

REVIEWS

Gilead (2004)

Marilynne Robinson

(1943-)

“Like *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* is a lyrical evocation of existential solitude. But it is also a provocatively sympathetic account of the abolitionist movement and of John Brown--whose attack on Harpers Ferry helped bring about the Civil War. In Robinson’s mind, American progressives have lost the ability to ‘take hold’ of an issue to mobilize change the way that radical reformers once did. And so *Gilead* differs from *Housekeeping* in one crucial way: it is an explicit corrective to what Robinson calls ‘cultural amnesia.’ The explicitness of this ambition makes Robinson an anomaly in a literary landscape still more given to postmodern pontification than to old-fashioned political arguments.

In a sense, Robinson is a kind of contemporary George Eliot: socially engaged, preoccupied with the environment and the moral progress of man (especially as catalyzed through art) and preoccupied with the legacy of John Calvin (a misunderstood humanist, by Robinson’s lights). Robinson, who has no television and doesn’t drive, offered a scathing indictment of contemporary America’s materialism and frivolity in her essay collection *The Death of Adam*; all told, the book offered an almost anachronistically stern view of the moral failings of humankind. The curious part, then, is the degree to which readers of all persuasions find Robinson’s strenuous vision a welcoming--and welcome--one.

At first glance, *Gilead* may seem eccentrically conceived: set in 1956, it weaves together an intimate family story and a century’s worth of political events in the Middle West, sprawling from Kansas to Iowa and back. The narrator is John Ames, a 77-year-old preacher in Iowa who, facing death, has decided to make an account of his life for his young son (the unexpected gift of a late marriage to a much younger woman). Much of the novel is a reflection--albeit an oblique one--on the Kansas abolitionist movement and the years leading up to the Civil War, as experienced by Ames’s grandfather, a spirited abolitionist and Civil War chaplain, and Ames’s father, an ardent pacifist, whose ideologies set them at loggerheads. John Brown plays only a cameo role: the young Ames helps shelter him on the way home from a murderous raid. But the questionable merits of violent social activism cast a long shadow over the book.

What Robinson hopes to elucidate, by setting *Gilead* in 1956--on the eve of the civil rights movement--is the swiftness with which the grand social aims of the Civil War and of the abolitionists collapsed into Jim Crow, and how easily old prejudices overcome the energy of good will. ‘I became interested in the problem of how it is that people have in the past done the right thing,’ she told me over a pork-roast dinner at her house. ‘Of course, I was looking at it from my own particular point of view, which is basically that of my own religious culture. The people that came to mind were the abolitionists. I wanted to know how what they thought allowed them to acquire leverage to do what needed to be done. And so slavery became the focus of the book.’

Robinson’s willingness to reconsider the legacy of John Brown may invite skepticism from some fronts. After all, while Brown unflinchingly denounced slavery and helped foment the Civil War, he also murdered several supporters of slavery in the name of divine justice. Robinson, however, isn’t alone in feeling that Brown has been demonized in the popular imagination; interestingly enough, Russell Banks and Bruce Olds have recently written novels that are paeans of sorts to Brown. In the end, what’s best about *Gilead* is the way Robinson’s novel--unlike some of her more polemical essays--invitingly challenges its readers to entertain contradictory notions at once, and appealingly dramatizes the act of puzzling over charged questions, ‘trying to say what was true.’ Repeatedly, while Ames writes to his son, he revises an opinion held earlier in the lengthy ‘letter’ he is composing. You can imagine Robinson doing the same, year after year, as she struggled to write a novel she could stand behind.”

Meghan O’Rourke
The New York Times

(24 October 2004)

“Early in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*, one of the few recent American novels that have found and deserved both critical praise and readerly love, the narrator, the Rev. John Ames, admits that he has a tendency ‘to overuse the word “old”.’ This habit, he muses, ‘has less to do with age...than it does with familiarity. It sets a thing apart as something regarded with a modest, habitual affection. Sometimes it suggests haplessness or vulnerability. I say ‘old Boughton,’ I say ‘this shabby old town,’ and I mean that they are very near my heart.”

