

Marilynne Robinson, *Theologian of the Ordinary*, by Andrew Cuning. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 208pp. Hb, \$144.50, ISBN-13: 9781501358999; Pb. \$52.50, ISBN-13: 9781501371349.

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Pulitzer prize-winning author Marilynne Robinson's novels, especially her Gilead quartet (*Gilead*, *Home*, *Lila*, and *Jack*), explore the beauty and brokenness of spiritual journeys, especially as they intersect with family. Given her ubiquitous and unapologetic interest in theology, it is instructive to view her corpus through that lens. In *Marilynne Robinson, Theologian of the Ordinary*, Andrew Cuning delineates the theological significance of her writings. Cuning argues that "Robinson is best viewed as a theologian" (2). Moreover, he characterises her as a "theologian of the Ordinary," that is, as theologically attentive to the sacred or transcendental dimensions of the quotidian, mundane, and seemingly unremarkable (5–8). The familiar—"light and water, memory and family, food and conversation"—underwrites her theology (7; cf. 171). Her novels, Cuning contends, are "her way of doing theology" (12).

Cuning unfolds his argument through a theological analysis of Robinson's first four novels (*Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*) in Chapters 1–4. For each, Cuning interfaces Robinson with several interlocutors, including American Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau), philosophers (Levinas, Derrida), and theologians (John Calvin, James Cone). He interprets and illuminates the various facets of Robinson's fiction, surfacing the theological undercurrents of her stories. Some currents become waves, most conspicuously the often-reviled doctrine of predestination. Throughout, Cuning traces the theological motifs that recur in her work: grace, mystery, and, ultimately, universalism (121). In the Gilead saga chapters, he develops the incisive point that Ames and Boughton, the wizened clergy of Gilead, have a blind spot as it relates to the race relations of the 1950s. Their theology, Cuning avers, is too abstract, thereby obfuscating and obscuring lived experiences of injustice (108–109, 129–132, 168). Their failure to transpose theology from cloud-level to ground-level exiles Jack—the Prodigal Son of the stories—even as he returns home seeking guidance about his illegal interracial marriage to Della. Moreover, their theological detachment and insularity inhibit their

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ability to abate his self-doubt, self-loathing, and despair, which contributes to his final departure from Gilead. It is an insightful critique of the two beloved characters. In the concluding interview (Chapter 5), Robinson discusses her theological sensibilities, most notably her desire for “a recovery of real theology” (178) that appreciates the mystery of reality and the irreducible value of every soul as a divine image-bearer: “The absolute anchor for me, and this probably marks me as a Calvinist, is the image of God in human beings, without exception” (179). In the key quotation for the purposes of Cunning’s thesis, Robinson shares how theology informs her work and worldview: “I’ve been interested in theology for as long as I’ve known there was theology. It is an absolute habit of mine to make my characters into theologians, I realise that. Every one of them” (47, 194).

Cunning’s overriding thesis, while well aimed and close to the mark, misses it slightly. Marilynne Robinson is *not* a theologian, at least not technically. Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Jürgen Moltmann, James Cone, Miroslav Volf, Sarah Coakley, etc.—these are theologians. They formally studied, taught, and made major contributions to the discipline of theology from within that vocational path. Robinson herself agrees, at least humorously, when she quipped at Wheaton College: “I have been very candid about my theological credentials, they are non-existent” and “I am *almost* a theologian” (“Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson,” April 5, 2018). Self-deprecatingly ironic, to be sure, but not entirely facetious. Cunning convincingly establishes Robinson’s sustained engagement with theology, but that does not make her a theologian. Similarly, her sustained engagement with science does not make her scientist. Therefore, *contra* Cunning, and with all due respect to both, I argue that Robinson’s writings are theologically infused and fecund, but not theology proper. This distinction does not diminish the generative powers of her novels, which have inspired, stimulated, and engendered theological scholarship, including Cunning’s helpful monograph. In that sense, Robinson operates *theologically*, but not as a *theologian*. In a *New York Review* conversation, former President Barack Obama, before his election, says to Robinson: “You’re a novelist but you’re also—can I call you a theologian?” In a literary sense, it is a fitting designation. To identify her *primarily* as a theologian, however, subtly misperceives and thus inadvertently mischaracterises her contributions to theology, which are not methodological or substantive, but rather suggestive, aesthetic, and inspirational.

As an acclaimed novelist, professor of literature, and literary critic, Robinson has given new voice and new voices to theology. Her complex characters and stories spark the theological imagination, and her theological preoccupations—grace, mystery, and the beauty of souls—invigorate and rejuvenate theology when it becomes stale, stalled, remote, or, worse, graceless. *Marilynne Robinson, Theologian of the Ordinary* demonstrates the theological richness of Robinson’s fiction and highlights its theological potential. Cuning charts new directions in Robinson studies for the imaginative to enliven the theological, to their mutual enrichment.