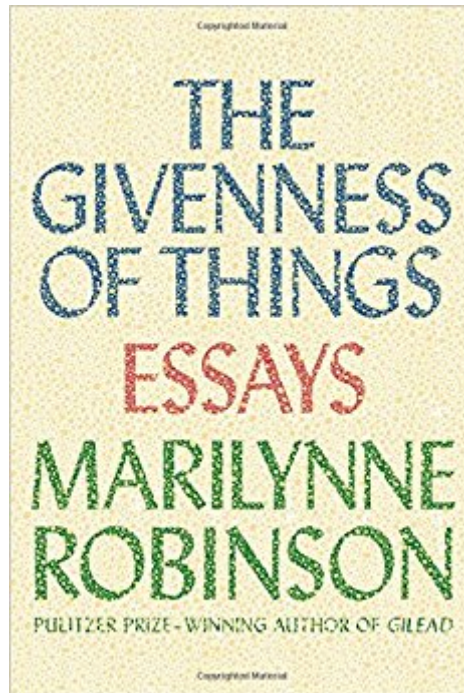




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The Givenness Of Things: Essays



Synopsis

Long-listed for the 2016 PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay The spirit of our times can appear to be one of joyless urgency. As a culture we have become less interested in the exploration of the glorious mind, and more interested in creating and mastering technologies that will yield material well-being. But while cultural pessimism is always fashionable, there is still much to give us hope. In *The Givenness of Things*, the incomparable Marilynne Robinson delivers an impassioned critique of our contemporary society while arguing that reverence must be given to who we are and what we are: creatures of singular interest and value, despite our errors and depredations. Robinson has plumbed the depths of the human spirit in her novels, including the National Book Critics Circle Award-winning *Lila* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gilead*, and in her new essay collection she trains her incisive mind on our modern predicament and the mysteries of faith. These seventeen essays examine the ideas that have inspired and provoked one of our finest writers throughout her life. Whether she is investigating how the work of the great thinkers of the past, Calvin, Locke, Bonhoeffer--and Shakespeare--can infuse our lives, or calling attention to the rise of the self-declared elite in American religious and political life, Robinson's peerless prose and boundless humanity are on display. Exquisite and bold, *The Givenness of Things* is a necessary call for us to find wisdom and guidance in our cultural heritage, and to offer grace to one another.

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Customer Reviews

In full disclosure I was already a huge Robinson fan. I read her first novel, *Housekeeping*, six times and would have read it twenty had *Gilead* and *Lila* not intervened. I've given the paperback editions

as sort of shibboleths to prospective friends and I traveled a hundred miles in a Michigan winter to hear her lecture. I also share the author's keen interests in Cosmology and Theology, along with her respect for the Transcendentalists, especially Thoreau. But Robinson is not writing only for her fans. Anyone who has ever sensed "another reality ...beyond the grasp of our comprehension yet wholly immanent in all of being, powerful in every sense of the word, invisible to our sight, silent to our hearing, foolish to our wisdom, yet somehow steadfast, allowing us our days and years" will find much to ponder in these essays.

This is a really unique book. Marilynne Robinson is a contender for the last American intellectual. She manages in this book to produce 17 interesting, well thought out and occasionally provocative essays. She speaks against the growing American polarization, the "fear" culture and for the place of the humanities and religion in life. She also manages the extremely difficult matter of being critical but positive. As well, she tries to reconcile science into her worldview and offers analysis as far afield as the American Civil War and Marx. Being all over the map is part of what makes it all so interesting. Its far from the case that I agree with her on every point she makes. But the points she makes are always interesting and somewhat original. To an extent, its not even what she says. Its how she thinks and how she manages to break through a great deal of intellectual stagnation in the modern United States. This book will not be for everyone. Especially for those who don't like to read things they might disagree with.

One of Marilynne Robinson's gifts is to be able to articulate a set of religious beliefs without making her readers feel that they are at the mercy of a dogmatist. Given that her beliefs are, self-confessedly, Calvinistic, it might strike readers that the lack of dogmatism is merely a trick of her rhetoric, but they would be wrong. She makes a case for Calvin's humanism that's based on interesting readings of his texts -- to which she brings her own humane critical intelligence and imagination to bear. Indeed, whenever she focuses on a particular text, whether from Calvin's works, from the Bible, or from anywhere else, she shows an alertness to language and an historical awareness of the circumstances out of which the text has come that is always interesting and revealing. What makes her writing about judgments and values deeply humane, however, is her sense of the limitations of our knowledge of the world -- visible and invisible, external and internal -- in which we have no choice but to make our way. It follows that her own commitments are admitted to be partial and provisional, just as the languages of her tradition (English and Calvin's Protestantism) have been shaped by their culture and history. That amounts to a kind of humility,

which she doesn't parade, and it enables her to be clear about the differences between belief (which she claims) and knowledge (which she doesn't claim). It follows from that that she is distrustful, to put it mildly, of those who claim to know the mind of God (religious fundamentalists and absolutists of every stripe) or who claim to know the way things really are (anti-religious scientists and pundits of the Dennett, Hitchens and Dawkins kind, whom she sees as scientific rather than genuinely scientific). It follows too that for her there is nothing finally authoritative about ANY writing, be it found in the Bible, the Koran, the works of Calvin, or the texts of Christopher Hitchens. This volume is a collection of essays (some originally speeches and sermons), and I have to admit that I like best the ones where she takes a critical stance, and takes it on the grounds of the limits of our knowledge. For her, the admission of limit enables a kind of freedom -- to imagine, to empathize, to keep our minds open to the new, and to find the possibility of value in places where dogmatism would foreclose it. What we're given, to allude to her title, is cognitive and emotional equipment, and a world in which to exercise it, that makes it possible for us to improve ourselves as human beings, find solidarity with anything humane, and deny that the most reductive explanation of anything that we can come up with (love, consciousness, any value) must be the true one. Yes, neurons are firing in our brains, and yes, we're capable of love and poetry and music, and you can't reduce the latter to the former. Even a very sensitive brain scan of Immanuel Kant, for example, wouldn't help us clear up all the mysteries of the "Critique of Pure Reason." I would just add that the sense that we have it in our power to be better, even in a culture that can seem cheap and materialistic and trivial, is what she shares temperamentally with Barack Obama and explains their mutual regard for one another. Everything in the book is worth reading, but I find those essays that sound most like sermons -- the ones on metaphysics and theology -- to be the least interesting, and, one could argue, they're actually a bit messy. In these essays, she's still not being dogmatic, but she's articulating her beliefs in language that's more remote and abstract than the language in those essays where she's engaging with ideas and attitudes in the culture and where she sounds more down-to-earth. But that's a small complaint. Read and enjoy.

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