A. O. Scott
The New York Times Book Review
(19 September 2008)

“To bloom only every 20 years would make, you would think, for anxious or vainglorious flowerings. But Marilynne Robinson, whose last (and first) novel, *Housekeeping*, appeared in 1981, seems to have the kind of sensibility that is sanguine about intermittence. It is a mind as religious as it is literary--perhaps more religious than literary--in which silence is itself a quality, and in which the space around words may be full of noises. A remarkable, deeply unfashionable book of essays, *The Death of Adam* (1998), in which Robinson passionately defended John Calvin and American Puritanism, among other topics, suggested that, far from suffering writer’s block, Robinson was exploring thinker’s flow: she was moving at her own speed, returning repeatedly to theological questions and using the essay to hold certain goods that, for one reason or another, had not yet found domicile in fictional form.

But here is a second novel, and it is no surprise to find that it is religious, somewhat essayistic and fiercely calm. *Gilead* is a beautiful work--demanding, grave and lucid--and is, if anything, more out of time than Robinson’s book of essays, suffused as it is with a Protestant bareness that sometimes recalls George Herbert (alluded to several times, along with John Donne) and sometimes the American religious spirit that produced Congregationalism and 19th-century Transcendentalism and those bareback religious riders Emerson, Thoreau and Melville.

Gilead is set in 1956 in the small town of Gilead, Iowa, and is narrated by a 76-year-old pastor named John Ames, who has recently been told he has angina pectoris and believes he is facing imminent death. In this terminal spirit, he decides to write a long letter to his 7-year-old son, the fruit of a recent marriage to a much younger woman. This novel is that letter, set down in the easy, discontinuous form of a diary, mixing long and short entries, reminiscences, moral advice and so on. (Robinson was perhaps influenced by the similar forms of the two most famous books narrated by clergymen, Francis Kilvert’s diary and Georges Bernanos’s novel *The Diary of a Country Priest*.) Robinson, as if relishing the imposition, has instantly made things hard for herself: the diary form that reports on daily and habitual occurrences tends to be relatively static; it is difficult to whip the donkey of dailiness into big, bucking, dramatic scenes. Those who, like this reader, feel that novels--especially novels about clergymen--are best when secular, comic and social, may need a few pages to get over the lack of these elements. In fact, *Gilead* does have a gentle sort of comedy--though there is nothing here to match the amusing portraits in *Housekeeping*--but it is certainly a pious, even perhaps a devotional work, and its characters move in a very small society.

The great danger of the clergyman in fiction is that his doctrinal belief will leak into the root system of the novel and turn argument into piety, drama into sermon. This is one of the reasons that, in the English tradition, from Henry Fielding to Barbara Pym, the local vicar is usually safely contained as hypocritical, absurd or possibly a bit dimwitted. Robinson’s pastor is that most difficult narrator from a novelist’s point of view, a truly good and virtuous man, and occasionally you may wish he possessed a bit more malice, avarice or lust--or just an intriguing unreliability. John Ames has cherished baptizing infants: ‘That feeling of a baby’s brow against the palm of your hand--how I have loved this life.’ He loves the landscape too: ‘I have lived my life on the prairie and a line of oak trees can still astonish me.’ When he informs us that he has written more than 2,000 sermons, and that he has written almost all of them ‘in the deepest hope and conviction,’ the reader surely protests: ‘Never in boredom or fatigue or sheer diligence?’ and perhaps thinks longingly of Yorick, the parson in *Tristram Shandy* who, at the bottom of his eloquent funeral eulogy, is seen to have written an improper ‘Bravo!’ to himself, so secularly pleased is he with his own eloquence.

But while John Ames may be a good man, he is not an uninteresting one, and he has a real tale to tell. His grandfather, also named John Ames and also a preacher, came out to Kansas from Maine in the 1830's and ended up fighting on the Union side in the Civil War. He knew John Brown and lost an eye in that war. The book's narrator remembers his grandfather as a formidable, old-fashioned warrior for God who used to conduct church services while wearing his pistol.

