almost to share their drive and commitment to reach those they perceive as savages, while, at the same time, making clear the disastrous consequences of the project, both in the short and the long-term.

We feel the hesitation of the wives who questioned the certainty of the men that this was what God had called them to do despite the obvious desire of the Waorani to be left alone.

Interestingly, we are also treated to a view of the relationship between these evangelical Protestants and a local Catholic priest, who, though theologically descended from those who had violently colonized Ecuador over the course of earlier centuries, serves in this story as a spokesperson for the view that the effort to drag the Waorani kicking and screaming, or praying, into the 20<sup>th</sup> century will not serve them well.

Finally, the author also explores, in a relatively light-handed way, the connections between these evangelizers and the government of Ecuador. The government was eager to take advantage of the missionaries' efforts to drive the Waorani out of the forest and into civilization so the area could be cleared for the exploitation of oil and other natural resources. At the same time, it effectively abandoned them to the missionaries, taking no responsibility for

what happened to them once they were drawn out of the forest and into missionary-created villages, and left with no way to support themselves.

By the end of the novel, we see members of a once-vibrant native community destitute and lost, either at the edge of the forest or in the cities, totally dependent on charity.

All of the relationships are treated with depth and complexity. We see conflicts and competition among the missionaries: a brother, the central figure of the mission group, tricks and lies to his sister to gain control of the meticulous, though seriously-flawed, work she is doing to try to learn the Waorani language. We come to understand the way the story of the massacre of the Christians obfuscated its real causes. And, finally, we learn how some members of succeeding generations of missionaries eventually came to terms with the damage wrought by their parents.

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