

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

READING GROUP GUIDE

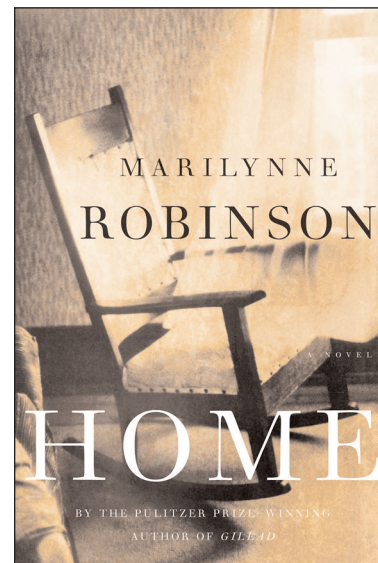
HOME

by Marilynne Robinson



“Robinson’s beautiful new novel, a companion piece to her Pulitzer Prize–winning *Gilead*, is an elegant variation on the parable of the prodigal son’s return.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



978-0-374-29910-1 • 0-374-29910-2
336 pages

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of Marilynne Robinson’s *Home*. We hope they will enrich your experience as you explore this extraordinary novel from one of our most beloved contemporary writers.

A novel that enthralled America and garnered the Pulitzer Prize, *Gilead* transported readers to a small Iowa town at the cultural crossroads of the 1950s. Returning once again to that singular time and place, Marilynne Robinson has crafted a wholly independent, deeply affecting novel taking place in the household of the Reverend Robert Boughton, whose closest friend John Ames narrated *Gilead* in a voice that was at once tender and luminous.

Home begins as Glory Boughton returns to Gilead at the age of thirty-eight to care for her dying father. Soon her brother, Jack, the family’s prodigal son, joins her after

twenty years away. Named for John Ames, his godfather, Jack struggles to make peace with his past, marked by alcoholism and failed attempts at conventional living. Yet he is his father's most beloved child. In what may be their final reunion, Jack and Robert struggle to understand their difficult relationship, while Glory attempts to come to terms with the lost promises of her youth.

A moving and healing book, *Home* inspires thoughtful conversation about families, honesty, and the passing of generations.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does "home" mean to Robert Boughton and his children? What does the Boughton house signify to his family? With whom do they feel most at home?
2. How does Glory's opinion of Jack change throughout the novel? What enables them to trust each other? In what ways is that trust strained? How does their relationship compare to yours with your siblings?
3. How is the Boughton household affected by the presence of a television set? How does this reflect a shift that took place in many households throughout America in the 1950s? Were you surprised by Robert Boughton's comments about African Americans, and by his reaction to the televised race riots?
4. Why do you think Robert loves Jack best, despite Jack's shortcomings? What is your understanding of Jack's wayward behavior? How would you have responded to his theological questions regarding redemption?
5. Discuss the friendship between John Ames and Robert Boughton. What has sustained it for so many years? How did they nurture each other's intellectual lives, approaching life from Congregationalist and Presbyterian perspectives?
6. What did Glory's mother teach her about the role of women? How was the Boughton family affected by the death of its matriarch?
7. How do the Boughtons view prosperity and charity? What is reflected in the way Glory handles the household finances, with leftover money stored in the piano bench? What is the nature of Jack's interest in Marxism? What is demonstrated in the incident of the book on England's working classes (the stolen library volume that Robert Boughton considered dull)?
8. How do the themes of deception and integrity play out in the novel? Are all of the characters honest with themselves? Which secrets, in the novel and in life, are justified?
9. What does Jack do with the memory of his out-of-wedlock daughter? Does his father have an accurate understanding of that chapter in Jack's life?
10. How are Glory, Jack, and Robert affected by Teddy's visit? What accounts for the "anxiety, and relief, and resentment" Glory feels regarding Teddy's arrival (p. 253)?

11. Discuss Ames's provocative sermon, which Jack paraphrases as a discussion of "the disgraceful abandonment of children by their fathers" (p. 206) based on the narrative of Hagar and Ishmael. To what degree are parents responsible for the actions of their children, and vice versa?
12. What aspects of romantic love are reflected in *Home*? How does Glory cope with her ill-fated engagement? Is Jack very different from Glory's fiancé? What do the Boughtons think of John Ames's marriage to Lila?
13. How did you react to Della's arrival? What legacy and memories will define her son? What common ground did Jack and Della share, fostering love?
14. Hymns provide a meaningful background throughout the novel. What do their words and melodies convey?
15. In terms of religion, what beliefs do Glory, Jack, and Robert agree upon? What do they seek to know about God and the nature of humanity? What answers do they find?
16. What distinctions did you detect between the way John Ames described Jack in *Gilead* and the portrayal of Jack in *Home*? What are the similarities and differences between the Ames and Boughton households? What accounts for the fact that families can inhabit nearly identical milieus but experience life in profoundly different ways?
17. Do towns like Gilead still exist? Are pastors like Ames and Boughton common in contemporary America?
18. Discuss the homecomings that have made a significant impact on your life. How much forgiveness has been necessary across the generations in your family?

PRAISE FOR
GILEAD

"A beautiful work—demanding, grave and lucid . . . Robinson's words have a spiritual force that's very rare in contemporary fiction."

—James Wood, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Moving, compelling, and fascinating . . . *Gilead* is full of passages that beg to be read aloud, complex thoughts and emotions expressed with a felicity as engaging as it is illuminating. Most of all, in this book, through the wide-open eyes of her aging hero, Robinson manages to convey the miracle of existence itself."

—Merle Rubin, *Los Angeles Times*

"Radiant . . . This is a book to be savored." —Elizabeth Taylor, *Chicago Tribune*

"Novels work in varied ways; some take 50 pages or more to crank up to their operating temperature, and others seem to radiate their heat at once, establishing an ambient level of energy that will characterize the book to its end. *Gilead* is such a book, a searching and tender call-and-response as a preacher facing death tries to anticipate what he should impart of life to his young son . . . Its measured and generous narrative voice speaks not only from the pulpit, but from the pews as well."

—Art Winslow, *Chicago Tribune*

RECOMMENDED
READING

Tender Mercies and *Half a Heart* by Rosellen Brown
In Sunlight, in a Beautiful Garden by Kathleen Cambor
Quarantine by Jim Crace
Jim the Boy by Tony Earley
Independence Day by Richard Ford
The Story of a Marriage by Andrew Sean Greer
Plainsong by Kent Haruf
The Great Fire by Shirley Hazzard
Winter's Tale by Mark Helprin
So Long, See You Tomorrow by William Maxwell
Child of My Heart by Alice McDermott
On Chesil Beach by Ian McEwan
Beloved by Toni Morrison
Three Daughters by Letty Cottin Pogrebin
Postcards by E. Annie Proulx
The Confessions of Nat Turner by William Styron

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARILYNNE ROBINSON is the author of the novels *Gilead* (FSG, 2004)—winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award—and *Housekeeping* (FSG, 1980), which won the PEN/Hemingway Award for best first novel. Also the author of two books of nonfiction, *Mother Country* (FSG, 1989) and *The Death of Adam*, she teaches at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in Iowa City.