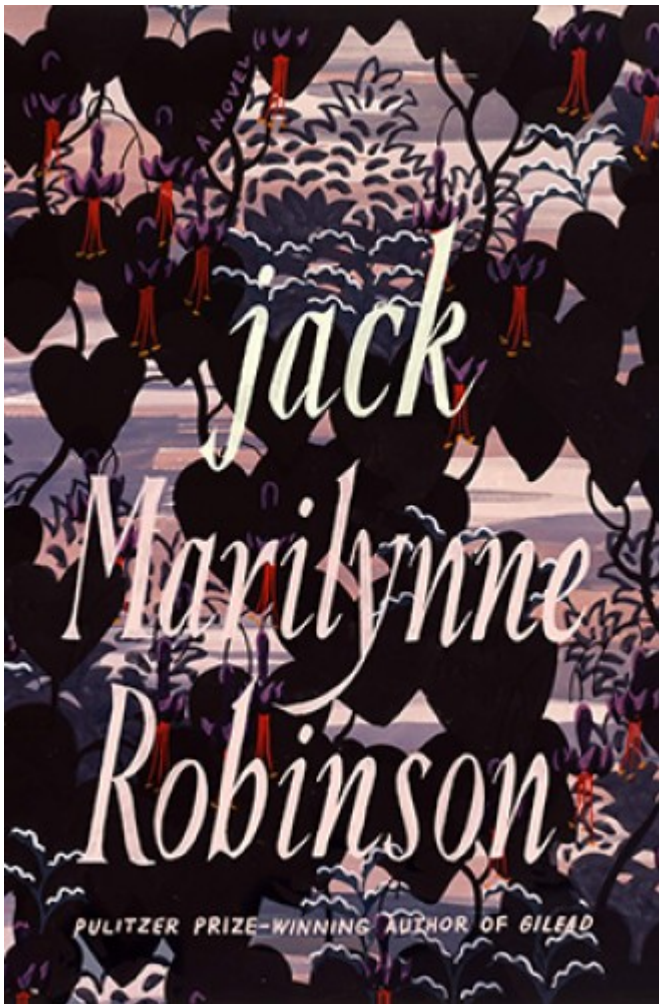


Marilynne Robinson's new Gilead novel makes Jack Boughton make sense

Everything in *Jack* is a marvel.

by [Philip Christman](#) in the [October 21, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Jack

A Novel

By Marilynne Robinson
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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In Marilynne Robinson's fiction, characters register the presence of other people as a constant surprise. They say, over and over again, to themselves or to each other, things like, "I came into the nursery one morning and there you were," or "There she was anyway," or "Here he was in her kitchen," or "Here she was in middle age." They repeat variations on these phrases throughout the four novels (thus far) of the Gilead series, like people who tap a nearby wall just to reassure themselves that it and they continue to exist. A person's bodily *thereness*—the indentation they leave on a pillow, their smell—is the supreme miracle, something so refulgent as to reduce the joys and pains that people produce almost, but not quite, to afterthoughts.

When Robinson published *Gilead* in 2004, the literary press reacted in much the same way to the sudden appearance of that book. *Why, here she is*. Where had this lovely, unfashionable novel—the story of a dying Iowa pastor, his colleague, and that colleague's prodigal son—come from? And where had Robinson been in the 24 years since her classic first novel, *Housekeeping*? (She had been reading the entire Western canon and writing a series of scorchingly brilliant essays about the experience. But essay collections don't get press.)

As masterly as *Gilead* is, every novel Robinson has written since not only has improved on it but, by adding depth and complexity to its story, has in a very real sense improved it. *Home* (2008), which makes apparent the passive racism of the elderly Reverend Boughton, depicts scenes of confrontation between father and son so searing that I don't know if I can ever read it again. *Lila* (2014) gives a backstory to the wife of John Ames, Boughton's friend and the narrator of *Gilead*, and it hangs a question mark over the future of their relationship. Together the three novels are, to my mind, the American literary accomplishment of our young century. Yet it's hard to keep returning to Gilead, Iowa, when we know that with each trip we will witness these people whom we love suffering more.

Now here *Jack* is: the fourth novel in the series, the story of the ill-behaved Boughton son in his own words. He, too, worries that his presence will only mean suffering for those he loves, and he has reasons to do so: a history of petty thievery and an early sexual disgrace for which he has rightly refused to forgive himself. Released from prison, wandering through postwar St. Louis, he aspires to nothing more than harmlessness.

Then he falls in love with a Black woman, Della—which, for a White man in the 1950s, is an excellent way to bring harm, since his mere presence in her house overnight could get both of them locked up. Her family intervenes; he tries to stay away; she, to her own initial surprise, refuses to let him go. Their love story unfolds against a background of Jim Crow rigidity, seemingly predestined to fail, and yet nothing in the novel happens quite as you expect it to, even if you've read the other books. Tragedy keeps turning to tragicomedy, then back to sheer wonder: Jack's shock that Della exists, Della's shock that Jack does.

In some ways the novel forms a kind of diptych with *Lila*. Both are love stories that consist largely of people talking to an absent other, whom they avoid because they fear the intensity of their attachment and they think such evasion is in the other person's best interest. Jack spends weeks and months in mental dialogue with Della and, late in the novel, is delighted to learn that she does the same, arguing with him in her head. ("Mostly I win," she says.)

I wonder whether Robinson realizes how perfect an analogue this is to the relationship that exists between a great or distinctive writer and that writer's readers. At intervals, the writer finds that she has words to say, to a collective she cannot meaningfully know but for whom, in her urgency to say nothing untrue or shabby or cheap, she manifests the highest regard. And we, the readers, wander through our jobs and our lives with this stranger's words repeating in our heads, thinking them over, talking back. I have been arguing with Marilynne Robinson in my head for about 18 years now. Mostly she wins.

Everything about *Jack* is a marvel. I did not know whether a distinguished literary personage such as Robinson would convincingly depict the world or the psychology of a small-time crook or the lasting wounds of prison. She does. She has been attacked, once or twice, for the lack of ethnic diversity in her earlier novels. Whether one grants this criticism or not, Della—a character we only glimpsed in the earlier novels—here speaks words that feel specific both to Blackness and to Della. She is as real now as Jack Boughton or John Ames.

Robinson had, in the earlier books, painted herself into something of a corner: it was hard to believe that the sweetly feckless Jack we meet in *Gilead* and *Home* could do some of the things he is reported to have done. In this book, Robinson makes him make sense. And in so doing, she invites us to see the wrongdoers in our midst with more clarity than we may find convenient.

Della tells Jack at one point that to fall in love with somebody is simply to take in, fully and for the first time, that we are surrounded by other souls. Reading a great novel like this one, you know what she means.