Robinson's portraits of the old man are vivid slashes of poetry. Marvelously, we see Grandfather Ames as 'a wild-haired, one-eyed, scrawny old fellow with a crooked beard, like a paintbrush left to dry with lacquer in it.' He seemed to his grandson 'stricken and afflicted, and indeed he was, like a man everlastingly struck by lightning, so that there was an ashiness about his clothes and his hair never settled and his eye had a look of tragic alarm when he wasn't actually sleeping. He was the most unrepentant human being I ever knew except for certain of his friends.' Our narrator recalls entering the house as a little boy and being told by his mother that 'the Lord is in the parlor.' Looking in, he sees his grandfather talking with God, 'looking attentive and sociable and gravely pleased. I would hear a remark from time to time, "I see your point," or "I have often felt that way myself".'

But our narrator's father, also called John Ames and also a preacher, was a very different kind of man. He was a pacifist and he quarreled with Grandfather Ames, so that the older man, who had been living with his son, left the house and wandered off to Kansas, where he died. *Gilead* is much concerned with fathers and sons, and with God the father and his son. The book's narrator returns again and again to the parable of the prodigal son--the son who returned to his father and was forgiven, but did not deserve forgiveness. Ames's life has lately been irradiated by his unexpected marriage and by the gift of his little son, and he consoles himself that although he won't see him grow up, he will be reunited with him in heaven: 'I imagine your child self finding me in heaven and jumping into my arms, and there is a great joy in the thought.'

Gradually, Robinson's novel teaches us how to read it, suggests how we might slow down to walk at its own processional pace, and how we might learn to coddle its many fine details. Nowadays, when so many writers are acclaimed as great stylists, it's hard to make anyone notice when you praise a writer's prose. There is, however, something remarkable about the writing in *Gilead*. It's not just a matter of writing well, although Robinson demonstrates that talent on every page: the description of the one-eyed grandfather, who 'could make me feel as though he had poked me with a stick, just by looking at me,' or one of a cat held by Ames's little son, eager to escape, its ears flattened back and its tail twitching and its eyes 'patiently furious.' It isn't just the care with which Robinson can relax the style to a Midwestern colloquialism: 'But one afternoon a storm came up and a gust of wind hit the henhouse and lifted the roof right off, and hens came flying out, sucked after it, I suppose, and also just acting like hens.' (How deceptively easy that little coda is--'and also just acting like hens'--but how much it conveys.)

Robinson's words have a spiritual force that's very rare in contemporary fiction--what Ames means when he refers to 'grace as a sort of ecstatic fire that takes things down to essentials.' There are plenty of such essentialists in American fiction (writers like Kent Haruf and Cormac McCarthy), and Robinson is sometimes compared to them, but their essentials are generally not religious. In ordinary, secular fiction, a writer who 'takes things down to essentials' is reducing language to increase the amount of secular meaning (or sometimes, alas, to decrease it). When Robinson reduces her language, it's because secular meaning has exhausted itself and is being renovated by religious meaning. Robinson, who loves Melville and Emerson, cannot rid herself of the religious habit of using metaphor as a form of revelation. Ames spends much time musing on the question of what heaven will be like. Surely, he thinks, it will be a changed place, yet one in which we can still remember our life on earth: 'In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets.' There sings a true Melvillean note.

As the novel progresses, its language becomes sparer, lovelier, more deeply infused with Ames's yearning metaphysics. His best friend, an old Presbyterian minister named Boughton, who lives nearby and is also ailing, has a wayward son, now in his 40's, who returns to Gilead in the course of the novel. Boughton's son comes to Ames for spiritual counsel, and his sad story provides a counterpoint to the relationship Ames has with his 7-year-old--which he would dearly like to continue beyond the grave.

Ames does not want to die and dislikes aging, not least because he cannot play vigorously with his son: 'I feel as if I am being left out, as though I'm some straggler and people can't quite remember to stay back for me' At the end of the book, Boughton's son leaves Gilead even as his own father is on his deathbed, and Ames registers the filial cruelty of this act: 'It was truly a dreadful thing he was doing, leaving his father to die without him. It was the kind of thing only his father would forgive him for.'

