The role of Fiction to create Understanding between Cultures

Marilynne Robinson’s novels as exemplars:

Marilynne Robinson loves to be in the universe of religious thought and art and music, and says, “I write out of that interest, probably having no real choice. A great deal has been done, recently and historically, to obscure the beauty and the depth of religious thought. For my own pleasure, in my own way, to the extent that I can, I try to recover them and explore them. I hope other people find value in it all, without respect to their own state of belief or disbelief.”

Gilead is set in the Iowa prairies in the 1950s, in the form of a letter from Ames, an old dying Congregationalist minister, to his young son. Home covers the same time period from the perspective of the daughter of Ames’s best friend, the Presbyterian minister from up the road. Lila tells the story of Ames’s much younger wife; her transient, heathen upbringing through the Great Depression, and the theological conundrums the Christian faith presents for her.

Responses to Robinson’s novels:

Robinson’s novels are published in 26 countries, and have received many prestigious awards, including Korea’s Park Kyong-ni Prize, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, for fostering “Peace, social justice and global understanding,” and the National Humanities Medal for “grace and intelligence in writing”.

Robinson says, “I’ve never encountered a cultural barrier of the kind people always imagine I would. Muslims don’t care if I’m Christian – they knew that already. What they care about is that the phenomenon of religion itself is being explored seriously. We are not separated from the rest of the world by religion, to the extent that we are religious. We are separated from the rest of the world by secularism. And if we wanted to make ourselves comprehensible there’s no better way to do it than be deep students of religion – it doesn’t matter if it’s Judaism, or Christianity…there’s a harmonics that goes right across cultures. We make a tremendous error in thinking that knowing deeply about the religions that are available to us, culturally and historically, is something that cuts us off. It doesn’t. Quite the reverse.”

Robinson’s work is also deeply appreciated by the non-religious. Atheist literary critic Mark O’Connell says, “I’ll never share her way of seeing and thinking about the world and our place in it, but her writing has shown me the value and beauty of these perspectives.”

My Engagement with Robinson’s work:

My creative writing PhD has two components: the creative artefact and an exegesis. For my creative artefact, I have written a novel in conversation with Gilead, called The Minister’s Wife. It is the journal of a contemporary Australian woman as she navigates the clash of modern secular culture with her faith, and the demands of ministry. My exegesis examines Robinson’s use of fiction to discuss theology from an apologetic of beauty. I have twice interviewed Robinson for my research. My thesis investigates whether it is possible, in the Australian literary landscape, to write fiction that explores culture and faith from an apologetic of beauty.

References: