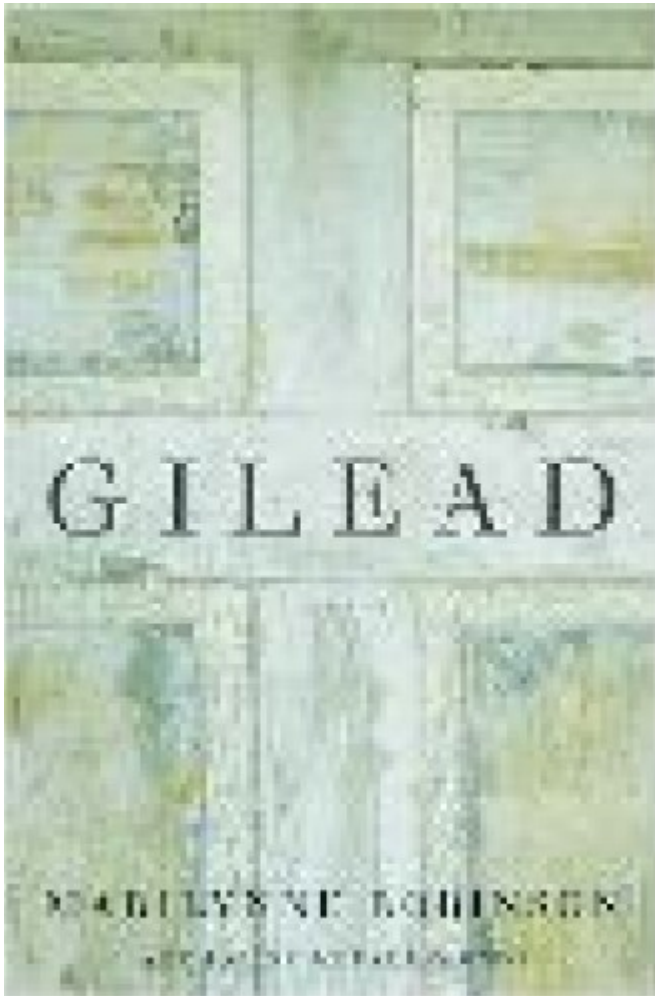


Strife in Gilead

By [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Gilead: A Novel

Marilynne Robinson
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Here is a novel without glamour and without any obvious appeal for beach or airplane reading. John Ames, 76 years old, has long served the same church in

Gilead, Iowa, as did his father before him. Ames's heart is failing, and he has little to bequeath his family other than his old sermons—over 2,000 of them in boxes in the parsonage attic—a source of pride and dismay. He intends to write an account of his life for the seven-year-old son who will grow up without him.

If the author were not Marilynne Robinson, whose first novel was the beloved *Housekeeping* (1981), we might not take any interest in such a seemingly slender tale. But then some of the greatest novels resist summary. What sounds duller, after all, than *The Diary of a Country Priest*?

As it turns out, however, *Gilead* is, in every sense, a sacred story and a revelation. Robinson has written one of the most skillful, tightly constructed, deeply felt novels in many years, as much a classic as Georges Bernanos's fictional *Diary*.

It is good to have Robinson writing fiction again. Since her remarkable debut 24 years ago, she has produced only two books, *Mother Country* (1989) and *The Death of Adam* (1998). As much as I admire the brave unfashionableness of her essays, they are jeremiads, and her writing warms up when she has characters to love.

Gilead is one of those rare novels in which all the characters are lovable, even though they have not fully come to terms with one another: it is easier for them to love the world than their own kin. John Ames, who says his heart is giving out on him, rhapsodizes at simple pleasures like seeing his son play catch, but at times he seems trapped in sublimated anger. The congregation is already planning changes to be made after his death. Ames fears that this son may someday be angry with him for leaving the family penniless. He recalls that when he first met his young wife "there was a seriousness about her that seemed almost like a kind of anger."

The protagonist's irritation is nothing compared to the righteous anger of his grandfather, also named John Ames, an abolitionist who left Maine for bleeding Kansas. The old man rode with John Brown, lost an eye in the Civil War, and preached thereafter in a blood-soaked shirt, a pistol at his side. Horrified, the abolitionist's son, also named John Ames, became a pacifist. *Gilead* coils with tensions between the firebrand who "preached men into the war" and his equally principled son. "No good has come, no evil is ended," the old man scolds him. "That is your peace."

Should the church make peace or should it be at war with the world? Did Christ intend to heal the human family or to set a man against his father? Elsewhere

Robinson has written that “there is no group in history I admire more than the abolitionists,” and she has suggested that she longs for the church to become truly radical. This abolitionist is far and away her most vivid character—he is “a wild-haired, one-eyed, scrawny old fellow with a crooked beard, like a paintbrush left to dry with lacquer in it, . . . stricken and afflicted . . . like a man everlastingly struck by lightning.” Every time he appears, there is a bomb in *Gilead*.

The abolitionist’s grandson, our narrator, instead cherishes the world as it is. To redeem it he will have to start with his godson and namesake, the ne’er-do-well John Ames Boughton. (Robinson’s use of the same name for many of her characters may be a nod to Gabriel García Márquez, who also marvels at the wonder of life—although Robinson’s mode is sacramentalism, not magical realism.) Jack Boughton has come home like the prodigal son—a changed man, perhaps, but a provocation to Ames, who knows the particulars of his long-ago sins and now believes Boughton has designs on Ames’s young wife and son. Both men are badly in need of forgiveness.

Readers familiar with scripture will find that Robinson has chosen an eerily resonant title, and it’s not just about balm. Gilead is a land of family strife. It’s where Hagar and Ishmael take refuge, where Laban confronts Jacob. And perhaps most significantly it’s where Jephthah, son of Gilead, wins a bloody battle and foolishly vows to sacrifice the first person he meets, who turns out to be his only daughter. *Gilead* echoes all of these biblical stories, most poignantly in the protagonist’s loss of his only daughter.

At times in *Housekeeping*, Robinson’s metaphysics overwhelmed the narrative, stopped the story dead in its tracks with long purple paragraphs that recalled Melville. This time around, she seems more determined to inhabit her narrator, who is less self-consciously literary and more plainspoken, concrete, actual. Perhaps Robinson inhabits John Ames so well because she has known him a long time: she teaches in Iowa and serves as a deacon in a Congregationalist church.

Despite the author’s vast learning, this seems to me a very personal novel, born not of research but rather of emotional curiosity and a deep core of belief. In *The Death of Adam* Robinson tells of the grandfather who looms large in her memory: “I knew my grandfather for many years, but I am not sure I ever knew him well. He seemed stern to me and I was very shy of him. I had heard sad stories about him as a boy and a young man, and when I was with him I always thought of them, and I was

cautious, as if the injuries might still be tender. It may be that I did not know my grandfather very well because I thought of him as a boy and a young man, and explained his silence to myself in such terms.”

This attempt to know the unknowable springs of our parents and children makes for great storytelling. A reader may feel that, like the scripture that abounds here, Robinson’s uncanny literary gift is inspired.