

REVIEWS

Home (2008)

Marilynne Robinson

(1943-)

BLURBS

“Remarkable...an even stronger accomplishment than *Gilead*.” (Claire Messud, *The New York Review of Books*); “An exquisite, often ruefully funny meditation on redemption” (Megan O’Grady, *Vogue*); “An anguished pastoral, a tableau of decency and compassion that is also an angry and devastating indictment of moral cowardice and unrepentant, unacknowledged sin.... Beautiful” (A. O. Scott, *NYRB*); “Rich and resonant... *Gilead* and *Home* fit with and around each other perfectly, each complete on its own, yet enriching and enlivening the other. But both are books of such beauty and power” (Emily Barton, *Los Angeles Times*); “Marilynne Robinson is so powerful a writer that she can reshape how we read” (Mark Athitakis, *Chicago Sun-Times*); “*Home* begins simply, eschewing obvious verbal fineness, and slowly grows in luxury--its last fifty pages are magnificently moving.... Powerful” (James Wood, *The New Yorker*); “When Marilynne Robinson writes a new book, it’s an event” (Pat MacEnulty, *Charlotte Observer*)

SUMMARY

“Hailed as ‘incandescent,’ ‘magnificent’ and ‘a literary miracle,’ hundreds of thousands of readers were enthralled by Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*. Now Robinson returns with a brilliantly imagined retelling of the prodigal son parable, set at the same moment and in the same Iowa town. The Reverend Boughton’s hell-raising son, Jack has come home after twenty years away. Artful and devious in his youth, now an alcoholic carrying two decades worth of secrets, he is perpetually at odds with his traditionalist father, though he remains his most beloved child. As Jack tries to make peace with his father, he begins to forge an intense bond with his sister Glory, herself returning home with a broken heart and turbulent past. *Home* is a luminous and healing book about families, family secrets, and faith from one of America’s most beloved and acclaimed authors.” (macmillan.com)

ANALYSES

“Her new novel, *Home*...begins simply, eschewing obvious verbal fineness, and slowly grows in luxury—its last fifty pages are magnificently moving, and richly pondered in the way of *Gilead*. *Home* is not a sequel to that novel but more like that novel’s brother, since it takes place at the same narrative moment and dovetails with its happenings. In *Gilead*, John Ames’s great friend is the Reverend Robert Boughton, a retired Presbyterian minister (Ames is a Congregationalist). The two men grew up together, confide in one another, and share a wry, undogmatic Protestantism. But where Ames married late and has only one son, Boughton has eight children, one of whom, Jack, is a prodigal son. In the earlier novel, Ames frets over Jack (now in his forties), who has been difficult since he was a schoolboy: there has been petty theft, drifting, unemployment, alcoholism, and an illegitimate child, now deceased, with a local woman. Jack walked out of the Boughton home one day and stayed away for twenty years, not returning even for his mother’s funeral. After all that time, we learn, Jack has unexpectedly returned. In the last part of *Gilead*, Jack comes to Ames for a blessing—for the blessing he cannot get from his own father—and spills a remarkable secret: he has been living with a black woman from Memphis named Della, and has a son with her.

Home is set in the Boughton household at the time of Jack’s sudden return, and is an intense study of three people: the Reverend Boughton, the old, dying patriarch; his pious daughter Glory; and the prodigal Jack. Glory has her own sadness: she has come back to Gilead after the collapse of what she took to be an engagement, to a man who turned out to be married. Like Princess Marya in *War and Peace*, who does daily battle with her father, the old Prince Bolkonsky, she is the dutiful child who must submit to the demands of an aging tyrant. She is fearful of Jack, whom she hardly knows, and is in some ways envious of

his rebellious freedom. Robinson evokes well the drugged shuffle of life in a home dominated by the routines of an old parent: how the two middle-aged children hear ‘a stirring of bedsprings, then the lisp lisp of slipped feet and the pock of the cane.’ There are the imperious cries—for help getting dressed; a glass of water—and the hours distracted by the radio, card games, *Monopoly*, meals, pots of coffee. The very furniture is oppressive, immovable. The numerous knickknacks are displayed only ‘as a courtesy to their givers, most of whom by now would have gone to their reward.’ For Glory, who is in her late thirties, there is the dread that this will be her final home:

‘What does it mean to come home? Glory had always thought home would be a house less cluttered and ungainly than this one, in a town larger than Gilead, or a city, where someone would be her intimate friend and the father of her children, of whom she would have no more than three.... She would not take one stick of furniture from her father’s house, since none of it would be comprehensible in those spare, sunlit rooms. The walnut furbelows and carved draperies and pilasters, the inlaid urns and flowers. Who had thought of putting actual feet on chairs and sideboards, actual paws and talons?’

Much of *Home* puzzles out the mystery of Jack Boughton’s rebellion, his spiritual homelessness. From his earliest years, he had seemed a stranger to his relatives. The family had been waiting for him to walk out, and he did, and then this story became their defining narrative: ‘They were so afraid they would lose him, and then they had lost him, and that was the story of their family, no matter how warm and fruitful and robust it might have appeared to the outside world.’ Even now that he has returned, Glory reflects, there was ‘an incandescence of unease about him whenever he walked out the door or, for that matter, whenever his father summoned him to one of those harrowing conversations. Or while he waited for the mail or watched the news.’ In the course of the book, we discover a little of what he has been doing in those twenty years away—as in *Gilead*, we learn about the early illegitimate child, and about his eight-year relationship with Della, herself a preacher’s daughter.

