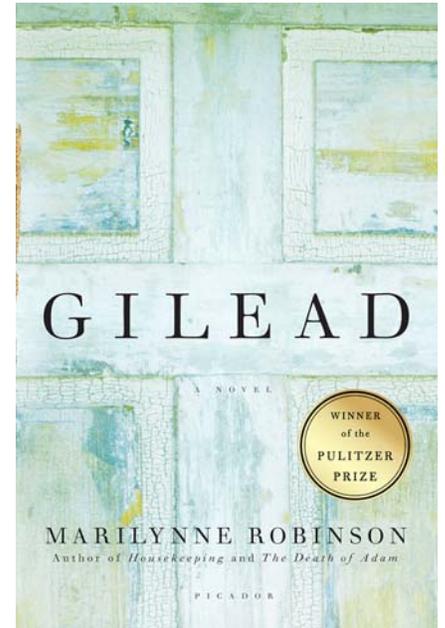


READING GROUP GUIDE

Gilead

A Novel

by Marilynne Robinson



ISBN: 0-312-42440-X

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Gilead* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Gilead*.

About the Book

Since the publication of Marilynne Robinson's widely praised 1981 debut, *Housekeeping*, readers have long anticipated a second novel from this extraordinary writer. *Gilead* at last fulfills that hope, combining a profound exploration of life's mysteries with magnificent storytelling.

Told through the eyes of a Midwestern minister nearing the end of his life, *Gilead* unfolds in the form of a letter. As Reverend Ames writes to his young son, we learn of the family's legacy, a heritage steeped in abolition, economic hardship, and conflicting views on religion and war as each generation comes of age. The 1950s find John Ames comparing his grandfather, a fiery Union Army chaplain, to his devoutly pacifist father while a gentle turn of events poses the question of racial equality in new terms.

Throughout the novel, he recalls a life shaped by love for his faith, his vocation and his church, for prayer, for his town and all it has meant, for his father and grandfather, for his books, for baseball, for his lifelong friend, for his physical life and the splendors of the physical world, for his memories, and for the young wife and infant child to whom he remains loyal over solitary decades.

Stirring an array of questions regarding peace and turmoil, faith and disillusionment, memory and mortality, *Gilead* illuminates each facet of these issues with sparkling precision. We hope this reader's guide will enrich your experience as you explore Marilynne Robinson's captivating meditation on destiny and devotion.

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize

Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction

"A beautiful work—demanding, grave, and lucid."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"One feels touched with grace just to read it."

—*The Washington Post*

"Incandescent . . . magnificent . . . [a] literary miracle."

—*Entertainment Weekly* (A)

"Radiant . . . This is a book to be savored."

—*Chicago Tribune*

"Lyrical and meditative . . . potently contemplative."

—*Time*

"Poignant, absorbing, lyrical . . . Robinson manages to convey the miracle of existence itself."

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Rapturous . . . astonishing . . . *Gilead* is an inspired work from a writer whose sensibility seems steeped in holy fire."

—*Elle*

"Robinson returns with a second novel that will do no less than tell the story of America and break your heart. . . . Robinson has composed a novel as big as a nation, as quiet as thought, and moving as prayer. Matchless and towering."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

About the Author

Marilynne Robinson is the author of the modern classic *Housekeeping* (FSG, 1981), winner of the PEN/Hemingway Award for First Fiction and released as a major motion picture in 1987. She

has also written two books of nonfiction: *Mother Country* (FSG, 1989), an examination of Great Britain's role in environmental pollution, and *The Death of Adam*, a collection of essays on religion, history, and the state of society.

Robinson was born and raised in Idaho, where her family has lived for several generations. She earned her undergraduate degree at Brown University and holds a Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Washington. She now lives in Iowa City, where she teaches at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Discussion Questions

1. What was your perception of the narrator in the opening paragraphs? In what ways did your understanding of him change throughout the novel? Did John's own perception of his life seem to evolve as well?
2. Biblical references to Gilead (a region near the Jordan River) describe its plants as having healing properties. The African-American spiritual "There Is a Balm in Gilead" equates Jesus with this balm. According to some sources, the Hebrew origin of the word simply means "rocky area." Do these facts make *Gilead* an ironic or symbolically accurate title for the novel?
3. The vision experienced by John's grandfather is a reminder that the Christ he loves identifies utterly with the oppressed and afflicted, whom he must therefore help to free. He is given his mission, like a biblical prophet. This kind of vision was reported by many abolitionists, and they acted upon it as he did. What guides John in discerning his own mission?
4. How does John seem to feel about his brother's atheism in retrospect? What accounts for Edward's departure from the church? What enabled John to retain his faith?
5. The rituals of communion and baptism provide many significant images throughout the novel. What varied meanings do John and his parishioners ascribe to them? What makes him courageous enough to see the sacred in every aspect of life?
6. One of the most complex questions for John to address is the notion of salvation, how it is defined, and how (or whether) God determines who receives it. How do the novel's characters convey assorted possibilities about this topic? What answers would you have given to the questions John faces regarding the fate of souls and the nature of pain in the world?
7. Marilynne Robinson included several quotations from scripture and hymns; John expresses particular admiration for Isaac Watts, an eighteenth-century English minister whose hymns were widely adopted by various Protestant denominations. Do you believe that certain texts are divinely inspired? What is the role of metaphor in communicating about spiritual matters?

8. Discuss the literary devices used in this novel, such as its epistolary format, John's finely honed voice, and the absence of conventional chapter breaks (save for a long pause before Jack's marriage is revealed). How would you characterize *Gilead's* narrative structure?
9. What commentary does John offer about the differences between his two wives? Do you agree with Jack when he calls John's marriage unconventional?
10. John describes numerous denominations in his community, including Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Quakers, and Congregationalists. What can you infer from the presence of such variety? Or does the prevalence of Protestants mean that there is little religious variety in *Gilead*?
11. What might John think of current religious controversies in America? In what ways are his worries and joys relevant to twenty-first-century life?
12. John grapples mightily with his distrust of Jack. Do you believe John writes honestly about the nature of that distrust? What issues contribute to these struggles with his namesake?
13. Discuss the author's choice of setting for *Gilead*. Is there a difference between the way religion manifests itself in small towns versus urban locales? What did you discover about the history of Iowa's rural communities and about the strain of radicalism in Midwestern history? Did it surprise you?
14. Abolition drew John's grandfather to the Midwest, and the novel concludes at the dawn of the civil rights movement. In what ways does this evolution of race relations mirror the changes John has witnessed in society as a whole?
15. Is *Gilead* a microcosm for American society in general?
16. In his closing lines, John offers a sort of benediction to his son, praying that he will "grow up a brave man in a brave country" and "find a way to be useful." Do you predict a future in which his hope came true? What do you imagine John experiences in his final sleep?
17. Robinson's beloved debut novel, *Housekeeping*, features a narrator with a voice just as distinctive as John's. Do the longings conveyed in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* bear any resemblance to one another? How might John have counseled Ruth?

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