

Back home in Gilead: The complexities and beauty of family

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

What is Jack Boughton really like? How will he respond to Reverend Ames's blessing as he gets on the bus to leave Gilead again? Will he embrace the grace and forgiveness of the blessing? Or will he return to his old ways?

Questions like these have run through the minds of readers of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* when I've led book discussions with students, laity and clergy over the past four years. Some people fervently believe that Jack will turn a new leaf; they are hoping against hope that people do change and are transformed by grace.

Others argue fervently that Jack's character is too firmly entrenched to change—after all, didn't he flee town again, abandoning his dying father? Can a leopard change its spots? Even Jack wonders; he once asked Reverend Ames whether there were some people who are simply predestined to perdition.

Gilead readers will be delighted to discover that Robinson's new novel, *Home*, returns to 1950s Gilead, this time focusing on the Boughton household and the interactions of Jack, his sister Glory and their father. Like *Gilead*, it is a story told in beautiful prose, with astute theological insights and finely drawn characters.

In *Home* as in *Gilead* John Ames and Robert Boughton are pastors who embody grace as well as perseverance, and the contours of their lifelong friendship are portrayed with subtle beauty. We also rediscover the complexities of Jack Boughton's life—the child he abandoned, the long stretches of time in which he had no contact with his family, his tendency to be a loner, the ways in which he's been “a wound in his father's heart.” *Home*'s story fills out Jack's character. We learn more about him in his conversations with his sister and father.

At the same time, however, *Home* challenges readers to rethink our overall assessment of Jack, Reverend Ames and their relationship. *Gilead* portrays Ames and his relationship to Jack with such richness that readers tend to adopt his

perspective without really thinking about Jack's point of view. They focus more on how Jack will respond to Reverend Ames's gracious blessing and less on why Jack is leaving in the first place or what he might think about Ames.

In *Home*, Jack's return to Gilead is marked by his tortured desire to reestablish relationship with his father and with Reverend Ames. He emerges as a person who struggles with his own sin and longs for home, reconciliation and love.

Jack reaches out tentatively to the Ames family and screws up the courage to visit Ames's church. When Jack doesn't come home right after church, Glory finds him out in the barn sitting in the car. Church has not gone well. Jack says, "Ah, little sister, these old fellows play rough. They look so harmless, and the next thing you know, you're counting broken bones again."

The sermon was on Hagar and Ishmael, and the application was the disgraceful abandonment of children by their fathers. As Jack says of Ames's sermon, "The illustration was my humble self. . . . I think I was aghast. His intention, no doubt."

Jack's decision to leave Gilead begins to take on a very different feel as we gain access to Jack's perspective. His is less a ne'er-do-well's abandonment of his father and more an understandable if regrettable decision.

Home reminds us of the importance of paying attention to different perspectives on the same situation—a fundamental lesson of leadership, and crucially important for pastors doing counseling, who must not take the counselee's perspective as the only one. Movies such as *Crash* and novels such as Toni Morrison's *Jazz* show the importance of diverse perspectives. *Home* pays attention to the dynamics of perspective in forgiveness, especially among those who know each other intimately but who remain mysteries to one another.

In lectures on forgiveness I often cite Bill Cosby's line that you only become a parent when you have two children, because if you have only one child you know who broke the lamp. Wherever two or more are gathered, there will be at least two different perspectives on what happened and why. But we often forget these important lessons and assume that what one person has told us is the truth about a situation.

Those different perspectives also enable us to appreciate both the grace and the sinful blindness in any of our lives. Jack struggles with the tendencies of his father and Reverend Ames to give him "broken bones" over and over again. They are

gracious people, but they also know how to wound, and they hurt Jack—maybe without even realizing it.

Robinson's latest novel has given me new perspective on Jack, Reverend Ames and the complexities and beauty of family, forgiveness, home and healing. Now I am imagining what the story looks like from a neighbor of both the Amesese and the Boughtons. We can hope that Robinson will return us to *Gilead* one more time.