Jack is a suggestive figure—a highly literate nonbeliever who knows his Bible backward but finds it hard to do theological battle with his slippery father. Back home, he dresses formally, putting on his threadbare suit and tie, as if to do his reformed best; but he has a perpetually wary expression and a studied politesse that suggest an existential exile. He tries to conform to the habits of the childhood home—he tends the garden, does the shopping, fixes up the old car in the garage—but almost every encounter with his father produces a tiny abrasion that smarts and festers. The novel quietly mobilizes the major Biblical stories of father and son: Esau, denied his birthright, begging for a blessing from his father; Joseph, reunited, finally, with his father, Jacob; the Prodigal Son, most loved because most errant.

What propels the book, and makes it ultimately so powerful, is the Reverend Boughton, precisely because he is not the soft-spoken sage that John Ames is in *Gilead*. He is a fierce, stern, vain old man, who wants to forgive his son and cannot. He preaches sweetness and light, and is gentle with Jack, like a chastened Lear (‘Let me look at you for a minute,’ he says), only to turn on him angrily. There are scenes of the most tender pain. Robinson, so theologically obsessed with transfiguration, can transfigure the most banal observation. In the attic, for instance, Glory finds a chest of her father’s shirts, ironed ‘as if for some formal event, perhaps their interment’; and then the novelist, or poet, notices that the shirts ‘had changed to a color milder than white.’ (Those ceremonies again.) Father and son clash while watching television news reports of the racial unrest in Montgomery. Boughton swats away his son’s anger with his bland, milky prophecy: ‘There’s no reason to let that sort of trouble upset you. In six months nobody will remember one thing about it.’

As the old man palpably declines, an urgency sets in. The imminence of death should conduce to forgiveness, but the father cannot allow it. He knows that his son has not returned for good. ‘He’s going to toss the old gent an assurance or two, and then he’s out the door,’ he complains. Nothing will change, because the family situation rests on a series of paradoxes, which interlock to imprison father and son. Jack’s soul is homeless, but his soul is his home, for, as Jack tells his sister, the soul is ‘what you can’t get rid of.’ He is condemned to leave and return. If the prodigal son is the most loved because most errant, then it is his errancy that is secretly loved: perhaps a family needs to have its designated sinner? Everyone longs for restoration, for the son to come home and become simply good, just as everyone longs for

Heaven, but such restoration, like Heaven itself, is hard to imagine, and in our lack of imagination we somehow prefer what we can touch and feel—the palpability of our lapses.

Behind all of Robinson's work lies an abiding interest in the question of heavenly restoration. As she puts it in *Housekeeping*, there is a law of completion, requiring that everything 'must finally be made comprehensible.... What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?' But will this restoration ever be enough? Can the shape of the healing possibly fit the size of the wound? You see a version of this concern in *Home*, in the way the novel ponders the question of return. The Boughton children come home to a strange, old-fashioned Iowa town, but the return is hardly the balm it promises to be, for home is too personal, too remembered, too disappointing. Eden is exile, not Heaven:

'And then their return to the *pays natal*, where the same old willows swept the same ragged lawns, where the same old prairie arose and bloomed as negligence permitted. Home. What kinder place could there be on earth, and why did it seem to them all like exile? Oh, to be passing anonymously through an impersonal landscape! Oh, not to know every stump and stone, not to remember how the fields of Queen Anne's lace figured in the childish happiness they had offered to their father's hopes, God bless him.'

So old Boughton is dying, and nothing changes. 'What I'd like to know is why you didn't love us,' he petulantly chides his son. 'That is what has always mystified me.' He continues a little later, 'You see something beautiful in a child, and you almost live for it, you feel as though you would die for it, but it isn't yours to keep or to protect. And if the child becomes a man who has no respect for himself, it's just destroyed till you can hardly remember what it was.' Early in the novel, the Reverend seemed to want his son to call him something other than the customary, rather estranged 'sir'—Papa or even Dad.

Late in the novel, when Jack calls him Dad, he bursts out, 'Don't call me that. I don't like it at all. Dad. It sounds ridiculous. It's not even a word.' When he is not rebuking his son, he is complaining about old age: 'Jesus never had to be old.' He is calm only when asleep: 'His hair had been brushed into a soft white cloud, like harmless aspiration, like a mist.' In a final encounter of devastating power, Jack goes to his father to tell him that he is going away again. Jack puts out his hand. 'The old man drew his own hand into his lap and turned away. "Tired of it!" he said.' They are the last words that the Reverend Boughton says to Jack, an angry inversion of the last, tired words of the serene John Ames in *Gilead*: 'I'll pray, and then I'll sleep'."

James Wood
The New Yorker
(8 September 2008)

"Ames, an important figure in Robinson's new novel, *Home*, is...allowing his creator to speak through him, and to acknowledge with some slyness a tic of her own remarkable literary style. If anything, the word 'old' pops up even more frequently in *Home*--a third-person retelling of many of the events in *Gilead* seen through the eyes of 38-year-old Glory Boughton--than it did in the earlier book. Its meanings are complex, at times contradictory. Robinson uses 'old,' as Ames did, to refer to people, places and objects that are dear and intimately known--including Ames himself, well into his 70s in 1956, when both novels take place. The word also suits Robert Boughton--usually called 'the old man'--a fellow minister who has been Ames's friend since childhood. Boughton's faltering health has brought Glory, the youngest of his eight children and recently abandoned by a no-account fiancé, home to Gilead, Iowa. The big, vine-covered house, in Glory's childhood an emblem of the family's prosperity and fertility, holds on to the ghost of its former vitality. 'The furniture and the damage done to it in the course of the old robust domestic life were all still there,' she observes. 'And the old books.'

Old life, old books, old habits. Glory seems to settle into a world as worn and comfortable as the title of the book. But for her, and for Robinson, what is near and dear--an older brother, say, or a scrap of textbook history, or home itself--can also be unaccountably mysterious, even uncanny. 'What a strange old book it was,' Glory thinks as she reads the Bible, a daily practice she maintains partly to keep some connection to that 'old life' of habitual piety she knew growing up in a minister's household, and partly out of a deeper religious feeling. ('Faith for her was habit and family loyalty, a reverence for the Bible which was also literary, admiration for her mother and father. And then that thrilling quiet of which she had never felt any

need to speak.')

Surely she knows the book backward and forward, but she discovers that still it has the power to haunt and surprise. 'I will open my mouth in a parable,' she reads, 'I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.'

A clue to the intentions behind both *Home* and *Gilead*--which do not coexist in a relation of chronological sequence or thematic priority, but instead turn together like enmeshed gears impelling a single narrative machine--may lie in that passage from the 78th Psalm. It suggests that familiar stories and pieces of wisdom can nonetheless be obscure, even sinister or magical, in their lessons and meanings. And it is a characteristic of Robinson's prose to proceed with self-evident clarity and simplicity while seeming at the same time pregnant with troubling implications. Most of what might be called the action in "Home" consists of the movements of a few characters--Glory, her father and her brother Jack--around their grand old house, from kitchen to living room, from garden to porch. They speak with sometimes strained politeness as they busy themselves with mundane domestic tasks. But those quotidian facts of what Glory thinks of as 'difficult, ordinary life' feel, in Robinson's hand, like vessels of the terrible, the sublime, the miraculous.

While she attends, with tact and precision, to sensual details, the pieces of language Robinson cherishes most are the kind of sturdy, everyday abstractions you might ponder in church. She is somehow able to infuse what can sound like dowdy, common words--words like courtesy and kindness, shame and forgiveness, transgression and grace--with a startling measure of their old luster and gravity. Phrases many of us have heard and known since childhood come in her hands to have the depth of dark sayings, and her parable of a family's partial restoration is also a story to trouble your sleep and afflict your conscience.

Boughton and Ames grew up together at the end of the 19th century in Gilead and followed their own fathers into the ministry there, clinging to adjacent branches of the sturdy tree of Puritan tradition. Boughton, whose forebears arrived from Scotland just after the American Civil War, tended to Gilead's Presbyterian flock, while Ames, grandson of a visionary abolitionist from Maine, looked after the souls of the local Congregationalists. Their denominations separated (as Robinson has written elsewhere) by a 'doctrinal and demographic inch,' the two preachers served each other as theological sparring partners, combatants across the checkerboard and spiritual counselors in good times and bad. As a measure of their mutual affection, each gave the other a namesake. Ames's young son, born in the twilight of his father's life, is named Robby. (*Gilead* is addressed to him.) The black sheep of Boughton's large brood--four boys and four girls--is John Ames Boughton, better known as Jack, who calls his own father 'sir' and keeps 'papa' as his sardonic sobriquet for Ames.

Gilead and *Home* stand together, in part, as twinned portraits of these godly, elderly patriarchs, whose intimations of encroaching mortality are disrupted by Jack's return home to Gilead after 20 years away. And some of the appeal of the books surely lies in the nostalgic coloring Robinson imparts to the small-town Middle West of a half-century ago. There are pancakes in the morning and chicken and dumplings for Sunday dinner. The local grocer makes deliveries. A battered DeSoto sits in what used to be the Boughton's horse barn, and television is enough of a novelty that it can safely be ignored most of the time. For entertainment, there are hymns at the piano, with an occasional selection from the American songbook thrown in to add a note of slightly scandalous variety. The mainline Protestant churches are in full vigor, and if one old minister leans toward Eisenhower in the coming election while his 'alter ego' prefers Stevenson, that seems more a matter of temperament and habit than a sign of serious ideological division.

What could be more soothing, amid the racket and contention of our present moment, than the company of a pair of old-timers living in what we might be inclined to think of as the good old days? And the comforts of *Home*, the balm in *Gilead*, are real enough. But even as Robinson's deep and unsentimental fondness for Ames and Boughton is as evident as their devotion to each other, her judgment of them and what they represent is uncompromising and severe.

Home is a book full of doubleness and paradox, at once serene and volcanic, ruthless and forgiving. It is an anguished pastoral, a tableau of decency and compassion that is also an angry and devastating indictment of moral cowardice and unrepentant, unacknowledged sin. It would be inaccurate to say that the novel represents yet another breathless exposé of religious hypocrisy, or a further excavation of the dark

secrets that supposedly lurk beneath the placid surface of small-town life. When Robinson writes that 'complacency was consistent with the customs and manners of Presbyterian Gilead and was therefore assumed to be justified in every case,' she is not scoring an easy, sarcastic point. There is real kindness and generosity in the town, and its theological disposition is accordingly tolerant and charitable.

