

time, or whether the entire human race chooses in one eternal moment to disobey God.

Jacobs efficiently defends Augustine (AD 354–430) against the many attacks against him as the author of original sin, demonstrating that doctrines of original sin similar to Augustine's preceded him by at least two centuries in both the East and the West. Jacobs quickly dismisses the still widely held belief that original sin was sexual—Adam and Eve practiced free sex in Eden before their eviction. Original sin is the initial assertion of human *pride* against God. Augustine did maintain that original sin, once it existed, was *transmitted* sexually through generations, in much the same way that today we understand genetic flaws are passed on. Contrary to another common misconception about Augustine, he was adamant that the source of sin does not lie in the body but rather in the corruption of the will. In fact, he spent a great deal of his career denouncing the Manichean belief that the human body is essentially evil.

Jacobs's most original and provocative argument is that original sin has strong democratic implications. Denial of original sin leads to elitism: Take, for instance, the duchess who simply refuses to believe that she shares a common nature with the unkempt commoners of field and street, or the self-righteous people who believe that they can make themselves good by stacking up a higher pile of good deeds than of bad ones. Their underlying assumption is that some people have exempt status, or higher virtues, or brighter minds, that others lack—plainly speaking, that some people (usually *us*) are better than other people (*them*). Original sin, on the other hand, is egalitarian because it means that *everyone* is alienated from God and has an innate tendency to sin. Equally egalitarian is the belief that Christ died in order to give *everyone* the liberty to escape sin. No one person can dare to consider himself or herself better than others, and no nation or race should dare to do so either. Jacobs offers this fascinating angle on the age-old debate in a splendid book.

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The Holy Web

Reviewed by Mary Swander

TWELVE YEARS AGO, SHARMAN Apt Russell sat down on her porch in Silver City, New Mexico, and decided to become a Quaker. For Russell, adopting the Quaker religion meant not only joining a group of like-minded people whose traditions include pacifism and a commitment to right the wrongs in the Peaceable Kingdom, but finding her own definition of “standing in the Light.” Her group consists of unprogrammed Quakers and Universalists. They have no minister, no creed, no scripture. Rather, they gather in silence, “waiting—waiting for the Light.”

On her porch steps, Russell had an epiphany. She found her Light in pantheism. In middle age, with her children growing up, instilled with a sense of her own mortality by her father's early death, Russell embarked on a spiritual quest to practice and more clearly define a belief system that falls under the umbrella of paganism—any nontheistic belief that is not Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. But isn't pantheism just a New Age belief in tree spirits? Russell's friends asked. Isn't it mysticism with an experience of the supernatural? Russell answers these questions and others in her investigation of this little-understood belief.

Pantheists include a wide spectrum of thinkers—from the Greek *physici* philosophers, to practitioners of Eastern religions, to dualists, to Romantic poets, to contemporary deep ecologists and cell biologists. But the basic belief is that “the universe is an interrelated whole that deserves human reverence.” In the words of the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, “Everything is interwoven, and the web is holy.” As part of that web, Russell says, we are “called upon to celebrate our existence in the universe, no matter what and who we are, blessed or not, whole or broken, deserving or undeserving.”

Throughout her exploration of spiritual thought, she interweaves a narrative of her work as a naturalist. Her observations of herds of jave-

STANDING IN THE LIGHT:
My Life as a Pantheist.

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lina, of stinkbugs and coots, and of birds she bands for the Nature Conservancy deftly illustrate her sensitive yet unsentimental connection to the holy web. Through binoculars Russell watches sandhill cranes, the oldest known living bird species, and waits for the female crane to dance, but “with wings fully extended, she springs upward, flapping strongly, the upstroke more rapid than the down as she gains altitude.” The transitions between Russell’s theological writing and her personal observations of nature can be abrupt. But the material is compelling, and we always feel that we are in good hands with Russell, who has written with authority of the natural world in previous books, most recently *Hunger: An Unnatural History* (2005).

Yet in *Standing in the Light*, the nature writing plays a supporting role to human biography. Russell is at her best when she focuses on portraits of Marcus Aurelius, Baruch Spinoza, and Walt Whitman, all pantheistic writers. Even when faced with a besieged empire and the death of nine of his 14 children, Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180) acknowledged a beneficent universe and his role in it. Spinoza (1632–77), exiled from his Jewish community for beliefs that, in the words of an Augustinian monk reporting to the Spanish Inquisition, “reached the point of atheism,” lived out his days in a rented room in Holland, grinding glass for lenses. His posthumously published masterpiece *Ethics* offered what Spinoza saw as a logical “geometric proof” that God was identical with nature. Like Spinoza and other pantheists whose ideas contradict the dominant culture, Whitman (1819–92), a Transcendentalist, was disparaged in his time. In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), he sought to write a uniquely American poetry that celebrated humanity and the natural world.

In the large sweep of this book, Russell shows us the variety of Western thought on the holy web through the voices of D. H. Lawrence, Robinson Jeffers, Virginia Woolf, and Annie Dillard. And she investigates the many rich Eastern traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, that embrace the call to celebrate the spirituality of the present moment. She widens the lens of her binoculars so that we, too, may see the cranes dance. But she

ends not with the excitement of that sight, but with the act of opening the door to her little yellow house to reveal her serene faith in the wonders of her place on the earth.

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SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

A Real Gusher

Reviewed by Eric Hand

IT SOUNDS LIKE A NATURAL-ized urban legend, but the rumor holds water: Niagara Falls is turned up for the tourists. At night, and during the off-season, much of its flow is diverted into turbines for peak power generation. When Ginger Strand, an environmental writer from New York City, discovered this fact while taking notes on a foray to the falls, she “stopped scribbling and just grinned like a maniacal toddler.” It is the starting point for *Inventing Niagara*, a picaresque journey that explains how just about everything at Niagara Falls is engineered, Disneyfied, or deluded.

The 176-foot drop in the Niagara River between Lakes Erie and Ontario, on the border between Ontario and New York, is neither the largest nor the tallest cataract in the world. But it does occupy an outsized place in American mythology, sitting at the frontier of a young country just venturing into tourism. As Strand sees it, that virginal experience went horribly awry. Goat Island, a wooded hunk of rock in the middle of the river, became a staging area for parking lots. The Cave of the Winds, a natural cave behind the falls, was blasted away to make room for an eponymous observation deck. The history of the place has been bowdlerized; the waste from falls-powered industries, buried. Taken together, these stories say a lot about America’s relationship with nature, Strand argues, and so she sets herself to

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Beauty, Power,
and Lies.

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