



The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought

By Marilynne Robinson

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In this award-winning collection, the bestselling author of *Gilead* offers us other ways of thinking about history, religion, and society. Whether rescuing "Calvinism" and its creator Jean Cauvin from the repressive "puritan" stereotype, or considering how the McGuffey readers were inspired by Midwestern abolitionists, or the divide between the Bible and Darwinism, Marilynne Robinson repeatedly sends her reader back to the primary texts that are central to the development of American culture but little read or acknowledged today.

A passionate and provocative celebration of ideas, the old arts of civilization, and life's mystery, *The Death of Adam* is, in the words of Robert D. Richardson, Jr., "a grand, sweeping, blazing, brilliant, life-changing book."

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

"My intention, my hope, is to revive interest in... John Calvin. If I had been forthright about my subject, I doubt that the average reader would have read this far." That's the introduction to one essay, but it could also apply to most of Robinson's (*Housekeeping*) first book in nearly a decade. Among the 10 essays here is one on the idea of wilderness and an intensely personal meditation on growing up Presbyterian, but these are essentially afterthoughts to an impassioned argument against America's contemporary social Darwinists cum free marketeers. And here's where Calvin comes in. She rebuts the characterization of Calvin as protocapitalist and the quick dismissal of his Puritan followers as prigs. Instead, she finds in their example a more fulfilling morality, one that substitutes personal responsibility for contemptuous condemnation of our fellows and a more personal, independent relationship with God and conscience. The corollary of the notion that "our unhappiness is caused by society, is that society can make us happy," she writes, adding, "Whatever else it is, morality is a covenant with oneself, which can only be imposed and enforced by oneself." Though there are occasional problems—for example, the argument "an important historical 'proof' very current among us now is that Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence unconscious of the irony of the existence of slavery" is simply a straw man. But for the most part her moral integrity is accompanied by an equally rigorous intellectual integrity, and rather than accepting received wisdom she hunts it out for herself among original texts. In the process, she revives founding beliefs as a possible solution for current ills. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Contrarian in method and spirit, this title fields a host of unapologetically demanding critical essays. From the introduction, reclaiming religion's role in culture, to the final essay, on civilization and wilderness, each bracing page compels response to a positively asserted and forcefully argued moral vision. Here passion and intellect are wed. Robinson (*Mother Country*, LJ 5/1/89) assays our common cultural ore, exposing dross and rediscovering worth and truth. An uncommon critic, she delves into diverse material and does not deny her religious roots but taps into them as she examines how Midwestern abolitionists inspired the McGuffey Reader, how Creationism spurs on contemporary Darwinism, and what's kind about Calvin. Dense with literary references, this book sorely needs the footnotes and bibliography it evidently lacks. Nonetheless, it is recommended for public and academic libraries. —John R. Leech, Brooklyn, NY
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From [Booklist](#)

Robinson is revered for her novel, *Housekeeping* (1980), but the sophisticated nonfiction found in *Mother Country* (1989), and in the intellectually rigorous and stylistically superb essays collected here, is her forte. She begins by boldly indicting contemporary discourse as "short on substance." Rather than achieving what religion, art, and philosophy are capable of, that is, to "expand or refine our sense of human experience," Robinson believes modern thought is tainted by the reductionism of economics, an obsession with the marketplace that engenders a debilitating loss of historical context, and encourages disrespect for thinking and learning. Robinson develops her critique of the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic shortcomings of modern thought in hard-hitting essays about Darwinism; unduly trivialized figures such as John Calvin; our focus on anxiety and the "medicalization of sorrow"; our brittle definitions of family and religion; our rampant materialism; and the need to sacrifice wilderness to save the earth. Uncompromising and resolutely eloquent, Robinson exposes and demolishes current shibboleths with the force of her reasoning, erudition, and passion for truth. *Donna Seaman*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Emily Scott:

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