

One New Book for the Preacher

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When I Was a Child I Read Books by Marilynne Robinson
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2012), 206 pages.

It would be surprising if this review introduces Marilynne Robinson to readers of the *Journal for Preachers*. She is one of America's distinguished novelists who won the Pulitzer Prize for *Gilead* in 2005. She is also a public intellectual who speaks regularly in the accents of Reformed theology and has garnered national and international acclaim. Praise comes not only from religious and literary communities, but from self-declared non-believers and atheists. (See quotations below.) What is surprising is the scant attention paid her by mainline (especially Presbyterian) seminaries. The notable exception is her receipt of the 2011 Abraham Kuyper Prize at Princeton Theological Seminary. Her address on that occasion is one of ten essays reproduced here: "Open Thy Hand Wide: Moses and the Origins of American Liberalism." Liberalism here refers more to its original meaning as liberality or generosity. Robinson explores the word's root associations through English translations of Deuteronomy, traces it back to John Calvin, and describes its understanding and use in Colonial New England.

These essays are steeped in Reformed and humanist thinking, in American writers like Whitman and Poe, and in the "pastor/theologian," Jonathan Edwards. "Who Was Oberlin?" takes a historical tour through the origins of the abolition of slavery and the founding of Oberlin College by exploring the question in the title. Another, "Wondrous Love," is a prose poem which beautifully marks the power of Christmas and Easter narratives to "fracture the continuities of history." It speaks to all who feel "a wistfulness and regret for the loss of Christianity." The essay demolishes the anxieties of those religious folk who think that government should come to the defense of Christian faith and puts a universal twist on American exceptionalism.

I have been an exuberant promoter of Robinson's work for several years. Her novels delve into the meaning of human existence; they take the particulars of time and place, from the rising of the sun unto its setting and breathes into them universal human experience. With Robinson you also get God's glory revealed in nature and in human faithfulness.

There are obvious riches here for preachers. Excerpts from these essays are readily quotable. For example, she writes that not only in Christian scripture but in the Hebrew Bible she finds "a haunting solicitude for the vulnerable." This trumps by several degrees the tired declaration of "God's preferential option for the poor." The phrase comes from an essay in which she surgically but gently deplores popular critiques of the Old Testament for being oppressive, and of setting Jesus' kindness against the "terror" of the God of Israel, a practice commonplace not only in public discourse, but in the loftiest and most respectable Christian Churches (see John Shelby Spong). Yet there are more serious reasons that this book will enrich preaching. It's not only for the low hanging fruit.

First, Ms. Robinson declares throughout these essays the importance of beauty and learning which have been marginalized — along with a sense of the sacred — in much of modern thought and even in religious life. “We have retreated,” she writes, “from the cultivation and celebration of learning and of beauty, by dumbing down, as if people were less than God made them and in need of nothing so much as condescension. Who among us wishes the songs we sing, the sermons we hear, were just a little dumber?” (p. 5). She implicitly calls us who traffic in the written and spoken word to care about quality, about reverence, and about mystery, not only in our preaching, but also in the structure and content of worship. To read these essays is to be drawn into a conversation about the worthiness of human life, its grandeur and possibility, and of this extraordinary world which is God’s gift to all species. We are reminded as we read (savor would be more like it) that when we are trite, clichéd, ill-prepared, or casual in what we speak and pray, we are diminishing not only those who depend upon us, but the authority and power of the gospel.

Second, there is a narrative quality to her writing which is valuable for the construction of sermons — not in order to mimic her, but to assist a preacher in internalizing a style. Here one learns by example how to unfold and develop thoughts such that they seem to have a plot or form a narrative whose beginning and middle lead to a conclusion which the reader or hearer is eager to read or to hear. There is a satisfying quality to her writing, a depth and richness which model the kinds of thinking and expression that are certain to improve preaching. See how Robinson develops the ideas in “Wondrous Love.” I heard her deliver it as a lecture before it was ever in print. She was spellbinding and held the rapt attention of the audience. I’ve had that experience only when listening to some of the world’s best preachers, where my mind and heart and soul were fully engaged, and where the beauty of words and expressions were obvious, but never mannered, unnecessary, or distracting. When that can be achieved in the preaching of the word, the gospel is heard, and often, by God’s grace, believed.

Third, her essays are full of scripture and theology. As one reviewer observes, it is handy to have a biblical concordance (or Wikipedia) beside you as you read. Robinson does not preach in these essays; she develops her thought and gives a public voice to her faith — not stridently, not with shallow moralisms, but with grace, kindness, and occasional humor. There is no doubt where she stands, nor is there any doubt that she respects her opponents — or most of them. She is more contrarian than polemicist, and thus she stands over against all those who deplete our energy and our faith by their sordid, fearful views of human nature and creation itself. She sees the “glory in the flower” in all God’s works and communicates that underlying “music of the spheres” when she reviews matters both scientific and religious. She respects human life and the potential that has been realized among us at our best, the slow churning out of democratic ideals into public governance, a representative democracy that is generous in spirit, dedicated to the common good. And she shows us the origin of all that we take so much for granted in the Reformed tradition. To read her, to inhabit her world, will cause you to rejoice.

If there is anything amiss in current preaching, it is the sense that Christ has deserted the public square, that the addressing of public matters in sermons is more a matter of naming enemies and scorning them than of generously calling all hearers together for the human good and for the upbuilding of the church. Many churches

are polarized along political and cultural lines. These essays are examples of both style and content that engage minds and hearts, that dig into meaning and history for the sake of the common good — of the church and the human community. Were this not true of her writing and speaking, Marilynne Robinson would never have received praise from the “secular press” with such extraordinary fulsomeness.

Let two of her secular devotees speak by way of conclusion. Mark O’Connell writes in *The New Yorker* (“The First Church of Marilynne Robinson”): “Even though I’m more or less a fully paid up atheist, I’m more drawn to Robinson’s Christian humanism than I am to the Dawkins-Hitchens-Dennet-Harris school of anti-theist fighting talk.” Then there’s Kate Kellaway writing a review of this same book in *The Guardian*: “Her critical armory includes no ostentatious weapons — no cruelty, sarcasm or rhetorical flourishes . . . Yet as a non-believer, there were occasions when she was in the pulpit and I was on my knees.”

Would that all who preach could get the same respect and response from non-believers, or even from faithful worshippers. Imagine what that would mean for the witness of the church in times such as these.

Note

The Marilynne Robinson Appreciation Society is an excellent website (mrasociety.com) to consult.