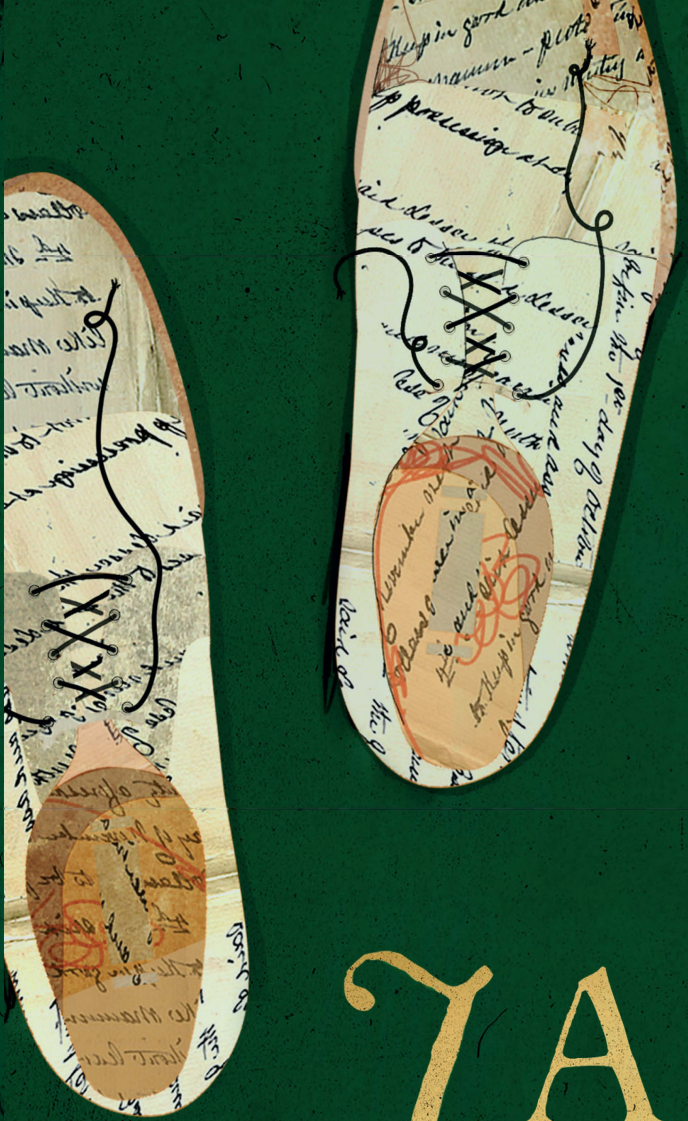

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JACK

A reader's guide to Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead Quartet*

MARILYNNE

ROBINSON

JACK

virago

Contents

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Marilynne Robinson

Regarded as one of America's most important, graceful and original writers, Marilynne Robinson is loved for her deep humanity and prized for her generous intellectual rigour. In many ways an uncategorisable writer, she will be forever cherished as the creator of some of the most memorable fictional characters, including Jack Boughton, John Ames and Lila Ames from her *Gilead* quartet, and Lucille and Ruth from *Housekeeping*.

Marilynne Robinson has spoken of her enduring relationship with them: 'I have found that when you write a novel, a character never actually leaves you from that point on.'

Born Marilynne Summers in 1943 in Sandpoint, Idaho, the town she used for the backdrop of her first novel, *Housekeeping*, she is the youngest of two. Her father worked in the timber industry and her mother kept home for the family. When Marilynne was young, her brother declared that he would be an artist and she would be a poet. David Summers became a Renaissance art scholar and painter, and Marilynne dedicated her collection of essays *When I*

Was a Child I Read Books to him, 'the first and best of my teachers'. She was brought up Presbyterian but became a Congregationalist, strongly influenced by John Calvin.