Reverend Boughton embodies this forgiving, welcoming spirit both in his dotage and in his prime. In his preaching days, Glory recalls, 'he did mention sin, but it was rarefied in his understanding of it, a matter of acts and omissions so commonplace that no one could be wholly innocent of them or especially alarmed by them, either--the uncharitable thought, the neglected courtesy. While on one hand this excused him from the mention of those aspects of life that seemed remotest from Sabbath and sunlight, on the other hand it made the point that the very nicest among them, even the most virtuous, were in no position to pass judgment on anyone else, not on the sly or the incorrigible, not on those who trouble the peace of their families, not on those who might happen to have gotten their names in the newspaper in the past week.'

Lurking between these lines is the figure of Jack Boughton, who in his youth did nothing but trouble the peace of his family, and of other families as well. He was a thief, a truant and an all-around ne'er-do-well, whose crowning disgrace was getting a young farm girl pregnant and abandoning her and their child to a fate that could not be mitigated by the guilty charity of other Boughtons. Ames, in *Gilead*, remembers the young Jack as a mean-spirited and wanton trickster, his transgressions motivated at best by the complete absence of any sense of responsibility and at worst by a pure and unaccountable malice. But old Boughton, whose love for his prodigal son never wavered even as it caused him endless grief, suspects that Jack's bad behavior arose from a primal, unfathomable sense of estrangement. 'I just never knew another child who didn't feel at home in the house where he was born,' he says. 'I always felt it was sadness I was dealing with, a sort of heavyheartedness.'

That sorrow is still evident in the 43-year-old Jack, who returns from his long time away with the cautious air of 'a stranger unsure of his welcome.' He arrives hung over, but his evident alcoholism may only be the symptom of a deeper affliction, one that *Home* invites us to think about in explicitly theological terms. In *Gilead*, when Jack quizzed his father and Ames on the perennially tricky topic of predestination, Ames thought the younger man was mocking them. The scene is replayed in *Home*, with Glory anticipating an endless and fruitless doctrinal debate: 'Ames and her father had quarreled over this any number of times, her father asserting the perfect sufficiency of grace with something like ferocity, while Ames maintained, with a mildness his friend found irksome, that the gravity of sin could not be gainsaid.' But there is nothing mischievous or provoking in Jack's inquiry. When he asks 'Do you think some people are intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition?' it is clear, to the reader, if not to his father, that he has a particular case--his own--in mind.

Nothing in the novel rules out the possibility that Jack might exist outside the grace of God, and that this spiritual condition, as much as any psychological disposition, might explain his loneliness and estrangement in the bosom of such a warm and blessed family. The apparent failure of two learned and serious ministers to hear the plain, earnest intent of Jack's question is painful in itself, but it is also the sign of something larger. *Home* and *Gilead* are marvelous novels about family, friendship and aging. But they are great novels--or perhaps two installments in a single, as yet unfinished great novel--about race and religion in American life.

Ten years ago, Robinson published *The Death of Adam*, a collection of bracingly contrarian essays whose common thread was a defense of the Puritan intellectual and ethical tradition. Against the grain of much recent historiography--and in the teeth of a powerful literary tendency going back to the end of the 19th century--she defended John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and their descendants against the usual charges of intolerance, prudery and parsimoniousness. Instead, she finds a tradition devoted to social justice, universal education and a chastening knowledge of human fallibility.

For Robinson, the political and moral apotheosis of this noble, misunderstood tradition was the abolitionist movement, among whose incidental achievements was the founding of towns like Gilead, a kind of garrison for militants fighting the spread of slavery in Kansas. John Ames is steeped in this local history--his grandfather was a zealot in the old, righteous antislavery cause--and Jack Boughton is aware of

it, too. 'Home again in Iowa, the shining star of radicalism,' he says, quoting Ulysses S. Grant. There is rueful irony there, as there is in nearly everything Jack says, but there is also something more: a sad acknowledgment of how far the town has fallen away from its founding spirit.

In 1956, the problem of race preoccupies no one in Gilead but Jack Boughton. He and his father watch the news from Montgomery, Ala.—'On the screen white police with riot sticks were pushing and dragging black demonstrators. There were dogs'--but the reverend is unmoved: 'In six months nobody will remember one thing about it,' he says. Later, he declares that 'the colored people' are 'creating problems and obstacles for themselves with all this--commotion.' He sees no particular connection between that distant commotion and local history, in which he takes little interest apart from observing that 'there was a lot of what you might call fanaticism around here in the early days.'

There are other names for it, one of which might be moral courage. Jack's failure to find any trace of that--and the inability of either Ames or Boughton to understand that it has been lost--is infuriating and finally heartbreaking. Readers who come to *Home* after *Gilead* will know that during his 20-year exile Jack met a black woman and had a child with her. His return to Gilead is in part a reconnaissance mission, an attempt to discover if the town might be a suitable home for a mixed-race family. In 1956, there are 'no colored people in Gilead,' but it has not always been that way. They left after their church was burned, even though Ames remembers the arson as 'a little nuisance fire' that happened long ago. And Ames's 'shabby old town' is a place where a black family is afraid to be out on the road when the sun goes down.

These ugly facts complicate the beauty of *Home*, but the way Robinson embeds them in the novel is part of what makes it so beautiful. It is a book unsparing in its acknowledgment of sin and unstinting in its belief in the possibility of grace. It is at once hard and forgiving, bitter and joyful, fanatical and serene. It is a wild, eccentric, radical work of literature that grows out of the broadest, most fertile, most familiar native literary tradition. What a strange old book it is."

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

"Marilynne Robinson's mournful new novel, *Home*, is not a sequel or a prequel to her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gilead* (2004) but rather a companion. And companionship, it turns out, is what all the lonely people in this book are seeking. Set in the same Iowa town, just a short distance from Rev. John Ames, the dying narrator of *Gilead*, the events in *Home* take place concurrently with those of that other novel. This time, however, we're in the house of Rev. Robert Boughton, Ames's longtime friend, who's equally close to putting on 'imperishability.'

The publisher claims these two novels can be read separately, but that's not fair to the profound relationship between them nor, I think, to the way *Home* depends on its predecessor for detail and resonance. Indeed, as meditative and spare as *Gilead* is, it now seems downright hyperactive next to this ruminative new volume. Rev. Ames, you will recall, spiced his reflections on life and God with wild tales of his one-eyed grandfather, who rode with the abolition terrorist John Brown. There are deadly adventures in *Home*, too, but they take place offstage, and they're never mentioned, only outlined by the pained silence of those who cannot forget.

Almost all the physical movement of this story is exhausted in its opening pages with the return of Glory, the youngest of Boughton's eight children. Robinson writes in the third person, but we see the events that unfold over the following months in 1950 from Glory's point of view. Her father is overjoyed to see her, and neither of them mentions the collapsed engagement and abandoned career that have brought her back to live in her childhood house at the age of 38. 'Nothing about that house ever did change,' she thinks, 'except to fade or scar or wear.' Now, forced to abandon dreams of a husband and a child of her own, she's haunted by the question, 'What does it mean to come home?' With so much nursing and housekeeping to be done, both of them can pretend that Glory has returned entirely for her father's sake. 'She did not permit herself to brood, strong as the urge was sometimes,' Robinson writes. 'She could decide nothing about her life. She did not want to think about her life.'

Their quiet routine is soon interrupted by the return of another wayward Boughton child. The black sheep in this otherwise happy family, Jack was a petty thief and a brooding drunk who skipped town 20 years before, leaving behind his teenage girlfriend, a baby and a cloud of shame. During the intervening years, Jack continued to torture his parents by spurning every offer of assistance no matter how desperate his circumstances. When he finally returns--thin, pale, unkempt--Glory barely recognizes him. Though she once idolized him, now he seems to her 'the weight on the family's heart, the unnamed absence, like the hero in a melancholy tale.' But their father--a man of 'tireless tenderness'--is giddy, thrilled by the possibility that his boundless love may finally open the heart of his wary, rueful child.

This is a version of the Prodigal Son that picks up where the Gospel parable stops, after the extravagant feast, when the excitement of reunion fades in the awkwardness of the next day, and then the next. Robinson has constructed a plot so still that it seems at times more a series of tableaux than a novel. The tension in *Home* is palpable but invisible. Rev. Boughton, Glory and Jack move through domestic chores and hesitant conversations, fraught with the danger of confession or rapprochement or affection. Glory and her father are determined to make their love known to Jack, but the possibility of his bolting again renders them all timid and formal. 'They had always been so careful of him,' Robinson writes, 'almost afraid to touch him. There was an aloofness about him more thoroughgoing than modesty or reticence. It was feral, and fragile.'

Jack is a man in the throes of a spiritual crisis, which Robinson captures with the most exquisite precision. An alcoholic clutching at the edges of sobriety, he's tempted to think he can clean himself up, but he's desperately afraid of failing, knowing that one more slip could kill both him and his long suffering father. With a mixture of affection, embarrassment and annoyance, he realizes that his father is 'afraid to die because of me. To leave me behind, still unregenerate.'

Writing one novel about a minister's family is asking for trouble; writing a second seems downright unrepentant, the kind of misjudgment that could land a reputable literary author in a Christian bookstore or with a cozy series on the BBC. But Robinson, who teaches at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, is unlikely to suffer either fate; her books are toxic to sentimentality. Even more than their stylistic beauty, what's miraculous about *Gilead* and *Home* is their explicit focus on spiritual affliction, discussed in the hard terms of Protestant theology. Robinson uses the words 'grace,' 'salvation' and 'prayer' frequently and without embarrassment and without drifting into the gassy lingo of ecumenical spirituality. Her characters cower in the shadow of perdition. Though as a teenager Jack seemed to have paid no attention to his father's sermons, now, amid the ruins of his adult life, he's hypnotized by a sense of his worthlessness even as he feels 'a certain spiritual hunger.' Why, he wonders, could he never be a part of this wonderful family? What has drawn him again and again to hurt them and himself? 'I don't really know what to do with myself,' he tells Glory. 'I'm a scoundrel.'

As a disquisition on the agonies of family love and serial disappointment, *Home* is sometimes too illuminating to bear. During a long, candid conversation that serves as the crisis of the novel, Jack's father confesses, 'So many times, over the years, I've tried not to love you so much. I never got anywhere with it, but I tried.' And then he manages to ask, without rancor of any kind, 'What I'd like to know, is why you didn't love us. That is what has always mystified me.'

Although there's much sadness here, it's always cradled in Robinson's voice. 'This life on earth is a strange business,' she writes, but somehow that business sounds like a more familiar home in these discerning pages."

Ron Charles
Washington Post
(7 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.

