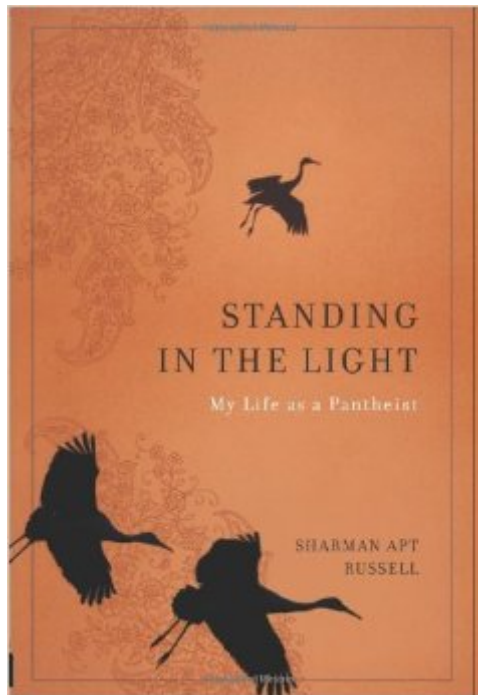


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Standing In The Light: My Life As A Pantheist



Synopsis

Everything is connected, and the web is holy. So wrote Marcus Aurelius, the starting point of Sharman Apt Russell's wise and haunting new memoir about her life as a pantheist. Perhaps no other religious philosophy is as simple and inclusive as pantheism. What is, right now, is divine; there is no god apart from the universe itself. In *Standing in the Light*, Russell explores the history of this tradition from the Stoic philosophers to the Transcendentalists while reflecting on her own life during a year spent in the mountains and desert of southwestern New Mexico. A season of banding birds, the migration of sandhill cranes, the panicked charge of a young javelina-nature provides the inspiration for meditations on subjects ranging from Buddhist thought to the death of her father, from the Quaker tradition to the sadness of children leaving home, from global warming to the ineffable loneliness of human experience. With a humane heart, an inquisitive mind, and luminescent prose, Sharman Apt Russell invites skeptics, scientists, and seekers everywhere to join her in her exploration of the soul of pantheism.

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Customer Reviews

As a Quaker seminarian and fellow New Mexican, I'm more than a little partisan to Russell's latest book, but I'd recommend her beautiful lively writing to all who sense something delightful and disturbing in their experience of nature and spirit. *Standing in the Light: My Life as a Pantheist* is a walking meditation, faithful in its survey of pantheistic thought, yet grounded in its particular place and time. The book begins not with a creed, but with a map of the Nature Conservancy's Gila River Farm in southern New Mexico, where the author lives in a "little yellow house" not far from one of

the few healthy rivers remaining in the American Southwest. Her stories of Spinoza, Whitman, Quakers, and Hindus are interlinked by a refrain that counts blackbirds, flycatchers, grosbeaks, and wrens during bird banding season. Greek philosophers are accompanied by a chorus of sandhill cranes. Roman stoics and modern cell biologists find themselves at home among stories of the author's family, or the river's mosquito fish and loach minnows. "Everything is interwoven," writes the Roman ruler Marcus Aurelius, "and the web is holy." "I am in love with Marcus Aurelius," admits Russell, two thousand years later, yet she paints her portrait of his brutal time and life with the same faithful linguistic brush, as she paints scenes of Coots pecking their baby nestlings to death. Russell has not written a sentimental book. Those looking for an idealized naturalism will not find easy comfort. Yet the view from Russell's porch remains reverent. "Standing in the Light" is a Quaker phrase that captures both the immediacy of religious experience and the difficulty of its explication. The inbreak of the divine is heralded by the ordinary - by a sidewalk and porch step, pine tree and electric wires, by the gurgling call of a raven. By walking the landscape, Russell is able to walk through thousands of years of human life, pondering the relation of the natural and the divine. One doesn't so much learn history or philosophy in this book as breathe it, smell it in damp earth after desert rain, or watch it form and shift like clouds in the New Mexico sky. "In my case, pantheism is a word whose back I ride like a man on a horse trying to get somewhere," writes Russell, "Or maybe a word more like a house, a place of shelter when it is cold and rainy, a house with big windows and a gorgeous view."

I highly recommend this book (that fifth star is saved for the next Moby-Dick). It is one of those books I read slowly. Don't let the smooth, plain-faced prose fool you. This book moves in deep water. I would read a few pages, or a few lines, or perhaps only one of Russell's finely crafted sentences then sip my coffee and contemplate my own world. The book braids an often riveting history of pantheism with memoir and nature writing. Though the latter was enjoyable, I was most intrigued by the stories of history's pantheists and author's own intimate struggle with her spiritual place in this world. The title might suggest a little fluff. The reality is quite the opposite. Russell is a scholar. A few moments with your nose in the bibliography offers a window into the extent of her journey. And just as the historical facts are well rooted in hard research, Russell's own personal journey rings with authenticity. The highest praise I can give this book is that unlike many of its ilk, it offers no easy answers (if any answers at all) to our human struggle. It instead illuminates the landscape, offers the wisdom of one life's journey, and leaves us to face the day as we have faced all our others--though perhaps heartened, and with a more informed respect for the slants of light

moving us all forward.

I never heard of Pantheism before this book. I don't know much about Quakerism, nor am I a literary scholar. But I do recognize something well-researched and well-written. I savored every page, sometimes re-reading parts to feel the richness of Sharman Russells words. I so appreciate the time she put in to sift through history and give the reader clearly-written excerpts on of past philosophers and their ideas. I especially enjoyed reading about more personal details about Marcus Aurelius's life and his love of family. I had no idea...Sharman Russell has an amazing ability to weave the past and present together, like Marcus's web interconnected. This book is rich, deep and delightful. I plan to give copies as gifts this year to family and friends who are "seeking" the light in these dark times. Sharman doesn't gives answers, because she knows there are no answers. Spirituality is not a destination. It is a journey, and she bravely shares hers with us.

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