She graduated from Brown University, where she studied American Literature, and while she was at the University of Washington, studying for a PhD in English (on Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 2*), her first novel about two little lost sisters began to take shape. She married and had two sons, though later divorced, and wrote *Housekeeping* in the evenings after the children went to bed. Motherhood influenced that first novel: 'It changes your sense of life, your sense of yourself.' She showed her manuscript to a friend who, unbeknownst to her, sent it to Ellen Levine, a New York literary agent. The agent loved it but took it on with the caveat that she thought it would be hard to find a publisher. She did find one in Farrar Straus and Giroux (and Faber in the UK), who said they loved it but that it would be hard to sell. *Housekeeping* was published in 1980 and an early review by Anatole Broyard in the *New York Times* turned out to be only the first to laud this masterpiece:

'You can feel in the book a gathering voluptuous release of confidence, a delighted surprise at the unexpected capacities of language, a close, careful fondness for people that we thought only saints felt.'

The novel went on to win the PEN/Hemingway Award for debut fiction and was shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize.

It looked like an exciting new career had been launched. But Marilynne Robinson had other things to occupy her.

Instead of writing another novel, she turned to years of deep study of political and theological subjects and began to write non-fiction. Her first, written during a brief spell living in England, was *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution* (1989), an indictment of the nuclear power industry. Then followed

The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought (1998) on, among others, Darwin, Calvin and Nietzsche.

In 1991 she was invited to teach at the famous Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa; founded in the 1930s, this was America's first creative writing degree programme. She remained there for twenty-five years, dividing her time between Iowa and a home in Saratoga Springs in upstate New York.

Essay-writing, teaching, reading, reviewing and studying she did plenty of, but she eschewed fiction. Until, two decades after the publication of *Housekeeping* Marilynne Robinson was spending several days in a largely empty hotel in Provincetown, Massachusetts, waiting for her grown sons to join her for Christmas, and found herself 'in a little room with Emily Dickinson light pouring in through the windows and the ocean roaring beyond. I had a spiral notebook, and I started thinking about this situation and the voice. And I started writing.'

Gilead was the extraordinary result. Published in 2004, it was widely praised throughout North America, Britain, Australia and Europe and went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction It was translated into over thirty languages. Agents, publishers and readers wondered, what next?

The answer, to everyone's surprise, came just four years later, when Marilynne returned to the fictional town of Gilead in Iowa in *Home* (2008).

'After I write a novel or a story, I miss the characters – I feel sort of bereaved. So I was braced for the experience after *Gilead*. Then I thought, If these characters are so strongly in my mind, why not write them? With Jack and old Boughton especially, and with Glory also, I felt like there were whole characters that had not been fully realized in Ames's story. I couldn't really see the point in abandoning them.'

Home won the 2009 Orange Prize for Fiction (now the Women's Prize).

Marilynne continued to write essays and lectures, which were collected in *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (2010) and *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (2012).

But it seemed that the town of Gilead had not released its creator just yet, and in 2014 she told the poignant and fascinating story of John Ames's wife in *Lila*.

Essay collections *The Givenness of Things* (2015) and *What Are We Doing Here?* (2018) followed.

The Gilead trilogy, as it was then, has been forever haunted by dear Jack. Boughton's precious son, Glory's brother and John Ames's namesake, Jack has raised hopes, created disappointment and left sadness in his wake throughout his life. He is the wayward son of Gilead, a ne'er do well, a man to test the patience and humanity of all he encounters. But he is also deeply loved.

And now we are rewarded with Jack's novel . Set in the 1940s, just a few years before *Gilead*, it is a moving love story between Della, a black woman, and Jack, at a time when interracial relationships were illegal in more than half of the United States.

Though not in Iowa. Legally, Jack *could* bring Della home to Gilead. However …

Jack, the book that makes this extraordinary series a quartet, is about love and forgiveness. Marilynne Robinson has given us a beautiful and poignant novel that asks us to understand the true definition of grace.

Marilynne Robinson and Her Awards

'There's something about finding out that your interior life is acceptable to people on a wide scale that you simply have to make a revision of yourself. You think, What a surprise. The question of how private you are, how inward you are. All that seems suddenly to change when you find out that people are reading your stuff in China.'