Only his father and only His Father. The link between the terrestrial relationship and the religious one is made explicit when Ames recalls that 'Augustine says the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true. He will wipe the tears from all faces. It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required.' Heaven, then, as Ames sees it--and perhaps Robinson too--will afford a special kind of amnesty, a sublime gratuity, in which those who least deserve forgiveness will most joyously receive it. Ames hints at this when he reflects on his own unspectacular filial piety: 'I myself was the good son, so to speak, the one who never left his father's house.... I am one of those righteous for whom the rejoicing in heaven will be comparatively restrained.'

Robinson's book ends in characteristic fashion, with its feet planted firmly on the Iowa soil and its eyes fixed imploringly on heaven, as a dying man daily pictures Paradise but also learns how to prolong every day--to extend time, even on earth, into a serene imitation of eternity: 'Light is constant, we just turn over in it. So every day is in fact the selfsame evening and morning.' *Gilead* closes as simply as it opened: 'I'll pray, and then I'll sleep.'

James Wood
The New York Times
(28 November 2004)

"Growing up in a religious household, I got used to the sight of priests, but I always found them at once fascinating and slightly repellent. The funereal uniform is supposed to obliterate the self in a shroud of colorlessness, even as it draws enormous attention to the self; humility seems to be cut from the same cloth as pride. Since the ego is irrepressible—and secular—it tends to bulge in odd shapes when religiously straitened. The priests I knew practiced self-abnegation but had perfected a quiet dance of ego. They were modest but pompous, gentle but tyrannical (one of them got angry if he was disturbed on a Monday, the vicar's day off), pious but knowing. Most were good men, but the peculiar constrictions of their calling produced peculiar opportunities for unloosing.

This is probably one of the reasons—putting the secular antagonism of novelists aside—that in fiction priests are usually seen as comical, hypocritical, improperly worldly or dangerously unworldly, or a little dim. Another reason is that fiction needs egotism, vanity, venality, in order to produce drama and comedy; we want our sepulchres craftily whitened. The seventy-six-year-old Reverend John Ames, who narrates Marilynne Robinson's second novel, *Gilead*, is gentle, modest, loving, and above all good. He is also a bit boring, and boring in proportion to his curious lack of ego. At home in the Iowa town of Gilead, in the mid-nineteen-fifties, and aware of his imminent demise, he writes a long letter to his seven-year-old son, which is presented as a series of diary entries. (Georges Bernanos's novel *Diary of a Country Priest* seems to have been one model.) Mellowly resigned, tired but faithful, he is a man who can serenely exclaim 'How I have loved this life!' or inform us that he has written more than two thousand sermons 'in the deepest hope and conviction.' The reader may roll his eyes at this, and perhaps think of Fielding's Parson Adams, in *Joseph Andrews*, who tries to pawn his sermons, and who falls into argument with another parson about who is the better writer. Fielding seems closer to the human case, and more novelistically vivid.

But Robinson skirted this potential objection by making her novel swerve away from the traditionally novelistic. Ames's calm, grave diary entries contain almost no dialogue, shun scenes, seem to smother conflict before it has taken a breath. Very beautifully, *Gilead* becomes less a novel than a species of religious writing, and Ames's entries a recognizable American form, the Emersonian essay, poised between homily and home, religious exercise and naturalism: 'This morning a splendid dawn passed over our house on its way to Kansas. This morning Kansas rolled out of its sleep into a sunlight grandly announced, proclaimed throughout heaven—one more of the very finite number of days that this old prairie has been called Kansas, or Iowa. But it has all been one day, that first day. Light is constant, we just turn over in it.

So every day is in fact the selfsame evening and morning. My grandfather's grave turned into the light, and the dew on his weedy little mortality patch was glorious.'

