

Book Review

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GILEAD by Marilynne Robinson. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004. 247 pages.

Marilynne Robinson is a new discovery for this reader. However, that doesn't mean she is new on the literary scene, not at all. The reviews that accompanied the publication of *Gilead* at the end of 2004, as well as the brief note about the author on the book's dust jacket, note that she wrote the "modern classic," *Housekeeping*. It is perhaps a sign of my limited horizons that I had never heard of the modern classic which, having now read it, I indeed understand it to be. Those who read *Gilead* will most likely return to the book dealer to find a newly issued copy of the earlier novel that was published in 1981.

For the readers of the *Journal for Preachers*, of course, the most obvious appeal of *Gilead* is that the protagonist is a minister. The Reverend John Ames has our attention and interest right away because he is one of us, or at least he is one of the faithful of the previous generation. A Congregationalist, he has spent his entire career serving the church at Gilead, Iowa, which his father served before him. Ames' library has a number of the books that are on the shelves in our own studies, or once were. He has memories and observations on the sacraments, notes about the labors, joys, frustrations, and disappointments of preaching, numerous referrals to his practice of prayer, introspection on his ability to forgive. Ames' is truly the examined life.

In the summer of 1956, John Ames has been told he has a heart condition that cannot be treated. Ames' first wife and daughter had died in childbirth when both his wife and he were in their twenties. Noting that members of the congregation he served in Gilead had numerous nieces and sisters-in-law in neighboring communities, as single ministers are still apt to find, the young widower declined romantic involvement and devoted himself to his work. There were certain women in the congregation who came to the manse from time to time to defrost the icebox and to leave pies and casseroles. His standard of cooking for himself seems to have centered on the fried egg sandwich. His closest friend, the neighboring Presbyterian minister to whom he always refers as "Old Boughton," was partnered in a long marriage with a house full of children. Ames enjoyed the fullness of Boughton's home, and envies him the life of marriage and parenthood as much as his Calvinist spirit would allow him to envy anyone. As a sign of their long and deep friendship, the Boughtons name one of their younger children John Ames Boughton, which comes as a stunning surprise to Ames as he officiates at the new baby's baptism.

When John Ames was sixty-seven years old, he fell deeply and surprisingly in love with a much younger woman. They were married and became the parents of a son who was born when Ames was sixty-nine or seventy. Ames' diagnosis spurs him to address a long letter to this child. His purpose is to tell the boy, whose name is not used, all the family and personal lore he might have picked up from his father had the child completed his growing years with his father living. The book is not arranged in chapters, but is a series of journal entries during the summer of the second Eisenhower-Stevenson election. We learn about Ames' grandfather, an abolitionist minister and a

follower of John Brown, who had come out to the prairie to participate in the fight to bring the territories into the union as free, rather than slave, states. The first John Ames had preached his congregation into the Civil War and had lost an eye in battle. The second John Ames, also a minister, had become a pacifist and lived in strong reaction to his father's bellicosity. The third John Ames, the one reminiscing for his young son, lives with the tensions of his two predecessors, yet somehow makes no connection between the strong feelings of his grandfather and father to the incident of the "nuisance fire" at the Negro church and the removal of the black congregation some years before to Chicago. John Ames' congregation has given his family a television set, which seems to Ames more two-dimensional than radio when he keeps up with baseball. The joys of summer, of sitting on porches, of visiting with neighbors, of watching his little boy play, of enjoying the love, companionship, and solicitude of his wife, all these and more are noted as Ames ponders the joys and mysteries of life which he is loathe to leave behind.

Old Boughton, two years younger than John Ames, is in failing health. His wife has died, his children are grown and gone, and he is feeling the burdens of age. His daughter Glory, single after an unhappy marriage, has come home to care for him, and is joined by Ames' namesake, John Ames (Jack) Boughton. Ah, there's the rub! Jack Boughton is the prodigal son who has left a trail of misery and heartbreak, and yet he is the child of whom everything can be forgiven. He is a man of great personal charm and good looks, although he is now forty-three and, as Ames notes, is looking a little weary. Ames has never told his wife or their son of the existence of his namesake. His little boy is fascinated by this stranger who seems to share so much history with him and who engages him to play catch, calls him, "Little Brother," and who joins him and Ames' wife in the pew while the old man preaches. It has been easy for Ames to overlook telling his wife and son about Jack Boughton. There is too much sadness, too many talents poorly used, and disappointments still somehow too tender to be dug up.

The reader has the feeling that Jack Boughton may be a little too close to Mrs. Ames and the boy, that given his history he may be a predator. He tries to have several conversations with Ames—particularly one on predestination, in which Ames feels that he is being baited—and which reinforce his ill feelings toward his namesake. Ames is responsible and pastoral and tries to reinitiate his conversations with Jack. Without revealing the outcome, it is enough to say that Jack had come home to talk with his father about a matter, a reprise of the concerns of earlier generations in which he is now deeply personally involved, and found his father too weak to upset. John Ames becomes his confidant, and the resolution of the novel comes as Ames records for his son what Jack Boughton has confided to him. "You might wonder about my pastoral discretion, writing this all out. Well, on one hand it is the way I have of considering things. On the other hand, he is a man about whom you may never hear one good word, and I just don't know another way to let you see the beauty there is in him."

Marilynne Robinson teaches at the distinguished University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She says that when she first moved to Iowa City she began to read histories of the locale and the region. Robinson was impressed with the number and strength of the Calvinist pioneers who came from New England and the old Midwest to strengthen the abolitionist spirit in the territories. The grandfather in *Gilead* is based on one of these historic characters, the Reverend John Todd of Tabor, Iowa. Todd's house has a historical marker on it today noting that it was a station on the Underground Railroad.

He was associated with John Brown. “The great fortress of American racism,” says Robinson, “is that we think that countries full of white people are rational and civilized.” Asked what she was doing in the twenty-three years between novels, Robinson notes that she has been writing non-fiction. Two collections of essays, *Mother Country* and *The Death of Adam*, address ecological issues. In a reading and interview on March 11, 2005, at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., Robinson said, “I don’t choose my obsessions. They befall me. I wrote *Gilead* in about two and a half years because it presented itself to me.” She explains, “When you write you raise real questions for yourself for which you do not have the answers....If you force the answers your writing is dead. If you force a solution you’ll go wrong. If you wait for a solution it will come.” That sounds like preaching, doesn’t it?

And this last: “The writer has the same obligation to her or his characters that God has to God’s creations, that in the creation God honors the creatures’ dignity and sacredness.”

Marilynne Robinson’s characters in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* have the dignity and sacredness she intended. Robinson is a worthy, indeed poetic, expansion of our horizons.