New York Times Magazine, October 2014

PEN/Hemingway Award for *Housekeeping*

'Frankly, I had no thoughts about such things at all. I thought I was writing an unpublishable book – too private, too uneventful, too interested in language and metaphor. I didn't think of *Housekeeping* as a debut, because at that time I wasn't imagining a second novel … It was a long time ago, and the world of prizes was as new to me as everything else, so I don't think I realized what a blessing this would be for the book.'

Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Gilead*

'If you were to say to someone that you were to write a book about a minister dying in Iowa in 1956 and that he would spend a certain time on theological reflections, they would not think this was a book that would necessarily … sell.'

'A Pulitzer Prize is very reassuring, and that's a fact.'

The Orange Prize for Fiction for *Home*

'It is a wonderful institution and it's certainly the most elegant, brilliant platform for women's literature that I can really imagine … I just write what's on my mind and I'm extremely grateful for the fact that other people seem to find it meaningful to them also; it seems almost miraculous to me.'

National Book Critics Circle Award for *Lila*

'Another miraculous and momentous American portrait … glorious language shot through with light and grace.'

The Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction

'The writers that have always been most influential to me have been early American writers such as Walt Whitman and Melville. To a great extent, they have defined for me what language could do. So I really feel very much indebted to them and happy to be associated with them.'

National Medal of Arts and Humanities presented by President Obama 2012

'For her grace and intelligence in writing. With moral strength and lyrical clarity, Dr Robinson's novels and non-fiction have traced our ethical connections to people in our lives, explored the world we inhabit, and defined universal truths about what it means to be human.'

The Novels

'I love my characters, which seems to me the only justice I can do them, since they have only the faults and failings I give them.'

Christianity and Literature, spring 2009

The main characters of the *Gilead* quartet:

John Ames,
preacher, married to Lila Ames

Robert Boughton,
preacher, widower

Jack Boughton,
son, jack-of-all-trades and master of …,
married to Della Miles

Glory Boughton,
ex-teacher, daughter

Della Miles,
teacher, married to Jack Boughton

Marilynne Robinson's novels have a particular flavour. They are all set in a small town, all strongly driven by singular characters; they explore with a wonderfully gentle and wise humour what ordinary lives feel and look like. On one level they are circumscribed stories: limited landscapes, few characters, no driving plot, small concerns … And yet, and yet … In the particular is the world, and what these novels are about is no less than the universal concerns of almost everyone on this earth. 'Ordinary things have always seemed numinous to me,' she says, and amply demonstrates that in her fiction.

Character is her lodestar: 'I feel strongly that action is generated out of character. And I don't give anything higher priority than character.' From the intricacies of character she spins her novels.

'But then literature is full of whale hunts and sword fights and wars in heaven. My fascinations are what they are. I love loyalty and trust, and courtesy, and kindness, and sensitivity. They are beautiful things in my mind. They require alertness and self-discipline and patience. And they are qualities that sustain my interest in my characters.'

But she also talks about how human experience 'does not resolve into being comfortable in the world … including doubt and sorrow. We experience pain and difficulty as failure instead of saying, I will pass through this … We should think of our humanity as a privilege.'

These qualities, these everyday problems and gratifications are, in the strong, lyrical, metaphorical prose that Marilynne has made her own, what makes her work so powerful and touching. At the core of her writing is absolute respect for people. She has often talked of the awe in any human interaction and the richness of our

lives through such encounters, and our attempts to understand one another through observing 'a music of words and hesitations'.

As with most novelists, she is a little mysterious about where she draws her inspiration from, but she mentions often how a voice is where she starts and that after years of reading theology, without any idea of writing another novel, John Ames of *Gilead* arrived in her head. He was a fully formed man with a particular cadence and attitude; gentle, a little puzzled by the life he'd been given and was soon to leave. He was a man with complexity that she wanted to get to know better. And the same thing happened with Housekeeping. She says she never forms a plan, the voices and the stories 'just come to me':

'[My writing] is just voice-governed. When I think of a character like Lila, then I have to think of the kind of language that would be available to her. And the same with John Ames: he has his own little world of dialogue – or large world, I should say. I don't have much sense of myself as a writer apart from what I write. It's the voice that's in my mind that governs what I write.'

