

BOOK CLUB To Go!

Gilead

By Marilynne Robinson

Introduction

Gilead is a land east of the Jordan traditionally viewed as the source of a healing salve: the balm of Gilead. But in the Old Testament this same region carries less pacific associations as well, and is sometimes described as a place of war, bloodshed and iniquity. The word Gilead is also linked -- through a folk etymology -- with the idea of witnessing.

Marilynne Robinson draws on all of these associations in her new novel, which -- let's say this right now -- is so serenely beautiful, and written in a prose so gravely measured and thoughtful, that one feels touched with grace just to read it. *Gilead* possesses the quiet ineluctable perfection of Flaubert's *A Simple Heart* as well as the moral and emotional complexity of Robert Frost's deepest poetry. There's nothing flashy in these pages, and yet one regularly pauses to reread sentences, sometimes for their beauty, sometimes for their truth -- "Adulthood is a wonderful thing, and brief. You must be sure to enjoy it while it lasts."

Robinson's narrator is that rarity in fiction -- a thoroughly good man. As the Rev. John Ames approaches his 77th birthday (and an impending death from heart disease), he decides to record something of his family's history and his own inner life. The result, he trusts, may be of value to his young son, now 7, as well as a testament of his love for the boy and the boy's mother, the unexpected blessing of his old age. After Ames lost his first wife in childbirth, he never remarried but instead devoted himself utterly to his parishioners. But one day a young woman, a stranger, entered his church and the 67-year-old minister fell in love with her, staunchly saying nothing because of the disparity between their ages. Then one day . . . but let Rev. Ames tell the story, as he does in this long letter to his son:

"I came near alarming myself with the thought of the loneliness stretching ahead of me, and the new bitterness of it, and how I hated the secretiveness and the renunciation that honor and decency required of me and that common sense enforced on me. But when I looked up, your mother was watching me, smiling a little, and she touched my hand and she said, 'You'll be just fine.' . . ."

"She began to come to the house when some of the other women did, to take the curtains away to wash, to defrost the icebox. And then she started coming by herself to

tend the gardens. She made them very fine and prosperous. And one evening when I saw her there, out by the wonderful roses, I said, 'How can I repay you for all this?'"

"And she said, 'You ought to marry me.' And I did."

(Washington Post)

About the Author

Marilynne Robinson was born in 1947 in Sandpoint, Idaho, where she grew up and attended high school. After graduating from Brown University in 1966, she enrolled in the graduate program in English at the University of Washington. While writing her dissertation, Robinson began work on her first novel, *Housekeeping* (1981). Now regarded by many critics as an American classic, *Housekeeping* tells the haunting story of two girls growing up in rural Idaho in the mid-1900s. It addresses themes of loss and survival, transience, and coming-of-age.

After the publication of *Housekeeping*, Robinson began writing essays and book reviews for *Harper's*, *Paris Review*, and *The New York Times Book Review*. She also started teaching, serving as writer-in-residence and visiting professor at several colleges and universities, including the University of Kent in England, Amherst College, and the University of Massachusetts. From an essay she wrote for *Harper's*, entitled "Bad News from Britain," Robinson wrote the controversial book *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State and Nuclear Pollution* (1989), a finalist for the National Book Award. The book explored the environmental degradation caused by Sellafield, the British nuclear reprocessing plant.

In the tradition of 19th century novelists who turned to essays, Robinson published a critically acclaimed collection in 1998 called *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*. Through essays on topics ranging from John Calvin to Darwinism to Freud and 20th century psychologists, the book examines and critiques the ideas our culture has handed down to us. Kathleen Norris praised the collection as "a valuable contribution to American life and letters," while *The New York Times Book Review* observed that "one of Robinson's great merits as an essayist is her refusal to take her opinions secondhand. Her book is a goad to renewed curiosity." Robinson is widely regarded as one of America's best contemporary writers.