The catalyzing moment in both novels is the return of Glory’s older brother Jack to their hometown of Gilead, Iowa. Jack is the son of Ames’ best friend, Robert Boughton, Gilead’s Presbyterian minister. (Though Ames is a Congregationalist, their doctrinal differences seem friendly.) Jack is named for Ames--who was, at the time of Jack’s birth, a young widower who might otherwise never have had a namesake--but even as a child he was known to be a scoundrel and a thief. Glory recalls a childhood misdeed for which she and some of their other siblings had to apologize; she remembers that ‘[s]omewhere along the way Jack caught up and walked along with them, as if penance must always include him.’ He disappears as a young man, cutting off all contact with his family and not even coming home for his mother’s funeral.

But after a 20-year silence, Jack Boughton returns. It is now 1957, and in the early pages of *Home* he appears ‘in the back porch, a thin man in a brown suit, tapping his hat against his pant leg as if he could not make up his mind whether to knock on the glass or turn the knob or simply to leave again.’ He is civil to Glory--who has recently come back to Gilead to care for their declining father--but he divulges little about his life during his years away. Details bubble up despite his efforts to keep them down: He is sensitive to news about the racial strife in Montgomery, Ala., and when Glory takes one of his shirts off the line, she notices that it’s ‘spangled with stars and flowers, an elaborate embroidery of white on white from the cuff to the elbow, and one final flower near the shoulder’--a detail that makes evident to her his involvement with an aesthetically minded woman. The novel’s plot--rich and resonant, though its incidents are quiet--tells the story of these long-estranged adult siblings carefully moving toward a degree of love and trust of each other.

One of the pleasures of reading *Home* is Robinson’s light touch with what readers may already know from a sojourn in *Gilead*. At that novel’s climax, Jack makes a confession to Ames about the unusual circumstances of his home life, but as the details about the civil rights movement and the embroidery show, Robinson only points toward this back story here. Someone who’s read *Gilead* will pay particular attention to such hints; but a reader unfamiliar with the earlier book will find Robinson’s allusions to Jack’s personal history subtle and deft. The author likewise treats Glory’s disappointments with a delicate hand.

As in *Gilead*, Robinson’s dignified prose delineates wonderfully vibrant, complex characters. Jack may be a ne’er-do-well, but he’s well educated: When, trying to make him feel more at home, Glory claims that ‘I wouldn’t care if you were a petty thief,’ Jack’s smiling response is, ‘That’s very subjunctive of you.’ Their father, a courtly minor player in *Gilead*, is here richly portrayed in his genteel dotage. We hear his optimism and pride and the cheerful cadence of his voice when he brightly tells Jack, ‘Yes!... I have never known it to be true that an educated man could not find work as a schoolteacher! There are more children every day! I notice them everywhere!’”

Emily Barton
The Los Angeles Times
(7 December 2008)

“What do you give a woman whose treatise on the plutonium content of the Irish Sea can put your family off eating fish in Wales for life? A woman who makes you feel you’re missing something if you don’t read John Calvin every morning before breakfast, or rethink Darwin, or sleep with your shoes on and maybe hop the occasional freight train, perhaps compose a 250-page letter to your small son.

I say give that woman pen and paper. Then stand back. Or better yet, approach, but with some caution. She will lull and woo you, and before you know it you are out in the middle of the night with your oddest aunt shivering in a leaky boat in very scary water, and not long after, setting fire to the curtains in the parlor, the last word in housekeeping. *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson’s first novel, a book that warned us not to be surprised if one day she wrote books like *Gilead* and now her latest, *Home*. To read Marilynne

Robinson is to enter into an agreement. I say be careful what you sign. Read the small print. Her characters can move into your living room, take up residence in silences and shadows, their triumphs and discomforts come unbidden at the oddest times. Her thoughts can make camp in your mind.

Pastor Tim Keller says you need a God you can disagree with. I think we need writers we can disagree with. Writers with positions and attitudes—yea, attitude—and dare, I say it, beliefs (oh dear!). And if Robinson's beliefs are not always my own, they help me to consider just what mine might be and why, and give a free home demonstration of definition playing out across a lifetime, blessing its bearer and the souls life brings to him.

For all of her conviction, Robinson is not a desperate writer. She doesn't over-describe or explain or try to convince you of anything. Gertrude Stein said she wrote for herself and for strangers. I think Marilynne Robinson writes for herself. Every worthy writer does, write for that self, that stranger, familiarly strange. She tells her story—it's all any writer has to tell—but because it's true, there is a place inside of it for us. A story about everybody is a story about no one. She makes you think that, happy or not, every family is different. And so, every family is just like yours. But you'll be wanting now to know about the plot of this new novel. A man, Jack Boughton, comes home—yes, to Gilead—to his father and his sister, Glory, after twenty silent years away. He gardens, fixes the car, visits the neighbors, and goes to church a couple times. Then goes away again.

And if this Jack Boughton is the Prodigal, he's one whose father slaughters not the fattened calf, but any hope of lasting ease. The Prodigal whose older brother traveled six times to St Louis to search the sorry streets for him. But Robinson would have Jack be more Lazarus than Prodigal, Lazarus 'with the memory of ceremonies about him,' no matter he is washed and shaved, his hair slicked down, dressed up in a suit he has *dry-cleaned* with dabs of gasoline. Lazarus who wishes they'd all stop studying him, stop falling silent when he walks into the room. He's Lazarus, not Saul or Paul, not Simon Peter, not even Thomas. His story isn't from the Gospels or the Book of Acts so much as it is from an older testament.