Marilynne does very little in the way of revising. Instead of going over and over a scene or passage until she gets it right, when something is not going well, she stops. She walks, thinks, muses and only when the voice has returned with clarity, no matter how long it takes, only then, does she continue. The revision is in the mind, not worked out on the page.

Original Thinking

'The question always is, how can I know what I need to know, how well can I trust what I seem to know, how well can I articulate what seems to me needs to be said?'

National Endowment for the Humanities, 2012

When Marilynne finished her doctorate, after she completed *Housekeeping*, she says she became aware of the fact that she was full of educated, received, conventional wisdom. She knew what an educated person knew, felt what a schooled person felt and worried she was espousing the views of others.

It made her want to start again, to re-educate herself. She began years of studying original texts: the Bible, Marx, Shakespeare, Darwin, Erasmus and particularly Calvin. She wanted to know how we all, and particularly how she, came to understanding. She believes in the enlarging and enlivening power of the written word, that 'culture and education are basically, at their best, meant to make us aware', but she is insistent that original thinking starts from striving for real thinking and real knowledge. And she says she had to do this for herself, 'to be of my own mind in some degree, and that was a feeling I had to achieve before I could enjoy writing fiction'.

We can see this in her attitude to the (lucky) students she taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She tried to make them first unlearn what they'd learned:

'I don't try to teach technique … I try to make writers actually see what they have written, where the strength is … I don't try to teach technique … What they have to do first is interact in a serious way with what they're putting on a page. When people are fully engaged with what they're writing, a striking change occurs, a discipline of language and imagination.'

And it is this same rigour of deep, original thinking that she brings to her essays and to her critique of the casual and damaging ideologies that sway us and our politicians.

'The thing that bothers me is that we are too inclined to be passive, to have an induced passivity in our thinking, as if somebody else were responsible for our thinking. We try to find out who to line up behind, and then, invariably – I'm speaking of liberals, of course – we see that the choices that person is dealing with do not allow ideal solutions … we put up heroes, we get disillusioned with them, and that excuses us from the responsibility even to think about the actual seriousness of the problems that they might in fact be facing … And we get some sort of moral satisfaction out of the act of abandonment.'

Landscapes

'Every time I write a book, in the literal sense it changes my mind. It always seems to me as if I've altered my sense of the world.'

Financial Times, December 2014

Housekeeping was born in Idaho. *Gilead*, *Home*, *Lila*, and *Jack* come from Iowa.

Marilynne Robinson was born in a sparsely populated town in a sparsely populated state.

Sandpoint is in northern Idaho, and situated on Lake Pend Oreille, nodding towards the border with Alberta, Canada. Idaho stretches south to Utah and Nevada; its entire population is less than two million.

'I was very fortunate to have so much space and wilderness around me, so much to look at and think about. That landscape is distinctive in a way that makes every other landscape striking by comparison. Growing up there made the world interesting to me, made me alert to place as a potent part of life.'

She grew up with freezing winters, warm summers, acres of wilderness and lots of silence – which perfectly suited her.

'It is true that towns in much of the state have a tentative quality, a frontier sense of being an outpost in a vast land. There is a strange beauty in this, something suggestive of the human situation, that I wanted to evoke in *Housekeeping*.'

Marilynne then went nearly three thousand miles east to Brown University, an Ivy League university in Providence, Rhode Island – which must have been a huge change for a small-town western girl – then to the far west, to Washington State and university in Seattle.

After living on the east coast, she went in 1991 to teach at the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the Midwest, miles from her birthplace and from her east-coast life.

Iowa is in the Midwest. The Middle West, as Marilynne always calls it, is often regarded by those of the east and west coasts as the middle of nowhere, a place of no culture. Despite being the home of the prestigious writing school, the inhabitants of her new state went even further and said it had no history. Well, thought Marilynne, 'you know, you just can't have two or three people gathered together without generating history. So I started reading everything I could find.'

What she found was a proud but forgotten history. She discovered that small colleges had been founded by abolitionists, creating integrated schools even before the American Civil Warwhich was battled from 1861 to 1865 between the northern and the southern states over the enslavement of black people. And Iowa also had an important part to play in that war.

