

65 QUOTATIONS



Marilynne Robinson

(1943-)

Marilynne Robinson wrote two short novels of great distinction, spaced 24 years apart, that established her in literary history, *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Gilead* (2004). Then she published *Home* in 2008 and *Lila* in 2014. These are 4 of the 10 best American novels published since 1980. As a soft Calvinist she is comparable to Anne Bradstreet and Harriet Beecher Stowe, while her numinous vision of life recalls Emily Dickinson. Calling herself a “Christian realist,” the scholarly Robinson sustains the tradition in American literature that includes Hawthorne, Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, Thornton Wilder, and Flannery O’Connor. She was born in the wilderness of Idaho, earned a doctorate at the University of Washington, is a divorced mother of two, and has published nonfiction as well—notably the environmentalist expose *Mother Country*. She has been teaching at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop since 1989.

ORDER OF TOPICS: conception, youth, family, teaching, science, religion, unorthodox Calvinism, pastoralism, Faith, religious traditions, philosophy, grace, love, transcendence, reeducation, Realism, writing, Political Correctness, Postmodernism, immortality:

CONCEPTION

Of my conception I know only what you know of yours. It occurred in darkness and I was unconsenting.

By some bleak alchemy what had been mere unbeing becomes death when life is mingled with it. So they seal the door against our returning.

YOUTH

Growing up in the West, in the mountains where, at least when I was a child, being an independent person was very highly valued, and what that meant was, or course, cultivating an interior life that could sustain you, that dignified you.

I grew up with the confidence that the greatest privilege was to be alone and have all the time you wanted.

FAMILY

My mother was a solitary.

My family was pious and Presbyterian.

The lumber industry was dominant in that part of Idaho.

We have a family legend about homesteading relatives in the nineteenth century—coming in covered wagons—dark forests, wolves, American Indians coming to ask for pie. My great grandfather was one of the first white people in a certain part of eastern Washington.

TEACHING

I accepted a grant from the American Academy that was supposed to support me for five years without teaching. I lasted about a year and a half before I nearly went crazy. Teaching is a distraction and a burden, but it's also an incredible stimulus.

SCIENCE

Reality consistently exceeds the expectations of science.

Quantum theory and classical physics, for instance, are both lovely within their own limits and yet at present they cannot be reconciled with each other. If different systems don't merge in a comprehensible way, that's a flaw in our comprehension and not a flaw in one system or the other.

The New Atheist types, like [Richard Dawkins], act as if science had revealed the world as a closed system. That simply is not what contemporary science is about.

When people try to debunk religion, it seems to me they are referring to an eighteenth-century notion of what science is.

RELIGION

Religion is a framing mechanism.

A mystical experience would be wasted on me.

Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it. But this is truest of the face of an infant. I consider that to be one kind of vision, as mystical as any.

Nothing could be more miraculous than the fact that we have a consciousness that makes the world intelligible to us and are moved by what is beautiful.

People seem to be profoundly disposed toward religion, yet they're not terribly good at it.

UNORTHODOX CALVINISM

Calvinism is supposed to induce emotional stoicism.

There's a puritanical hedonism in my existence. [Compare Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative"]

Sometimes I can't believe the narrowness that has been attributed to God in terms of what he would approve and disapprove.

One Calvinist notion deeply implanted in me is that there are two sides to your encounter with the world. You don't simply perceive something that is statically present, but in fact there is a visionary quality to all experience.

The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light.... It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within that great general light of existence.

Calvin says that God takes an aesthetic pleasure in people. There's no reason to imagine that God would choose to surround himself into infinite time with people whose only distinction is that they fail to transgress.

PASTORALISM

Sometimes I have loved the peacefulness of an ordinary Sunday. It is like standing in a newly planted garden after a warm rain. You can feel the silent and invisible life.

FAITH

Nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense.

I think the attempt to defend belief can unsettle it, in fact, because there is always an inadequacy in argument about ultimate things.

