A pastoral voice: An interview with Marilynne Robinson

by Debra Bendis in the April 4, 2006 issue

In 1980, Marilynne Robinson published her first novel, Housekeeping, *which won a PEN/Hemingway Award and was made into a movie. She published nonfiction works during the next 24 years, including* The Death of Adam *and* Mother Country, *but kept her fans waiting until 2004 for a second novel.* Gilead *is the memoir of John Ames, a Congregationalist pastor in a small Iowa town who reminisces about his father, a preacher with pacifist convictions, and his grandfather, an abolitionist minister.* Gilead *received the 2005 Pulitzer Prize and the 2006 Louisville Grawemeyer Award in Religion. For the past 14 years, Robinson has lived in Iowa City, where she works with students at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop.*

When did you decide to write *Gilead*?

I was in Provincetown, Massachusetts, at the end of 2001, giving a reading. My sons were on their way to visit me there but were delayed, so I was alone in a little sunlit room on Cape Cod, and I started writing. It seemed to me as if I suddenly knew the voice [of John Ames]—it sounds sort of mystical, but at that point I had the conviction that I knew the character. Then I wrote the book quickly, probably in less than two years, which is very brief for a novel.

Where does fictional inspiration come from for this and other books?

Everything you've done in your life goes into everything you write. I've read theology and history for many years just because it's my pleasure, so I had a background into which I could incarnate this voice. Other than that it's a matter of watching people and thinking how someone of a certain nature would think in certain circumstances.

***Gilead* reflects a strong sense of, place yet you did not grow up in Iowa. How did you develop the relationship to the land that is expressed in the novel?**

I grew up in the mountains in northern Idaho, then lived in New England and the Connecticut River Valley. Both of these places are appropriately vain on the subject of their landscapes. When I came to the Midwest and the Great Plains, I decided that I had to learn how to see this landscape, so I spent a lot of time just looking at it, trying to understand how to relax my expectations about mountains, for example, and see the beauty unique to this place.

I began to consciously and systematically study the nature of the place because I wanted to know where I was. For me that always means building a historical sense of a place. And there was one amazing experience that inspired *Gilead*: I did once see the sun and the moon on opposite horizons. It was very beautiful.

The main character of the book is a pastor who is the son and grandson of pastors. Obviously you've spent some time thinking about the role of ministers. Can you say more about your sense of ministry as a vocation?

People, even unchurched people, seem to want to invest a particular meaning in the role of pastor, and almost instinctively wish to be respectful of the pastoral role. I think it can be very difficult for the pastor himself or herself to understand that this is true because the meaning is community-generated rather than generated by the individual herself or himself. Some pastors live up to their role very beautifully. But often they are anxious about seeming pretentious or exclusive, and this keeps them from filling the role that they need to fill for the sake of other people.

One would assume that a pastor has an education that qualifies her or him to speak in certain terms, to take certain broader perspectives. It's not elitist, for example, for a doctor to know about medicine. It's not elitist for a professor to know about history, and it's not elitist for a pastor to know about theology. That's what they're there for. The idea that in their sermons pastors have to speak to people in almost infantile terms about things that they can read in the daily newspaper is an insult to others who are there to hear something that they do not know.

There's been a lot of talk in the larger culture for a long time about the problem of elitism. It's very odd. At the same time that the elitism of medical people was attacked, shamanism became popular. There's no consistency in it, no logic behind it. Some people are sensitive to art or music; some people are sensitive to theology.

You bring a strong aesthetic sense to church. I wonder how you view worship and current struggles over styles of worship.

To me, some of these styles suggest a nervous rejection of substance, on the pretext of contemporaneity. We know, for example, that Bach has been dead a long time, but his work is still the work of genius. The time will come when Einstein will have been dead a long time too, but that won't alter the value of what he was able to understand and articulate. The problem with contemporary worship is that it is synonymous—even for the people who are devoted to it—with mediocrity. It's not that the music is new; it's that the music is poor. It's not that the lyrics are new; it's that they are almost ridiculously poor. People are smart: they know when they're being condescended to, and most don't find that attractive.

You identify yourself firmly within the mainline Protestant tradition. Any thoughts on the challenges now facing that tradition?

I'd like to see mainline churches, collectively and individually, remember and claim their profound histories and cultures. The mainline church, for example, founded a great many of the nonpublic universities in the country, and a lot of the public ones as well. This is an intellectual tradition.

At least until the middle of the last century, most of the presidents of universities in this country were ordained clergy. This country has spent more time and resources on education than any other civilization in the history of the world. We are not phobic about intellectual institutions, but we act as if we were. We act as if we have to give people a placebo in place of learning and thought.

All of the traditions have their gift to give to the larger phenomenon of Christendom. But for the mainline Protestant tradition, intellectual culture is a huge part of it.

A prominent element in *Gilead* is the abolitionist movement, which tackled the major social issue of the 19th century: slavery. You seem fascinated by this movement.

I'm interested in the abolitionists partly because of the interesting effect their strategy had. Some speak of abolitionists as if they were all violent crazy people. But what they did was of great consequence: they came into the new territories and built colleges. Many of the colleges in the Midwest had such origins.

The founders would buy land from the government and build a church and a college. People wanted to live near colleges and churches, and so the value of the land rose. When some of the land was sold, the money endowed the college or funded the

development of another college. This was a well-designed system for creating value.

These colleges educated women as well as men, and many were on the underground railroad. Oberlin is a classic example: an abolitionist foundation that admitted women and black people on equal terms with white men from the beginning.

Important progressive movements germinated in these colleges and communities. They were organized on what was called the Manual Labor System. Everyone who went to a college did the work that was involved in the life of the college. Faculty and students alike hoed the rows and slopped the hogs. The point was, on one hand, to eliminate financial barriers to education and, on the other hand, to remove the stigma attached to physical labor.

These people were enacting the values that they wanted to propagate in the culture. They had a huge impact, shaping a culture that would be resistant to slavery. It required the devotion of people who could have stayed where they were and been prosperous, living relatively comfortable lives.

You write both nonfiction and fiction. How do you move between the two genres?

I'm not sure. Sometimes I'm thinking nonfictionally and sometimes fictionally. The experiences are very different. When I'm writing fiction I try to be very comfortable. I write in longhand in spiral notebooks. When I'm writing nonfiction I write on a laptop and sit upright in a chair. Each comes from a different impulse, as if the two sides of my mind don't agree with each other even though they are in conversation with each other.

In *Gilead*, John Ames cites Calvin as saying that each of us is an actor on a stage and God is the audience. Do you find that notion encouraging for writers? Does it suggest that God wants us to work but also to engage in play, in the sense of creative play?

Without question. Calvin's proof for the existence of the soul is the creative capacity of human beings, what they can make, what they can understand, what they can imagine and so on. That they dream, for example. The overplus of human capacity beyond any survival benefit—this is the image of God. This is the proof of the soul, human divinity. That kind of joy in human gifts and human capacity is the basis of

art, the basis of everything good in culture.

The sculptor Annie Truitt wrote that one day she was tempted to take some time off and "have some fun," but decided that she did not want to leave the joy of her engagement with her work, her sculpture. **What can you say about the joy of the writing process for you? When is it work? When is it play?**

If it feels like work I don’t do it. Somehow I can engage writing in a way that makes me produce things that surprise me. It’s concentration and the feeling of having the right word come to mind. It’s pretty tough play, and also work, perhaps something like football. We play so hard that our bones break. That seems to be part of human nature. I enjoyed writing Gilead, but whatever the pleasures of the writing process, it’s excruciating at the same time.