Gilead, which Genesis tells us means 'hill of testimony', is a fictional place, but it is thought to be based on town of Tabor in the south-west corner of Iowa, which was founded by abolitionist Christian clergy. John Todd, a conductor on the Underground Railroad which helped move enslaved people to places of safety in the north, made his home in Tabor. The famous abolitionist John Brown planned his liberation raids on Kansas and Virginia from the town.

This is the history threaded into *Gilead*. John Ames's grandfather, a preacher, carried out raids with John Brown and encouraged his parishioners into the Civil War. Ames's father became a pacifist. But by the time John Ames is telling his son the story, this history has been all but forgotten by the townspeople, and Ames himself has to acknowledge that he has not honoured his forebearers in defending racial justice: 'These little towns were once the bold ramparts meant to shelter such peace.'

Sarah Churchwell, the academic, wrote, 'The town of Gilead thus comes to stand, in its amnesia, isolation, good intentions and broken covenants, not only for the middle west, but as an image of America itself … a failure of care always marks a failure of the American dream'.

'In particular, the *Gilead* novels can be read as an act of national and cultural recovery, resurrecting powerful ghosts to remind America of a forgotten moral lineage.'

Jack is a struggling man who falls in love with a wonderful woman, but theirs is a relationship against the grain of 1950s society and few, including both their families, are able to wish them well. Even though Iowa was one of the states in which interracial marriage was legal (the anti-miscegenation law was not outlawed in all states until 1967), tragically for our prodigal son, his home town is not a place where Jack feels he can bring his black wife and mixed-race child to safety. The civil rights movement is beginning, but not in Gilead.

Alone and Loneliness

‘Books are good company.
Nothing is more human than a book.’

Paris Review, fall 2008

There was a very strong tendency among people to be kind of isolated. More hermits per capita than you'd find in most places,' says Marilynne of her home state, Idaho. She defines loneliness not as a problem but as a condition, a passion of a kind and, for her, a privilege. Perhaps she was being prepared to be a writer at school.

'We were positively encouraged to create for ourselves minds we would want to live with. I had teachers articulate that to me: "You have to live with your mind your whole life." You build your mind, so make it into something you want to live with. Nobody has ever said anything more valuable to me.'

But Marilynne's most beloved characters – Reverend Ames, Reverend Boughton, Lila, Jack, Della – struggle with being alone in their minds or in their lives until their loneliness is mitigated by the companionship of another human being. It is Glory's tragedy that her loneliness will be part of her life for ever.

The belief in the value of human beings is central to Marilynne Robinson's thinking and she carries that belief through to her fiction. She rails against the idea that we anchor meaning in experiences, when valuing of another is what is crucial: 'Without the concept of worth, there's no concept of meaning.'

The beauty and the tenderness of her novels is often found in the clumsy attempts people make to understand one another, to try to want to make things better. Can we forgive? Do we even know how?

At the heart of Jack's tale is the story of the prodigal son. The wayward child who returns to the fold and is joyfully embraced and completely forgiven by his father.

Or is it? The writer Colm Tóibín, a great admirer of Marilynne's work, ponders this:

'As Jack, despite doing nothing to make anyone like him, continues to bask in the love of his sister and his father, a reader might feel that this is a retelling of the story of the Prodigal Son. But slowly it becomes clear that Robinson, with infinite subtlety and care, is dealing with a stranger and more dramatic subject: the matter of predestination.'

And this is a question on which his father will fail Jack. Possibly because he loves Jack too much and as a result cannot or will not see the truth of his son's pain and needs. In fact, it is Jack who has to accept the truth of his frail and fallible father.

Marilynne says:

'I have changed the terms of the parable … I really see this as a parable about grace, not forgiveness, since the father runs to meet his son and embraces him before the son can even ask to be forgiven. Or it is about love, which is probably a synonym for grace. The prodigal can leave his old life behind him. Jack brings his to Gilead – in the form of loss and loneliness and also hope, and a painful and precious secret … the issue between him and his father is not one of forgiveness … He comes home seeking help in restoring a good life he had made, which has been destroyed by the pressures of law and social custom … he is bringing judgment home with him, and he finds himself continually having to forgive his father and to love him graciously, that is, despite all.'

