

One New Book for the Preacher

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Marilynne Robinson, *Home*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

“Do you have *Gilead*?” asked the church librarian. “It’s gone and it hasn’t been signed out.” She knows that I have taken such liberties in the past.

“No, I don’t. In fact, I can’t find my own copy of it, nor can I find my copy of *Housekeeping*. I must have loaned them out and now they’ve been passed on to someone else.” So it goes with good books. I really wanted to look over both books, and my marginal notes, before writing this review. Not all books come back, and this late in my career that may be a blessing.

Three years ago Marilynne Robinson sprang into my consciousness with the publication of the Pulitzer Prize winning *Gilead*. I contributed a review of it to *Journal for Preachers* (Pentecost 2005) in order to share a wonderful new discovery, a window on the life and practice of ministry, and a deep look into the spirit of a Congregationalist minister, the Reverend John Ames. Set in the imaginary town of Gilead, Iowa, during the Eisenhower/Stevenson campaign of 1956, *Gilead* is in the form of a journal or letter from the elderly Ames to his young son, a means of imparting family history and lore which Ames would have done orally had he anticipated living longer. We learn about the death of Ames’ first wife and baby in childbirth, his decades as a widower, his late marriage to a much younger woman, his abiding friendship with the neighboring Presbyterian minister, Robert Boughton. Whereas Ames has no living children until late in life, “Old Boughton” and his wife have a houseful of eight. Ames was asked to baptize one of the sons, and at the baptism learned that he was holding his namesake, John Ames Boughton, as an attestation to the long and deep friendship between the two men.

In preparation for writing the review of *Gilead*, I read Robinson’s earlier novel, *Housekeeping*, which appeared in the early 1980s. It is often described as “a modern classic,” and I thought it would give additional insight into Robinson’s mind and writing. It is worthwhile to become familiar with *Housekeeping* prior to a reading of *Home* inasmuch as it looks into the lives of two women who become homeless. Certainly in the ministry there are many of us who encounter homeless persons with some regularity. We have various responses to Matthew 25, greeting Christ in our neighbor, and we find ourselves responding within carefully set parameters. The gist of *Housekeeping* is that the two women are eccentric, but they are not crazy, an insight that has carried into my subsequent encounters with our homeless – what? – clients, guests, friends, manifestations of the Risen Christ. Perhaps some are just repeats. However, in every encounter the possibility remains....

Ah, now comes the surprise of *Home*, recently nominated for the National Book Award. Those who have read *Gilead* see immediately that what is happening in the home and life of Robert Boughton is concurrent with the story we read three years ago. Surely there are other examples of this in literature, but none immediately comes to mind. So tightly woven is the narrative that we are present at several scenes that appear

in both books but are written from different perspectives.

Home is the story of two of the Boughton children, Glory and Jack, both of whom come home to their aging father's house. Glory, who has been a high school teacher of English, is disappointed in love. Her elderly father can frame it in the best possible light, that she has come home to take care of him in his decline, and so she does. The truth, however, is that she has allowed herself to be taken advantage of by a dishonorable man, should have left the relationship years before she did, and has given away her youth, what money she had, her profession, and her pride. All this is easy for her to see in retrospect, but remains ever difficult for her to say aloud.

The prodigal John Ames Boughton, homeless alcoholic, soon returns after an absence of twenty years. We hear what we already know from *Gilead*, his boyhood role as the odd man out, the child who could always be counted on to say the right thing but to do the wrong, the one who was an embarrassment to the family and particularly to his minister father. Ever present is the memory of Jack's youthful relationship with a young woman that resulted in a little girl the elder Boughtons sought to reach out to, in their own way, and who died in childhood. If Jack Boughton is Robinson's portrayal of a prodigal son, Robert Boughton takes the role of the loving father, the one who never gives up on the wayward child, who always holds out hope that Jack will return and do well, who can always forgive and start anew, who to the very end lives in concern that Jack will embrace and make his peace with God. Although Robert Boughton loves all eight of his children, he makes allowances for Jack that far exceed his emotions for the other seven.

Home is a very quiet book, mostly a series of conversations between Glory and Jack. They are in the kitchen having coffee together, or working in the barn or garden, observed by their father who sits on the porch. The conversations go over the same ground again and again. In *Gilead* we were fascinated by Jack from a distance, although we gradually learn Jack's noble secret side of which his father might have been enormously proud, had he ever known. Or perhaps the Reverend Boughton would have been ashamed and embarrassed once again at Jack's secret. It's hard to tell, given the mores and attitudes of Gilead and the times. Now we see Jack gradually unfolding his story to his sister, revealing himself bit by bit, ultimately departing before the product of his secret appears to Glory.

We hear the two adult children of the manse repeat certain familiar scriptures they had learned in the home. They tend to be a bit casual with the expressions of piety that were genuine to their parents, keeping the theological words and concepts, but giving different interpretations based in their own lives and experience. Many of the conversations will sound familiar to adult children of Presbyterian, or any, ministers. One ponders how Robinson, who teaches in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, managed so well to insinuate herself into the little world of our homes, our families, our profession.

One does not read *Home* without considering the realities of aging parents or alcoholism or racism in America in the 1950s or now. We always want to consider that the homeless people we meet are carrying crosses of their own, burdens that may be unexpressed but with which someone is dealing in his own way as best he can. Just as I have considered the two eccentric women of *Housekeeping* as I have met their counterparts these last three years in Falls Church, perhaps we can all think of Jack Boughton when we try to infuse our ministry to the homeless with a new shot of compassion.

At the heart of Robert Boughton's final days is his worry about Jack's spiritual being. Near the end of Robinson's narrative, Jack uses carefully chosen words to try with integrity to reassure his dying father that he has made spiritual peace, only to be answered by the old man's ramblings. Is it Alzheimer's or "hardening of the arteries," as we were taught to say back in the 1950s? The poignancy of utter disappointment moves through the reader before the old man regains himself and seems to rejoin the conversation, too late for Jack to complete his intention. We do, however, end with a sense of hope that, even in the worst of us, there is grace and redemption.