(Seattle Arts and Lectures)

Reviews

“The American writer Marilynne Robinson has been revered for years as the author whose astonishing debut, *Housekeeping*, published in 1981, was an instant classic. Now, after 24 years, there's finally a second novel by Robinson, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In *Gilead*, Robinson is addressing the plight of serious people with a calm-eyed reminder of the liberal philosophical and religious traditions of a nation whose small towns "were once the bold ramparts meant to shelter peace". – *The Guardian*

“It's been 23 years since Marilynne Robinson published her first novel, *Housekeeping*, so to say the publication of her second novel is long-awaited is a bit of an understatement. It's certainly a relief to fans who thought she might go the way of Harper Lee, as a one-masterpiece wonder (not counting Robinson's published essays) . . . Readers will be delighted to know that Robinson has lost none of her edge when it comes to poetic prose. *Gilead* is full of rich, complex language, as well as plunges into intricate philosophical and spiritual introspections. There's also an intriguing plot turn and characters who harbor beguiling histories. *Gilead* is a refuge for readers longing for that increasingly rare work of fiction, one that explores big ideas while telling a good story.” – *San Francisco Chronicle*

Further Reading

O Tender Mercies by Rosellen Brown

In Sunlight, in a Beautiful Garden by Kathleen Cambor

Quarantine by Jim Crace

Jim the Boy by Tony Earley

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides

Beloved by Toni Morrison

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. What was your perception of the narrator in the opening paragraphs? In what ways did your understanding of him change throughout the novel? Did John's own perception of his life seem to evolve as well?
2. Biblical references to Gilead (a region near the Jordan River) describe its plants as having healing properties. The African-American spiritual, "There Is a Balm in Gilead" equates Jesus with this balm. According to some sources, the Hebrew origin of the word simply means "rocky area". Do these facts make Gilead an ironic or symbolically accurate title for the novel?
3. The vision experienced by John's grandfather is a reminder that the Christ he loves identifies utterly with the oppressed and afflicted, whom he must therefore help to free. He is given his mission, like a biblical prophet. This kind of vision was reported by many abolitionists, and they acted upon it as he did. What guides John in discerning his own mission?
4. How does John seem to feel about his brother's atheism in retrospect? What accounts for Edward's departure from the church? What enabled John to retain his faith?
5. The rituals of communion and baptism provide many significant images throughout the novel. What varied meanings do John and his parishioners ascribe to them? What makes him courageous enough to see the sacred in every aspect of life?
6. One of the most complex questions for John to address is the notion of salvation — how it is defined, and how (or whether) God determines who receives it. How do the novel's characters convey assorted possibilities about this topic? What answers would you have given to the questions John faces regarding the fate of souls and the nature of pain in the world?
7. Marilynne Robinson included several quotations from Scripture and hymns; John expresses particular admiration for Isaac Watts, an 18th century English minister whose hymns were widely adopted by various Protestant denominations. Do you believe that certain texts are divinely inspired? What is the role of metaphor in communicating about spiritual matters?
8. Discuss the literary devices used in this novel, such as its epistolary format, John's finely honed voice, and the absence of conventional chapter breaks (save for a long pause before Jack's marriage is revealed). How would you characterize *Gilead's* narrative structure?

9. What commentary does John offer about the differences between his two wives? Do you agree with Jack when he calls John's marriage unconventional?
10. John describes numerous denominations in his community, including Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers and Congregationalists. What can you infer from the presence of such variety? Or does the prevalence of Protestants mean that there is little religious variety in *Gilead*?
11. Discuss the author's choice of setting for *Gilead*. Is there a difference between the ways religion manifests itself in small towns versus urban locales? What did you discover about the history of Iowa's rural communities and about the strain of radicalism in Midwestern history? Did it surprise you?
12. Abolition drew John's grandfather to the Midwest, and the novel concludes at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement. In what ways does this evolution of race relations mirror the changes John has witnessed in society as a whole?

(Book Browse)