A good man doesn't always look and behave in obvious ways. There are many ways to be honourable.

Before *Jack*

Gilead

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award

In 1956, towards the end of the Reverend John Ames's life, he begins a letter to his young son:

'I told you last night that I might be gone sometime … You reached up and put your fingers on my lips and gave me that look I never in my life saw on any other face besides your mother's. It's a kind of furious pride, very passionate and stern. I'm always a little surprised to find my eyebrows unsinged after I've suffered one of those looks. I will miss them.'

'A visionary work of dazzling originality'

– Robert McCrum, *Observer*

'Writing of this quality, with an authority as unforced as the perfect pitch in music, is rare and carries with it a sense almost of danger'

– Jane Shilling, *Sunday Telegraph*

'A beautiful novel: wise, tender and perfectly measured'

– Sarah Waters

'A great work of literature'

– John de Falbe, *Daily Telegraph*

'A masterpiece'

– *Sunday Times*

Home

Winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction

Jack Boughton – prodigal son – has been gone twenty years. He returns home seeking refuge and to make peace with the past. A bad boy from childhood, an alcoholic who cannot hold down a job, Jack is perpetually at odds with his surroundings and with his traditionalist father, though he remains Boughton's most beloved child. His sister Glory has also returned, fleeing her own mistakes, to care for their dying father.

A moving book about families, about love and death and faith, Home is unforgettable. It is a masterpiece.

'One of the greatest living novelists'

– Bryan Appleyard, *Sunday Times*

'A luminous, profound and moving piece of writing. There is no contemporary American novelist whose work I would rather read'

– Michael Arditti, *Independent*

'Her novels are replete with a sense of felt life, with a deep and abiding sympathy for her characters and a full understanding of their inner lives'

– Colm Tóibín

'So finely wrought … Utterly haunting'

– Jane Shilling, *Sunday Telegraph*

Lila

Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award

Lila, homeless and alone after years of roaming the countryside, steps inside a small-town Iowa church – the only available shelter from the rain – and ignites a romance and a debate that will shape her life.

'Robinson is frequently named as one of America's most significant writers … Her questioning books express wonder: they are enlightening, in the best sense, passionately contesting our facile, recycled understanding of ourselves and of our world'

– Sarah Churchwell, *Guardian*

'Lila is the work of an exceptional novelist'

– Rowan Williams, *New Statesman*

'A sumptuous, graceful and ultimately life-affirming novel'

– James Kidd, *Independent on Sunday*

'Great and luminous beauty … a book that leaves the reader feeling what can only be called exaltation'

– Neel Mukherjee, *Independent*

Questions for Readers and Reading Groups

1. Can we know each other? 'I don't think in an essential way that ever happens. I think books are so fascinating in a way, because they bring you one step closer.' Do you agree with Marilynne Robinson? Do we know people in books better those we live with?
2. How does Marilynne Robinson create a specific world in *Gilead* – a small American town with small-town people – that speaks to people everywhere?
3. Jack's struggle with predestination is fascinating and tragic. He's given up the church, so why do you think he seeks answers from preachers?
4. Do you think of Jack as a prodigal son?
5. What do you think Marilynne Robinson is telling us about marriage in her novels?
6. Marilynne Robinson gives her characters safe places, but how does she make the reader highly aware of the racism in St Louis as a permanent and frightening backdrop?
7. Marilynne Robinson's intent in her novels is serious but she also has a generous, gentle humour. Where does the humour reside?
8. Lila and Jack are outsiders and seem to find a mutual understanding as a result. What does that say about the town of Gilead?
9. Marilynne Robinson has said that it intrigued her to try to write the story of a good man in *Gilead*. Is it harder to write about goodness?
10. Is there a character you would love Marilynne Robinson to write more about?

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Q: Do you think that Jack's is the last voice from *Gilead* that will inhabit you, or might there be others to come?

Marilynne Robinson: On the basis of previous experience, I really can't say.

New Yorker, July 2020