



Gilead

By Marilynne Robinson

First published in 2004

Genre & subjects

Fathers and sons fiction

Reminiscing in old age fiction

Synopsis

In 1956, toward the end of Reverend John Ames's life, he begins a letter to his young son, an account of himself and his forebears. Ames is the son of an Iowan preacher and the grandson of a minister who, as a young man in Maine, saw a vision of Christ bound in chains and came west to Kansas to fight for abolition: He "preached men into the Civil War," then, at age fifty, became a chaplain in the Union Army, losing his right eye in battle.

Reverend Ames writes to his son about the tension between his father—an ardent pacifist—and his grandfather, whose pistol and bloody shirts, concealed in an army blanket, may be relics from the fight between the abolitionists and those settlers who wanted to vote Kansas into the union as a slave state. And he tells a story of the sacred bonds between fathers and sons, which are tested in his tender and strained relationship with his namesake, John Ames Boughton, his best friend's wayward son.

Gilead is the long-hoped-for second novel by one of our finest writers, a hymn of praise and lamentation to the God-haunted existence that Reverend Ames loves passionately, and from which he will soon part.

Author biography

Marilynne Robinson was born and raised in Idaho, where her family has lived for several generations. She received a B.A. from Brown University in 1966 and a Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Washington in 1977.

Housekeeping, her first novel, was published in 1981 and won the PEN/Hemingway Award for First Fiction and the American Academy and Institute's Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award. *Mother Country*, an examination of Great Britain's role in radioactive environmental pollution, was published in 1989. Robinson published *Gilead* in 2004 and *Home* in 2008. *Home* won the 2009 Orange Prize. She lives in Iowa City, Iowa, with her family.

Discussion starters

- 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?
- 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?

- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- Marilynne Robinson included several quotations from Scripture and hymns; John expresses particular admiration for Isaac Watts, an eighteenth-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?
- 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?
- What commentary does John offer about the differences between his two wives? Do you agree with Jack when he calls John's marriage unconventional?
- 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?
- What might John think of current religious controversies in America? In what ways are his worries and joys relevant to twenty-first-century life?
- John grapples mightily with his distrust of Jack. Do you believe John writes honestly about the nature of that distrust? What issues contribute to these struggles with his namesake?
- Discuss the author's choice of setting for *Gilead*. Is there a difference between the way 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?

- 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?
- Is *Gilead* a microcosm for American society in general?
- In his closing lines, John offers a sort of benediction to his son, praying that he will "grow up a brave man in a brave country" and "find a way to be useful." Do you predict a future in which his hope came true? What do you imagine John experiences in his final sleep?
- Robinson's beloved debut novel, *Housekeeping*, features a narrator with a voice just as distinctive as John's. Do the longings conveyed in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* bear any resemblance to one another? How might John have counselled Ruth?

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