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Isn't it true that every one of these [religious] traditions expresses Christianity in a way that the other traditions could not? It's prismatic.

GRACE

Until you forgive, you defend yourself against the possibility of understanding.... If you forgive...you may indeed still not understand, but you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace.

Grace has a grand laughter in it.

LOVE

Love is holy because it is like grace—the worthiness of its object is never really what matters.

There is no justice in love, no proportion in it, and there need not be, because in any specific instance it is only a glimpse or parable of an embracing, incomprehensible reality. It makes no sense at all because it is the eternal breaking in on the temporal.

When she had been married a little while, she concluded that love was half a longing of a kind that possession did nothing to mitigate.

TRANSCENDENCE

Ordinary things have always seemed numinous to me.

Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.

Existence seems to me now the most remarkable thing that could ever be imagined.

There are two occasions when the sacred beauty of Creation becomes dazzlingly apparent, and they occur together. One is when we feel our mortal insufficiency to the world, and the other is when we feel the world's mortal insufficiency to us.

I like to be as forgetful of my own physical being as I can be.

REEDUCATION

It was largely as a consequence of the experience of writing *Mother Country* [1989] that I began what amounted to an effort to reeducate myself.

These people who can see right through you never quite do you justice, because they never give you credit for the effort you're making to be better than you actually are.

The ancients were right: the dear old human experience is a singular, difficult, shadowed, brilliant experience that does not resolve into being comfortable in the world. The valley of the shadow is part of that, and you are depriving yourself if you do not experience what humankind has experienced, including doubt and sorrow.

REALISM

I feel strongly that action is generated out of character. And I don't give anything a higher priority than character.

A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension.

PHILOSOPHY

Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it.

This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it.

It's not a man's working hours that is important, it is how he spends his leisure time.

I don't know exactly what covetous is, but in my experience it is not so much desiring someone else's virtue or happiness as rejecting it, taking offense at the beauty of it.

To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole.

In every important way we are such secrets to one another, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our own variant notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable—which, I hasten to add, we generally do not satisfy and by which we struggle to live.

WRITING

I write in my head all the time.

There's so much to be grateful for, words are poor things.

It is...difficult to describe someone, since memories are by their nature fragmented, isolated, and arbitrary as glimpses one has at night through lighted windows.

I don't try to teach technique, because frankly most technical problems go away when a writer realizes where the life of a story lies.

I want to feel that art is an utterance made in good faith by one human being to another. I want to believe there are geniuses scheming to astonish the rest of us, just for the pleasure of it.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

It is important to let people live out their experience of the world without censorious interference, except in very extreme cases.

POSTMODERNISM

It is not in our nature to stop harming ourselves.

I worry about participating in the consensus of opinion because frankly they don't bear out very well.

After all those years of school, I felt there was little I knew that I could trust, and I did not want my books to be one more tributary to the sea of nonsense that really is what most conventional wisdom amounts to.

We know that these new lightbulbs cut down on electricity, but where do they come from? China? Hungary? They have to be dealt with as toxic waste because they have mercury in them. So who's being exposed to these chemicals when they're manufactured and what are the environmental consequences in China or Hungary? What is the trade-off in terms of shipping them long distances to save a little bit of electricity?

It seems to me some people just go around lookin' to get their faith unsettled. That has been the fashion for the last hundred years or so.

Religion has always been profoundly effective in enlarging human imagination and expression. It's only very recently that you couldn't see how the high arts are intimately connected to religion.

IMMORTALITY

I assume immortality and this reinforces religion.

What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?

In eternity this world will be like Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets.

She conceived of life as a road down which one traveled, an easy enough road through a broad country, and that one's destination was there from the beginning, a measured distance away, standing in the ordinary light like some plain house where one went in and was greeted by respectable people and was shown to a room where everything one had ever lost or put aside was gathered together, waiting.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from
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