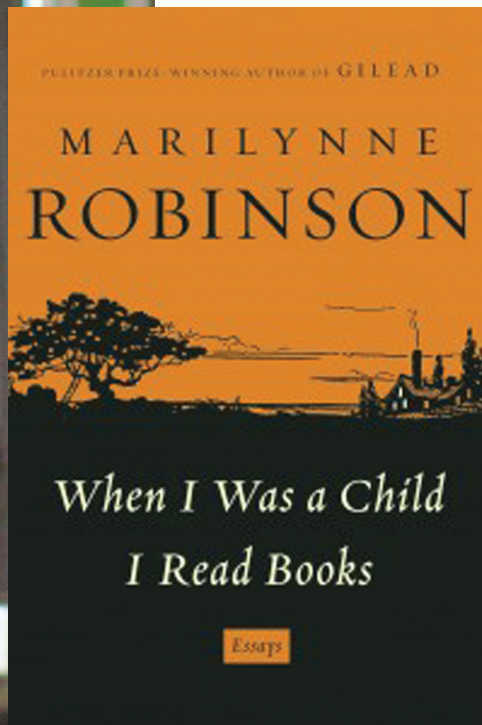


Literary Speaking



When I Was a Child

By Marilynne Robinson

Reviewed by Michael Sprong, Yankton Community Library

We are often told that within social discourse one should avoid the subjects of religion and politics. Indeed, these are treacherous waters. But at least one intrepid writer dares to navigate such straits. Marilynne Robinson's collection of essays gives hope that conversations about such volatile issues can be civil rather than hostile. This is not to say she is not passionate about either faith or politics.

In *When I was a Child I Read Books*, the author often examines the relationship of individuals to the powerful forces of church, state and corporations. She also gives ample space to the personal. Thus the essay, titled the same as the volume, in which Ms. Robinson writes eloquently of early years growing up in Idaho. The attentive reader is easily transported to her perspective on regional prejudice, especially the bias of "Easterners" against those who are reared in the American West.

Back to the content of Robinson's passion for politics and faith: She insists that religion is central to any national ethos but warns against getting caught up in vicious conflict surrounding differences. Her essay on "rehabilitating" the image of Calvin makes one nod their head in approval in one paragraph, then shake a fist in the next.

Politically, she critiques conservatives, moderates, liberals and radicals to make the point that choosing ideological fidelity over humanity is self-defeating. And just when one figures Robinson is simply too dour for

words, some bit of dry wit comes through her writing and gives hope that all is not lost.

Be forewarned, Robinson's prose is often less than accessible. However, it is worth the effort. If nothing else, the reader's vocabulary, if not their blood pressure, will be elevated by Robinson's ideas and her expression thereof.

Ms. Robinson is best known for her highly acclaimed novels *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* and *Home*. *Gilead* was awarded the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She is also known for her numerous essays in publications like *Harpers* and has authored several works of nonfiction. It is not an overstatement to claim she is a writer's writer. Currently, she teaches at the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop.

PS: There's a really cool Youtube clip of Robinson's appearance on the *Daily Show* in July of 2010.

Also available from Marilynne Robinson at the Yankton Community Library: *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Housekeeping*, which is available in audiobook format.

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