He's Abraham—he's told—abandoning his Ishmael; he's Caleb and Joshua still thinking things possible even after forty years of wandering in the desert. He is David, his *sin ever before him*, still, *man after God's own heart*, rehearsing questions about the sins of the fathers being visited on sons. Jack is Jonah telling God: *I fled because I feared your mercy*; he's Moses, stuttering: *God, Please! Pick somebody else*. He is Joseph, father-favorite, given a coat of many colors woven out of expectations—that he be happy, happier perhaps than his father ever managed to be. If there is a balm in Gilead, the relationship of this brother Jack with this sister Glory, and in the end with Reverend Ames, would suggest the balm to be a thing as rarefied and fine as friendly feeling, that friend-love that does not need you to be successful, or remarkable, or particularly serene. His sister: young Miriam. His godfather: Elijah, telling Elisha it's God who runs the blessing department. It's all been told before. But that's the point. The story's old. All stories are. We do not read for that. We read to know just what we are to make of the stories we already know. We read to ask how are we, knowing what we know, expected to get out of bed tomorrow morning. To stay alive till then. Some days to flourish.

Robinson can be a gentle writer, soothing even, but always in the service of an enterprise that in another hand might have us in the stock and pillory. She's come to talk of things that matter, let us not pretend. Mercy, grace. Truth and wisdom. And sorrow for our sin. Sin, perhaps defined as our intention to believe our substitutes will see us through. *And yet, and yet, I show you a better way*. In this writer's hands, good people can be good with fear of neither masquerade nor tedium. Her saints are kind as they are intelligent. A dying father says his *anticipation* of the prayers of gratitude and rejoicing he would pray on the day his prodigal came home gave him joy for twenty years. Robinson's men—yes, men—refuse ironic immolation with a soft-spoken, pleasing ease. (I want to use the word old-fashioned, though I know full well that goodness never was in vogue. True courtesy, hard to abide.) And here, rogues and villains practice righteousness, refuse to lie. Robinson writes of a redemption that redeems our dogged compromise, our tawdry imitations.

There's no fit way to encapsulate the beauty of Robinson's language, the lyricism born and bred in earnestness, the brilliance of her understanding. Choppy quotes are clunky. Not that that will stop my

trying. Robinson would have us know things. Have us know forgiveness *precedes* not follows understanding. Forgive, she says, and 'you will be ready to understand, and that is the posture of grace.' She paints with tiny brush strokes, showing 'Sympathy [that] would corrupt something wonderful, which secrecy and a kind of shame kept safe.' She tells us of a God who 'lets us wander so we will know what it means to come home.' She'd have us laugh out loud, with the preacher's treating salvation as if it were 'a problem that had been sorted out between the Druids and the centurions at about the time of Hadrian,' adding that 'The doctrine of total depravity had served him well.' And later, she has his children studying 'deracination...angst and anomie, done 'with the earnest suspension of doubt that afflicts the highly educable.'

Robinson knows and does not fear to tell us what a thing a family can be, with the burden of 'their endless, relentless loyalty.' The parents with the hope their son would not be lost to them. 'The one hope I couldn't put aside.' says the father who doesn't ask for much, only everything, only wanting every day forever 'the childish happiness they'd offered to their father's hopes.' This writer knows old age. The joke seeming to be that once very young, now very old, having been the same day after day, people at the end are somehow so utterly changed. Looking back on being young, the old man says, 'it's like remembering that I used to be the sun and the wind.' Now, his hair 'brushed into a soft white cloud, like harmless aspiration, like a mist given off by the endless work of dreaming,' he sleeps on. And finally he knows something like peacefulness with the 'extinction of that last hope, like a perfect humility undistracted by the possible.' And always memory. Standing in the sunlight 'the wind hushing in the dusty lilacs of their childhood, laundry swaying on the lines where school clothes used to hang.'

But it is Jack whose story breaks our hearts, as it surely should. We are made to understand the stark lunacy it is to think that he would one day get to know his family, come for Christmas, as though parents and siblings were only people. We see Jack with his sister 'whiling away perdition together,' reading to his sleeping father, his voice 'courteous to the page he read from.' Jack, laying out his alternatives to a slight by the Revered Ames as either confronting him, leaving town in a huff, or else 'the only undamaging choice left to me. Which might also have the look of virtue, I believe.' To forgive. As he prepares to go away again, he has 'fallen back on estrangement, his oldest habit,' the injury to him that 'all of them were native to their life as he could never be.' He experiences 'none of the trust that sustained the most ordinary conversation.'

What is the soul? his sister Glory asks. 'It's what you can't get rid of.' His reply. When she would assuage his pain, he tells her, 'Let me get used to things the way they are. That's the biggest favor you can do me.' Finally, the last morning, he seems to be 'withdrawing into utter resignation, as if the old incandescence had consumed him before it flickered out.'

Marilynne Robinson is in a category by herself, and that category is both fully staffed and up to any project. I hope this is gratuitous, but if you haven't read the essays in *The Death of Adam*, neither sleep nor eat till you have remedied the oversight. Her first novel *Housekeeping* is what I think a book should be. And now writing in *Home* of the same people in the same time and place as in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead*, everything is different. These two books could not be less alike. And just because she can and perhaps must, Robinson has pages and pages of dialogue about theology here, people sitting on the porch as evening falls, discussing and dissecting the particulars. The reader slows his pace, he doesn't want to miss a word. Theology as conversation. She's pulled off the impossible. (I know whereof I speak.)