The result was one of the most unconventional conventionally popular novels of recent times. Robinson describes herself as a liberal Protestant believer and churchgoer, but her religious sensibility is really far more uncompromising and archaic than this allows. Her essays, a selection of which appeared in *The Death of Adam* (1998), are theologically tense and verbally lush in a manner that is almost extinct in modern literary discourse, and which often sounds Melvillean. She is a liberal in the sense that she finds it difficult to write directly about the content of her belief, and shuns the evangelical childishness of gluing human attributes onto God. She writes that as a child she 'felt God as a presence before I had a name for him,' and adds that she goes to church in order to experience 'moments that do not occur in other settings.' In a way that many Americans, and certainly her liberal readers, would find palatable, her Protestantism seems born of a love of religious silence—the mystic, quietly at prayer in an unadorned place, indifferent to ecclesiastical mediation.

But Robinson is illiberal and unfashionably fierce in her devotion to this Protestant tradition; she is voluble in defense of silence. She loathes the complacent idleness whereby contemporary Americans dismiss Puritanism and turn John Calvin, its great proponent, into an obscure, moralizing bigot: 'We are forever drawing up indictments against the past, then refusing to let it testify in its own behalf—it is so very guilty, after all. Such attention as we give to it is usually vindictive and incurious and therefore incompetent.' We flinch from Puritanism because it placed sin at the center of life, but then, as she tartly reminds us, 'Americans never think of themselves as sharing fully in the human condition, and therefore beset as all humankind is beset.' Calvin believed in our 'total depravity,' our utter fallenness, but this was not necessarily a cruel condemnation. 'The belief that we are all sinners gives us excellent grounds for forgiveness and self-forgiveness, and is kindlier than any expectation that we might be saints, even while it affirms the standards all of us fail to attain,' Robinson writes in her essay 'Puritans and Prigs.' Nowadays, she argues, educated Americans are prigs, not Puritans, quick to pour judgment on anyone who fails to toe the right political line. Soft moralizing has replaced hard moralizing, but at least those old hard moralists admitted to being moralists.

I do not always enjoy Robinson's ecstasies, but I admire the obdurateness with which she describes the difficult joys of a faith that will please neither evangelicals nor secularists. Above all, there is the precision and lyrical power of her language, and the way it embodies a struggle—the fight with words, the contemporary writer's fight with the history of words and the presence of literary tradition, the fight to use the best words to describe both the visible and the invisible world. Here, for instance, is how the narrator of *Housekeeping*, Robinson's first novel, describes her dead grandmother, who lies in bed with her arms wide open and her head flung back: 'It was as if, drowning in air, she had leaped toward ether.' In the same novel, the narrator imagines her grandmother pinning sheets to a clothesline, on a windy day—'Say that when she had pinned three corners to the lines it began to billow and leap in her hands, to flutter and tremble, and to glare with the light, and that the throes of the thing were as gleeful and strong as if a spirit were dancing in its cerements.' 'Cerements,' an old word for burial cloth, is Robinson in her Melvillean mode, and is one of many moments in her earlier work when she sounds like the antiquarian Cormac McCarthy. But stronger than that fancy word is the plain and lovely 'the throes of the thing,' with its animism and its homemade alliteration."

James Wood
The New Yorker
(8 September 2008)

"Unlike novels that delight in plot twists and structural play, Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gilead* is seemingly straightforward and free of pyrotechnics. Instead, the novel takes its sweet, molasses-slow time, and in the process achieves depths of pathos and empathy rarely seen in contemporary fiction. What drives *Gilead* is the voice of its protagonist, the Rev. John Ames: his prose flexible and spare, steeped in Scripture and the writings of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. Yet Ames also has an abiding tenderness for the world; when he sees his son blowing soap bubbles, he describes one as floating 'past my window, fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst.' So little happens, in an outward sense, that Robinson barely divides *Gilead* into chapters. (There are two.) But

events resonate so profoundly, they almost cannot be contained within the book. This is perhaps part of why Robinson has chosen to revisit certain scenes in her new novel, *Home*, this time writing from the perspective of Glory Boughton, one of *Gilead's* minor characters. Yet this co-quel has a beauty all its own."

