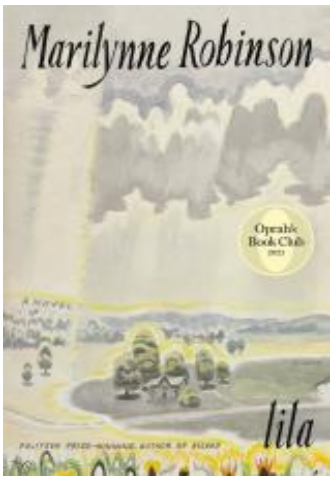
Lila

by Marilynne Robinson



About the Book

Marilynne Robinson, one of the greatest novelists of our time, returns to the town of Gilead in an unforgettable story of a girlhood lived on the fringes of society in fear, awe and wonder.

Lila, homeless and alone after years of roaming the countryside, steps inside a small-town Iowa church --- the only available shelter from the rain --- and ignites a romance and a debate that will reshape her life. She becomes the wife of a minister, John Ames, and begins a new existence while trying to make sense of the days of suffering that preceded her newfound security.

Neglected as a toddler, Lila was rescued by Doll, a canny young drifter, and brought up by her in a hardscrabble childhood. Together they crafted a life on the run, living hand to mouth with nothing but their sisterly bond and a ragged blade to protect them. Despite bouts of petty violence and moments of desperation, their shared life was laced with moments of joy and love. When Lila arrives in Gilead, she struggles to reconcile the life of her makeshift family and their days of hardship with the gentle Christian worldview of her husband which paradoxically judges those she loves.

Revisiting the beloved characters and setting of Robinson?s Pulitzer Prize-winning GILEAD and HOME, a National Book Award finalist, LILA is a moving expression of the mysteries of existence that is destined to become an American classic.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel?s opening paragraphs vividly capture the deprivations experienced by young Lila. How do these experiences affect her immersion in the culture of Gilead? As she reaches adulthood, what does Lila believe about the nature of life?

2. How did your perception of Doll shift throughout the novel? What motivates her to rescue Lila? What do the two girls teach each other about loyalty and its limitations?

3. Lila recalls the day she ventured into John Ames?s candlelit church (echoing Ames?s tender recollection of that scene, which was presented in GILEAD). Doane had told Lila, ?Churches just want your money,? yet she needed refuge. What does Ames?s church want from Lila?

4. As she copies difficult passages from the Bible, Lila continually returns to questions about human suffering and misfortune. What is your response to this debate? How does Lila?s practical wisdom compare to the philosophical wisdom of Ames and Boughton?

5. What is the significance of Doll?s knife --- both literally (as a weapon) and as a metaphor? Can someone from Ames?s world of gentleness have the capacity to understand what the knife means to Lila?

6. What lies at the heart of Lila and Ames?s decision to marry? What needs and longings do they share? How does their relationship reflect the broader needs and longings of humanity?

7. Which of the novel?s Bible quotations resonated most strongly with you? How were you taught to approach a sacred text?

8. Does the age difference between Lila and Ames create an imbalance in their marriage?

9. How is Lila?s sense of self affected by her days in St. Louis? Was she wounded or empowered by that chapter of her life?

10. While GILEAD and HOME emphasize the relationships between fathers and their children (particularly their sons), LILAaccentuates the perspective of women. How does this affect the storyline and the imagery?

11. What beliefs does Doll instill in Lila about nurturing a child?

12. Discuss the time and place depicted in LILA. What were your family?s circumstances during the mid-20th century? Is contemporary America less connected to the natural world and to the contemplative aspects of life? What insight can an urban reader in the Information Age gain from Lila and Ames?

13. Discuss the concept of trust as it plays out in LILA. What are the characters? greatest barriers to trust? What does it take to quell such fear? Is it as simple as sharing all that we know --- especially our most vulnerable moments? In the novel, how is trust distinguished from faith?

14. How does Lila reconcile her husband?s religious views with her life before she arrived in Gilead? Does she undergo a conversion in Gilead or does she arrive at something else entirely?

15. What do the closing lines of LILA tell us about life, and the absence of life?

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.

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