In all her work we have the writer as magician. She's making a concoction of her own invention, and if she doesn't know if it will turn the one who drinks it into a fairy princess or blow the place to smithereens, well, those are risks she is prepared to take on our behalf. Perhaps that hints at her distinctive. She has been the sort of reader in her life who knows the possibility of writing. She takes nothing lightly, but there is lilt and charm for all of that. She can be light precisely because she knows the stakes are high, because she has cared enough to take the measure of the thing. And, she has the requisite humility to say, 'There are things worth believing.'

So then. How to end a tribute so deserved? Why, the only way that makes any sense at all. To copy out the final sentence from this book, to speak aloud the words and hope to live in what they mean. Her last word: *The Lord is wonderful*."

Linda McCullough Moore
Books & Culture
Christianitytoday.com (2008)

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in,' wrote Robert Frost. But at what cost, and to what end? This is but one of a welter of profound considerations in Marilynne Robinson's impossibly rich and beautiful new novel, touted as a companion to her prior, much-vaunted novel, *Gilead*. In full disclosure, I confess to having been one of perhaps three people on Earth who did not initially succumb to *Gilead*. The reason? Its voice--that of the Rev. John Ames, in a long letter to his young son--rang for me too cloyingly good, heavy with what Robinson herself calls, in *Home* (via a character's quip), 'the odor of sanctity.'

I put *Gilead* aside, but eagerly snatched it up again after reading *Home*. As a deepening perspective, it proved terrifically satisfying. (For those who may not yet have read either, I recommend reading *Home* first.) In *Home*, Robinson enters at closer range to the story, told by Ames in *Gilead*, of Jack Boughton: the 40ish, ne'er-do-well son of the widowed, dying pastor Robert. Old Robert has been the lifelong best friend of the aging Ames, who lives nearby with his much-younger wife and child. Jack, named for Ames, has been the hellion and scourge of a family of seven, plunging them into shame and tragedy after impregnating a local girl and disappearing for 20 years. Yet he is also his father's favorite; thus, the old man's greatest grief.

The era is that of the early 1950s--significant for its conservatism and unquestioned conformities. Glory, youngest of the (now grown and scattered) Boughton clan and recently humiliated by a failed marital engagement, arrives at the family homestead in bucolic, peaceful Gilead to care for her dying father. Soon thereafter she is joined by older brother Jack, a sweet, pained, gifted, convolutedly self-ironic loner. Never mind they grew up singing hymns at the piano; the Boughtons maintain a personal decorousness that, for modern Westerners, may approach pathology. ('Her family was slower to forgive a failure of discretion than they were to forgive most things actually prohibited in Scripture.')

After his 20-year absence, neither Glory nor the old man dares ask the underfed, penniless, miserable Jack, 'What happened?' Instead, the three odd housemates attempt, quietly, heroically, to create a domestic life. Glory and Jack edge toward connection, but the going's excruciating. Secrets emerge, or half-emerge. Jack would like to relieve his father, family and disapproving Ames (rather shadowy in this rendering) of their dismay for him. Of all the grown children, Jack knows his Scripture best, but he's not a believer. Carrying a complicated, concealed burden, he longs to belong somewhere but cannot, for inarticulate reasons, get out of his own way.

Many of us have known a Jack Boughton, or been him. It is a mark of Robinson's extreme skill and imaginative empathy that we're given this lost, lovely man in marvelous, complex dimension. Perhaps anticipating the argument that any son of a near-saintly pastor and his 'slightly self-enamored and distinctly clerical family' might well opt for a misfit's life, Robinson has also entrapped Jack in a somewhat more contemporary predicament (revealed toward the last) that compounds his 'inaccessible strangeness' in an upright culture of 'endless probity.' One may wonder, mildly, whether a man like Jack might have fared better, say, as the son of cheerful atheists living in New York or San Francisco in the 21st century. Yet we recognize the brilliant, embattled self-saboteur in any era or circumstance.

In both *Home* and *Gilead*, Robinson appears to be considering (among myriad themes and issues) the ravaging, irremediable loneliness of the unbeliever. She embeds her inquiry in a lode of theological history, and a nest of comforting physical details. *Home*'s deepest pleasures may come from the exchanges (which form the novel's body) between Glory and Jack--tentative, difficult, sore with love, anguish, insight, told through Glory's exquisitely nuanced perceptions in clean, simple, luminous language. (Robinson's prose soothes and calms, itself a balm.) Jack strives to prove himself, relapses and self-lacerates, retriggering everyone's sorrow, not least that of a father who hardens as he diminishes--a spectacle so universal in its

particularity it becomes nearly unbearable. We may hope, *Home* finally suggests, that things will one day settle, in unanticipated ways. Robinson loves the word 'settle,' and by it she does not mean resignation.

Home offers such intricate characterizations, so many passages of surpassing wisdom and beauty, one yearns to quote page after page. It rejoices in the humblest actions--giving a haircut, weeding, making meals, coffee--the holiness of the daily. As handily as it fits Frost's famous lines, *Home* also calls to mind those of the late, entirely unreligious E. B. White: 'All that I ever hope to say, is that I love the world'."

Joan Frank
San Francisco Chronicle
(14 September 2008)

Michael Hollister (2015)