

Home by Marilynne Robinson

*Readers of Marilynne Robinson's Gilead will find themselves viewing familiar events from an unfamiliar perspective in Home.*

—Robinson's third novel, like her second, is set in Gilead, Iowa, in 1956, but the home around which the story is centered is not that of John Ames, narrator of *Gilead*, but of Ames' longtime friend and colleague, Presbyterian pastor Robert Boughton.

For many years, the large house, inherited from his frugal and foresighted parents, and the boisterous family of eight children he and his late wife raised there, have "embodied for [Boughton] the general blessedness of his life, which," in his eyes, "was manifest, really indisputable." Now retired and increasingly frail in both body and mind, Boughton clings tenaciously to this worldview, greeting the smallest indication that all is well with his home and family with an enthusiastic "Yes!" But such determined optimism has its costs, not only for Boughton himself, but also for his family, especially the two children whose less-than-happy lives cause their father the most anxiety. Robinson focuses her narrative on these siblings, telling the story from the perspective of the youngest daughter, Glory, who has returned home to care for her father after a thirteen-year career as an English teacher and a failed engagement, and centering the novel's action around the reappearance after twenty years of Jack, the black sheep of the family.

Jack's disproportionate power in the family has always derived from his absences, actual and anticipated. Jack's badness – his tendencies to drinking, theft, and other petty crimes – creates undeniable but ultimately manageable challenges for his parents. Again and again, Boughton guides his son through a halting process of apologizing and making amends. When Jack impregnates and abandons a young girl from the surrounding country, his parents suffer at their son's "cruelty" and "arrogance," but put all their energy into determining how to "act consistently with their faith," determinedly embracing "Truth," "Loyalty" and "Generosity," and rejecting "Appearance and Convention," "children of the giant Hypocrisy," as they follow the lead of their still-innocent youngest daughter in seeking to bring the reluctant girl and her child into the family circle.

Ultimately, however, it is Jack's palpable sadness that most challenges Boughton's beliefs. Even as a child, both Boughton and Glory remember, Jack never seemed completely part of the "wonderful family" from which Boughton drew such pleasure and reassurance; he was, in Boughton's words, a "child who didn't feel at home in the house where he was born," escaping to hiding places nearby yet removed from, and unknown to, his parents and siblings: the loft in the barn, the ancient oak tree in the front yard. To them, Jack's twenty-year absence is precisely the result his early demeanor led them to fear. Reluctant to accept the explanation Jack proposes for his own life – that he is "an instance of predestination," one among a group of "people who are simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell" – Boughton, except in one climactic moment when he acknowledges that, ultimately, a child's best qualities are not his parents' "to keep or to protect," clings to the conviction that it was or is somehow in his power to right the situation, tendering apologies and offers of help that only underline his disappointment in his son's life.

The rift between Boughton and Jack is deepened by the social and political context in which their story plays out: the racially segregated United States of the 1950s. This aspect of the novel will unfold

differently for those who have read *Gilead*, and know some of the details of Jack's years away, and those who, like Glory, must wait until the final scene of *Home* to understand why Jack is so drawn to news of the nascent civil rights movement. Unfortunately, Boughton, a descendant of Scots immigrants of the 1870s, lacks Ames' family tie to the abolitionist movement, and, perhaps as a result, is at his most conventional when approaching this subject. When Jack says, accurately, that he has "known a good many Negroes who are more respectable than" he, his father takes the statement as a sign that his son lacks self-confidence, and suggests that Jack "could help [him]self by finding a better class of friends." When Jack expresses horror at the murder of Emmett Till, and greets televised scenes of men, women and children facing dogs and fire hoses with an involuntary "Jesus Christ!," Boughton focuses on his own discomfort with the shouting and the swearing, not his son's evident distress. For him, his son's desire for change and his own satisfaction with the *status quo* are part of a pattern of normal generational disagreement, possible fodder for the sort of heated but ultimately inconsequential political argument with which he and Ames entertain themselves, but liable to suppression the moment they threaten to undermine rather than facilitate pleasant social interaction.

Jack's inability to spark a serious family conversation about race exacerbates the estrangement between him and his father, and, to a lesser extent, between him and Glory. But here, as elsewhere, Robinson eschews simple explanations for the difficulties of the human condition. Even if his family, and his hometown, were fully invested in building a racially integrated America, Jack, as Robinson portrays him, would have difficulty achieving the respectable family life of which he dreams. He would still battle alcoholism – a disease whose hereditary nature his father and grandmother acknowledge in calling it "the vice of the Scots" – and whatever knotty combination of other mental illnesses, character flaws, or both has bedeviled him since childhood. Even as he gradually trusts Glory with more and more information about the woman he loves, he hesitates to bring Della to Gilead not only because he is afraid that the town would not accept her, but also because he is afraid that Della could not accept him as he is known in Gilead.

Jack's day-to-day intimacy with Glory serves as a trial run for the life he would like to build with Della, another pious preacher's daughter. Glory, in turn, realizes in the course of her brother's visit how closely her interactions with her erstwhile fiancé paralleled her earlier experiences with Jack. Though painful, the growing relationship between these two adult siblings is among the most hopeful in the book. Each, in their best family tradition, is consciously and carefully "kind" to the other, and each is able, in a modest way, to offer the other the emotional support that Boughton, in his frailty and anxiety, no longer can. At the same time, the burden of maintaining peace in the household, and Jack's tenuous equilibrium, falls disproportionately on Glory, suggesting the ongoing pressures faced by the youngest daughter of a family in which "the girls . . . got named for theological abstractions, and the boys got named for human beings." I, for one, found myself hoping that Glory's vision of the future in the last pages of the novel is the product of a particular moment, rather than a sign that she will center her remaining years around a dream built on her own variation of her father's unrelenting hopefulness.

*Home* is a darker book than *Gilead*, raising more difficult questions, and providing definitive answers to few if any of them. This difference stems in part from the novels' differing perspectives. Although Ames may imagine a grown son as his eventual reader, he writes the letters that make up *Gilead* at least partly to, and for, the child he knows. In *Home*, we see events in the Boughton household, past and present, through the unfiltered thoughts of an adult woman whose return to her childhood home is a catalyst for forming a greater understanding of her family and herself. When Glory

reads *Andersonville*, the novel that “broke[ ] the heart of Greater Des Moines,” so that she can “weep without upsetting her father,” we see her reasoning, her understanding that the ruse is part of a long-established and unhealthy pattern, and her willingness to attempt the deception despite knowing her father will not, ultimately, be fooled or protected by it.

The atmosphere of each book is also shaped by the family story it tells. Ames’ life is exceptional, marked both by tragedy in his early manhood and by the unexpected blessings of a late second marriage and a child born as he approached old age. The likelihood that Robby and Lila will eventually have to make lives far away from Gilead contributes to the nostalgia with which Ames, and the reader, view his family’s past and present in the town. Boughton’s life is blessed precisely in its ordinariness, and the fault lines in his family’s good fortune exposed by the strains of old and middle age are equally predictable. Such subject matter militates against nostalgia. Its familiarity may, however, ultimately make *Home* more thought-provoking, if less comforting, for many readers.

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- Book Review by Catherine E. Saunders  
M.A. and Ph.D. in English from Princeton University  
Term Assistant Professor of English at George Mason University

*Her primary research interest is literature of the American antislavery movement. Dr. Saunders is an elder and active member of the adult education committee at Lewinsville Presbyterian Church.*