Gilead

by Marilynne Robinson



About the Book

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award, GILEAD is a hymn of praise and lamentation to the God-haunted existence that Reverend Ames loves passionately, and from which he will soon part.

In 1956, toward the end of Reverend John Ames' life, he begins a letter to his young son, an account of himself and his forebears. Ames is the son of an Iowan preacher and the grandson of a minister who, as a young man in Maine, saw a vision of Christ bound in chains and came west to Kansas to fight for abolition: He "preached men into the Civil War," then, at age 50, became a chaplain in the Union Army, losing his right eye in battle.

Reverend Ames writes to his son about the tension between his father --- an ardent pacifist --- and his grandfather, whose pistol and bloody shirts, concealed in an army blanket, may be relics from the fight between the abolitionists and those settlers who wanted to vote Kansas into the union as a slave state. And he tells a story of the sacred bonds between fathers and sons, which are tested in his tender and strained relationship with his namesake, John Ames Boughton, his best friend's wayward son.

This is also the tale of another remarkable vision --- not a corporeal vision of God but the vision of life as a wondrously strange creation. It tells how wisdom was forged in Ames's soul during his solitary life, and how history lives through generations, pervasively present even when betrayed and forgotten.

Discussion Guide

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 18th-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 21st-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?

Author Bio

Marilynne Robinson is the recipient of a 2012 National Humanities Medal, awarded by President Barack Obama, for "her grace and intelligence in writing." She is the author of GILEAD, winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award; HOME, winner of the Orange Prize and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize; and LILA, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her first novel, HOUSEKEEPING, won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Robinson's nonfiction books include THE GIVENNESS OF THINGS, WHEN I WAS A CHILD I READ BOOKS, ABSENCE OF MIND, THE DEATH OF ADAM and MOTHER COUNTRY. She lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

Critical Praise

"Robinson's 1981 debut, **Housekeeping**, was a perfect novel if ever there was one, and her long-awaited second novel proves just as captivating . . . Robinson's prose is lovely and wonderfully precise . . . Gilead is a gentle journey that will be even better the second time you read it."

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Publication Date: January 10, 2006
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 247 pages
Publisher: Picador
ISBN-10: 031242440X
ISBN-13: 9780312424404