

3 CRITICS DISCUSS

Housekeeping (1981)

Marilynne Robinson

(1943-)

“Here’s a first novel that sounds as if the author has been treasuring it up all her life, waiting for it to form itself. It’s as if, in writing it, she broke through the ordinary human condition with all its dissatisfactions, and achieved a kind of transfiguration. You can feel in the book a gathering voluptuous release of confidence, a delighted surprise at the unexpected capacities of language, a close, careful fondness for people that we thought only saints felt.

Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* is not about housekeeping at all, but transience. It is about people who have not managed to connect with a place, a purpose, a routine or another person. It’s about the immensely resourceful sadness of a certain kind of American, someone who has fallen out of history and is trying to invent a life without assistance of any kind, without even recognizing that there are precedents. It is about a woman who is so far from everyone else that it would be presumptuous to put a name to her frame of mind. Two Abandoned Girls

Sylvie, the principal character in *Housekeeping*, is looking after, or looking past, or looking around, two adolescent girls her sister has abandoned in Fingerbone. Fingerbone is one of those towns that seem to be lost between the West and the Middle West. As Miss Robinson puts it, Fingerbone is ‘chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather.’ It is often flooded and, after the waters recede, the graves in the cemetery are sunken, ‘like empty bellies.’ The two girls--Ruth, the narrator, and Lucille--are afraid that Sylvie is going to abandon them too, that she will disappear as mysteriously as she appeared. As Ruth says, Sylvie ‘seldom removed her coat, and every story she told had to do with a train or bus station.’ Sylvie likes to tell stories, ‘intricate and melancholy tales of people she had known slightly.’ Ruth describes the opening of one of Sylvie’s stories: ‘It was with a certain Alma that Sylvie had sat one Sunday on a stack of pine boards in a lumber yard outside Orofino.’

Everytime Sylvie goes out of the house, the girls think she is not coming back and they pull on overcoats and follow her. Sylvie doesn't always sleep in the house, and Ruth says, ‘I was reassured by her sleeping on the lawn, and now and then in the car. It seemed to me that if she could remain transient here, she would not have to leave.’ Sylvie likes to sit in the dark, ‘enjoying the evening,’ as she puts it. On one of their walks together, she takes Ruth to see a ruined house in a beautiful valley. The people who built the house never paused to observe that, because of the topography of the valley, the sun never reached the house or grounds.

Sylvie bought blue velveteen ballet slippers, adorned with sequins, for the girls to wear to school. As Ruth says, she ‘inhabited a millennial present. To her, the deteriorations of things were always a fresh surprise, a disappointment not to be dwelt on.’ Sylvie saved old newspapers and cans whose labels were peeled off because ‘she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping.’ Before Sylvie, the girls were looked after by two great-aunts who left their subterranean room in a hotel in another city to come and do their duty. But, Ruth tells us, the weight of the snow on the roof of the house in Fingerbone was ‘a source of grave and perpetual anxiety to my great-aunts, who were accustomed to a brick building, and to living below ground.’ Their conversation seemed ‘always to be the elaboration and ornamentation of the consensus between them, which was as intricate and well-tended as a termite castle.’

The girls were quite small when their mother left them, with a box of graham crackers, on the porch in Fingerbone. ‘At last,’ Ruth says, ‘we slid from her lap like one of those magazines full of responsible opinion about discipline and balanced meals.’ Her mother had told the girls to ‘wait’ there for her, and this, Ruth says, ‘established in me the habit of waiting and expectation which makes any present moment most significant for what it does not contain.’ Like the Impressionists Miss Robinson works with light, dark,

water, heat, cold, textures, sounds and smells...taking apart the landscape to remind us that we are surrounded by elements, that we are separated from one another, and from our past and future, by such influences. At one point in *Housekeeping*, Ruth has grown so awkwardly tall that her sister, Lucille, knocks the heels off her shoes to help her stand and move more naturally. Marilynne Robinson, too, does something like this. She knocks off the false elevation, the pretentiousness, of our current fiction. Though her ambition is tall, she remains down to earth, where the best novels happen."

Anatole Broyard
The New York Times
(7 January 1981)

"Robinson began to write *Housekeeping* while working on a dissertation on Shakespeare's histories for a Ph.D. at the University of Washington ('I just wanted to read more') and living in Massachusetts while her husband taught at the state university. She began by 'collecting metaphors' on scraps of paper. 'I wasn't terribly conscious of what I was doing.' For several years, she wrote at night and 'played a sleepy version of myself' with her sons by day. She had no plans to publish the manuscript. It simply seemed too different from the work she saw being reviewed. 'It had all female characters, and it was much more about thinking, a sort of meditative book, in a period when it seemed as if there was very little writing of that kind,' she said over coffee and nut cookies on her porch. 'I keep remembering seeing pictures of men in overalls who had just written a book about dropping everything and taking off on a motorcycle. It didn't seem as if there was any particular premium placed on inwardness or reflection at that point, and that is the only kind of writing that has ever interested me.'