Emily Barton
The Los Angeles Times
(7 September 2008)

"Marilynne Robinson is a peculiar author. After all, how many novelists contribute an article to the progressive journal *Salmagundi* defending the Puritans? (The bottom line: they weren't just mindless prigs, despite what you may have heard to the contrary.) And how many contemporary authors, instead of sharing their thoughts about Mailer or Bellow or Updike and the like, write lucid literary criticism about McGuffey Readers? But Robinson's fiction is as non-conformist as her essays. In an age of prolixity, she made us wait almost a quarter of a century for her second novel, *Gilead*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 2005. Like its predecessor *Housekeeping* (1981), it was a thin volume--revealing an author who reaped sparingly while other wordsmiths sowed widely their Joyce Carol Oates. And when *Gilead* finally arrived, it proved to be as transcendent and delicate as *Housekeeping* had been dark and haunted.

Even stranger, *Gilead* achieves its enchanting effects despite a story line that would seem to be unremittingly gloomy. Here was the advance warning I had been given by another reader: 'It's about the thoughts of a dying man in a small town in Iowa' Hmmm, the Hollywood studios will fight over the movie rights to that story, huh? Maybe they should. It's 1956, and Reverend John Ames has a serious heart condition, and fears each new day might be his last. He worries about leaving behind a wife and young son without any means of financial support. In this setting, he begins writing a journal--primarily as a document for his son to read when he is older. Ames looks back at his mostly uneventful life, and even further back at the lives of his father and grandfather, both of them also ministers, in a narrative that has its roots in the days before the Civil War.

But what Robinson does with this unpromising situation is remarkable. Almost every page of this novel is charged with a stark beauty and a deep poetry. Dostoevsky, drawing on his own experience of escaping a firing squad by a last minute stay of execution, has noted how the imminence of death intensifies one's perceptions and attachments to the surrounding world. Ames' worldview is permeated with this intensification of sensibility, imparting a grandeur to almost every matter he discusses, whether the simple details of day-to-day life or the moral dilemmas of the past and present. Yet history intrudes on private lives even in Gilead, Iowa. Robinson weaves in elements of American socio-political life, from John Brown and the abolitionists to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. Sometimes these merely provide color and verisimilitude to her tale, but often they create a backdrop for the psychological drama of her narrative.

Ames has unsettled business that constantly disrupts his reveries. Not just the future of his wife and son, or the tainted legacy of his forefathers, but also the plight of the son of his closest friend, a tormented soul who returns to Gilead, the scene of his youthful indiscretions. Transgression and forgiveness are key themes in this book, and they are given ample room to grapple with each other in the course of Robinson's novel. This is also a novel of ideas--a rarity in the pantheon of modern novels. Creative writing teachers have worked hard to weed out the taint of 'ideas' from their students' work in recent decades. Try to slip a philosophical musing into your assigned short story, and it will come back marked in red. 'Don't tell us, show us' is the inviolable rule. 'Show us with the characters' actions, or their emotions, or even their dialogue' But, heaven forbid, don't quote the so-called 'great thinker' in a story.

Although Robinson is a creative writing teacher herself--another surprise!--she violates this rule repeatedly in *Gilead*. But when Ludwig Feuerbach or Karl Barth show up in these pages, their cameo appearances are handled deftly and quite effectively. It makes you wonder why all that red ink got expended in the first place. Nonetheless, the contemplative tone of this book may fool you. Ames is severely tested in this novel, and in ways that even he barely understands. To get the full measure of it, readers need to compare this story with the alternative account of the same events provided in Robinson's follow-up novel *House* (2008). Yet even in the context of *Gilead*, we can see that our saintly narrator has

his own blind spots, and ‘falls short of the glory of God’ as Paul says in *Romans* (a work which figures in the shadows of *Gilead*).

We look for many things in fiction of the new millennium. But I am rarely tempted to apply the word ‘wisdom’ in the course of a book review. Yet Marilynne Robinson has written a very wise book in *Gilead*, and it is a hard-won wisdom her dying protagonist conveys. Perhaps it was a hard book to write, too--judging by how long Robinson took to complete it. But it is a joyous and sobering work to read and savor.”

Ted Gioia
The New Canon.com (2014)

Michael Hollister (2015)