Despite her expectations, *Housekeeping* was exceptionally well received. In *The New York Times*, Anatole Broyard wrote, 'Here's a first novel that sounds as if the author has been treasuring it up all her life.' Doris Lessing said enthusiastically, 'I found myself reading slowly, then more slowly.' *Housekeeping* is part of a tradition of visionary American novels, like Cormac McCarthy's border trilogy. Steeped in the sonorous rhythms of Shakespeare and the King James Bible, the prose is elegiac and infused with the spaciousness of big-sky land, where it is set. Robinson describes metaphysical states as concretely as domestic interiors. 'Everything that falls upon the eye is an apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings.... One is left with dreams that these specters loose their hands from ours and walk away,' Ruth, the narrator, tells us.

Primarily, *Housekeeping* is the story of Ruth and her younger sister, Lucille, two lonely girls who are raised by their aunt Sylvie, a former transient. Their mother has drowned herself in the glacial lake that borders the town and routinely floods the house; their grandfather, too, 'escaped this world' into the lake's waters, in a spectacular train accident. The novel is organized around a series of striking visual paradigms: the two girls skating until dark on thin ice above the water shrouding their mother and grandfather and, of course, the monolithic, elemental bridge that passes over the lake, and across which Ruth must symbolically cross at the book's end.

If *Housekeeping* is indeed about what Robinson called 'inwardness,' it is not the inwardness that the 70's 'Me' decade espoused. There is no rediscovered Inner Child; there are no recovered memories. The book deals with female alienation, but it does so with almost dispassionate reticence; *Housekeeping* struck a quiet chord in a generation of women who had assimilated second-wave feminism and become tired of the stridency of agenda-driven literature. Certainly it would be a mistake to consider *Housekeeping* a woman's book, despite its title. It is a book about spiritual order and uncountenanced yearning. Its method is metaphoric, and like the best metaphorical literature--*Moby-Dick*, for example--its symbols simultaneously edify and mystify, teach and puzzle. (Robinson actually calls her book *Moby-Jane* for its multiple drownings; Melville's novel is one of her favorite books.)

The novel's audience built through word of mouth, and in 1987, Bill Forsyth made it into a movie starring Christine Lahti. Robinson had become a famous writer. Only she was a famous writer without a second novel to sell. Another writer might have become concerned about her artistic dry spell. But it didn't bother Robinson: the intellectual problems that absorbed her seemed to be best addressed in nonfiction. After *Housekeeping*, she wrote *Mother Country*, a controversial expose of the accumulation of nuclear waste at the Sellafield processing plant in Britain that was highly critical of the British government and of

Greenpeace's inefficacy. (*Mother Country* was 'eye-opening,' Robinson said; she was slapped with a libel suit by Greenpeace, of all things, and because she refused to excise any passages, the book remains banned in Britain.)"

Meghan O'Rourke
The New York Times
(24 October 2004)

"*Housekeeping* begins with a man's dreams of mountains; it becomes the story of a drowned railroad man's family and his drowned daughter's children who live in the loss-haunted home the drowned man built. The story is of Aunt Sylvie and her two nieces, Lucille and Ruthie, the novel's narrator. Sylvie and Ruthie wander and dream, and Lucille turns to home economics and the mysteries of stability. Lucille imagines the citizens of Fingerbone, a town much like Sandpoint, Idaho, to live in a better way, but the other two, niece and aunt, prefer to search the wider world more aimlessly, losing themselves in boxcars, in a stolen rowboat, in an abandoned homestead, and, finally, under cover through the smoke of their own home's flames.

Robinson's book shows the small Idaho towns to be serious places. Throughout her childhood Robinson read the thick books in her school libraries, was trained in Latin by rigorous high-school teachers, in Plato and in the American transcendentalists and Emily Dickinson by her older brother who loaned his books to her, and, especially, in the language of King James Bible at home and in church. She remains entranced by the Bible; her son James said in an interview with the *Idaho Statesman* (September 9, 2001) that "our way of bonding is to discuss Theodor Adorno's critique of Christianity." And Robinson said, "I believe the entire hypertrophic bookishness of my life arose directly out of my exposure...to the language of Scripture" (Mark Popkey, "A Writer's Life," *The Idaho Statesman*, September 9, 2001). Robinson teaches for the University of Iowa Writers Workshop, is a deacon in Iowa City's United Church of Christ, and remains a student of religious traditions and beliefs.

These bookish anchors hold *Housekeeping* in the country of Robinson's childhood—Northern Idaho, the high panhandle country, and the towns of Coeur d'Alene, and Sandpoint with its long railroad bridge, and beside the great glacier-formed lakes in that region—Pend Oreille, Priest, Hayden, and Coeur d'Alene. How, a city bumpkin asks Robinson in the essay "My Western Roots" (1993), can someone from Idaho write a book? Robinson replies at length, and the reader knows that *Housekeeping* and all the rest of Robinson's writing began in the place all such writing begins, in libraries, solid teaching, in belief, and a place to see the world clearly.

For readers of *Housekeeping*, here are some questions to discuss:

1. *The Idaho Statesman*, describing the book for its series of articles on an all-Idaho reading project, said, "[*Housekeeping*] is accessible enough to be on the school district's list of books for the tenth-grade classroom. Its descriptions of Sandpoint, "Fingerbone," are crisp and moving. The book is topical, exploring issues of mental illness, conformity, and family dysfunction." Here one might object. Though the characters are a little wild, even feral, are they aptly deemed to be "mentally ill?" One may also ask how perceptions of the book might change between adolescence and adulthood, and through adulthood's various stages.

2. You are reading this site and its literature for examples of regional writing. Robinson probably didn't anticipate this regionalism as she wrote *Housekeeping*. She said, 'I don't think of it as particularly more or less likely to occur anywhere' (O'Connell 1998: 253). Yet books like this define a place somehow. To what end do readers distinguish between the universal meanings of a book and its regional usefulness?

3. *Housekeeping* is praised for its language; one way to appreciate this is to look through the book for sections you annotated or underlined because the writing seemed remarkable and share those sections with other readers. Throughout the book are examples of Robinson's craft. One section to consider is the beginning of chapter 9, where Robinson describes life in a small, closely-knit town.

4. Robinson said she wanted to “have” *Moby Dick*, to deny that Melville’s book was written for men only. “I thought if I could write a book in which there are no male characters--that men could read comfortably--then I could get *Moby Dick*” (Schaub 1994: 235). How could such a book affect the literary foundations of a region if that region’s literature depicts, primarily, the actions of men?

5. Does this book help to resolve, or does it put the reader in a bind between, conflicting ideals? One ideal holds that community stability and material possessions are not the most important things; another ideal values stability and makes the reader suspicious of persons who don't accumulate conventional comforts. We praise and deride success; we praise and deride self-sacrifice. Does *Housekeeping* argue for one ideal over the other?

6. Hearsay says that urbane northeasterners accuse westerners of cultural ignorance. *Housekeeping* accents this accusation because, as Robinson says in “My Western Roots” (1993:165-66), “I find that the hardest work in the world—it may in fact be impossible—is to persuade easterners that growing up in the West is not intellectually crippling. On learning that I am from Idaho, people have not infrequently asked, ‘Then how were you able to write a book?’ [How did Idaho-born Ezra Pound go on to revolutionize modern poetry?] What are the bases for this cultural perception? Consider what it means to live in a place whose history in the dominant culture is short. Is there a difference in how one achieves cultural status in north Idaho as compared to New England?

7. What can the reader know of Lucille and Ruthie’s cultural knowledge? Are the two girls separable from the sophistication of their creator who speaks for them? Review the book for clues to the narrator’s cultural education. Can one tell what Ruthie knew as a character in the narrative and what she does not know until she, as narrator, is much older? Does the book seem to put a mature woman’s head on a young girl’s shoulders?

8. Sylvie, Ruthie, and Lucille walk along lakeshores, skate on the lake’s frozen water, trudge through snow and up wild hillsides as they explore, for days at a time, the Idaho outdoors. Discuss whether the book’s setting designs the book’s meaning. Consider, at the same time, what the poet William Stafford said. ‘It’s a pleasant thought, but the idea that the style is rooted to the landscape just sounds sort of quaint to me” (O’Connell 1998: 260). Marilynne Robinson said, “People in Finland have told me that they knew of precisely similar circumstances” (O’Connell 1998: 253). How does a region hold any claim to its literature?

9. *Housekeeping* makes frequent references to the Bible and to other texts from western culture. How much is it necessary to recognize and acknowledge these correspondences when one teaches or discusses the book?”

“Marilynne Robinson”
Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest
(washington.edu, 2014)

Michael Hollister (2015)