

*Lila* in community

a conversation with [Amy Frykholm](#), [Rachel Marie Stone](#), [Peter Boumgarden](#), and [Amber Noel](#)

January 5, 2015

*At the end of Marilynne Robinson's latest novel Lila, the title character envisions heaven in an intensely communal way. In light of that communal vision, Century associate editor Amy Frykholm gathered together three avid Robinson readers—Rachel Stone, Peter Boumgarden, and Amber Noel—for a conversation about the novel. If you haven't read the novel yet, you might want to wait to read what's below. Amy's [review of Lila](#) has fewer spoilers. —Ed.*

**Amy:** All of you are regular readers of Marilynne Robinson and have read and reviewed her work. What were you expecting from this novel?

**Rachel:** My Marilynne Robinson obsession started many years ago when a friend sent me *The Death of Adam* and *Housekeeping*. I loved *Gilead*, but when I first read it, I found myself irritated with Ames for finding everything “remarkable.” Why is this old man exclaiming over ordinary things all of the time? Birth, cats, water...

**Peter:** Macaroni and cheese.

**Amber:** Macaroni and cheese *is* remarkable.

**Rachel:** But one day I got it. Water exposed to light is remarkable. I began to see and share the sacramental vision found in her novels.

**Amber:** The first time I read *Gilead*, I was utterly charmed by Ames. It was one of the only novels I have ever read where a character is actively doing theology. When I read *Gilead* again in graduate school, I read it alongside Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I had a little trouble with the place that Ames takes apart from social and political realities, his inability to recognize the dilemma that Jack Boughton is in. Ames does what most of us do when confronted by issues of social justice that make us uncomfortable: we ignore them and rhapsodize about the light on the water.

In *Lila*, I was expecting a perspective that was more earthy. I was expecting there to be one sex scene and a little more of a bodily point of view. I thought that the peak encounter of the book would be Lila with Jack Boughton. In *Gilead*, she is the only one who can really see and communicate with him. I was expecting to see Jack Boughton through Lila's eyes.

**Rachel:** I think Lila does bring a more earthy perspective to Ames's theologizing. She says to Ames, "I don't understand theology. I don't think I like it. Lots of folks live and die and never worry themselves about it."

Ames has to question himself. Lila is the minority report. She engages the existential questions in the most raw way, but Ames is wondering those same things. He seems to feel somewhat shamed by Lila's experience in the world and wonders if his theology can stand up to it.

**Amber:** Ames's theologizing has to face the litmus test of its ability to touch Lila. He has to face the stubborn reality of Lila, and she will not be moved easily.

**Amy:** Is *Lila* an authentic love story?

**Rachel:** In terms of post-1960s conceptions of romantic love, maybe not. But in Robinson's other work, we see familial life as a shelter in the wilderness. If you can conceive of marriage as a kind of shelter, then yes.

**Amber:** I do feel there is a lack of sensuality in the book. The romance is unlikely, but the kind of love that Lila and Ames share is the kind that waits to connect. It isn't instant sympathy.

Their encounter is a genuine encounter with the "other"—with another person who has lived a very different life. Can we love what is really different from ourselves? Can we be "under the tent" with someone who is not like us? That seems to be how scripture uses marriage as a metaphor for human relationship to God.

The relationship between Ames and Lila isn't perfect, and it is awkward, but that awkwardness is part of the beauty. Marriage helps both Lila and Ames to become holy people.

**Peter:** I think I understand what attracts them to each other. Ames's stability and his ability to name things that have always been mysterious to Lila are attractive to her. And for Ames, Lila's different perspective, her ability to see in a way that is new

to him, is incredibly attractive to a man who has lived his whole life in one place.

But I agree, it is a bit difficult to imagine the sensual side to their relationship. I had thought that Ames might struggle a bit more, in a Calvinist sort of way, with his motivations and desires. He doesn't, and this seemed a bit unrealistic to me.

**Amber:** I think he goes ahead with the marriage because he suspects that it will transform him, sanctify him, and put him in touch with the world more completely. He is bringing something into his life that he cannot control or understand. This is a risky move for an old Presbyterian. He *is* a remarkable old man.

**Peter:** I resonated with Lila's bafflement at theological questions. I am the son of a Presbyterian minister, and I have often walked away from theological debates wondering, "What are we even talking about here?" And yet, like Lila, I feel deeply drawn to what theology is trying to name, and I can't quite stay away from it. From the other side, Ames recognizes that his ease with religious language is actually a barrier to his ongoing conversion.

**Amy:** What do you make of Lila's second baptism at the end of the novel, right before her vision of heaven? Ames says, as he is putting water on her head, "I don't really know what I'm doing here. I should have asked you first. But I wanted you to know that we couldn't bear—we have to keep you with us." What is he doing?

**Rachel:** There is the practical matter of not wanting Lila to run away. Then there is his gratitude that Lila did not die in childbirth like his first wife. And maybe "keeping" Lila with "us" has something to do with Ames's conception of salvation. But baptism in the book happens quite often. Lila is "baptized" by Doll: Doll washes her as a form of belonging.

**Amber:** Maybe when Ames says "we have to keep you with us," he is gesturing beyond the first baptism, which took place when the two of them were alone. Here they are in the church, and he wants her to take her place there, in the community. If she decides to belong to Ames, she belongs to this greater community as well.

**Rachel:** But it also has to be about belonging to life and to existence. In the Ezekiel passage that Lila quotes so often, God takes up the bloody, abandoned baby and says, "Live!" To bind one person to another, yes, but also binding a person to this thing called life.

**Amber:** But that doesn't seem quite sufficient. Growing up, Lila doesn't belong to anyone, except Doll. She lives on the edges of everything and can't trust anyone. But the relationship between Lila and Ames pushes them both toward greater inclusion. After the resurrection, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Don't cling to me. Go to the brothers." If Lila's conversion is going to be ongoing, she is going to have to belong to a community bigger than Ames.

**Peter:** After the baptism, Lila remembers the communities of her past: the migrant workers, the people in the whorehouse. She sees that "there were the people that no one would miss [in heaven], who had done no special harm, who just lived and died as well as they could manage. That would have been Lila, if she had not wandered into Gilead."

**Amber:** From that place, she starts imagining all of the people that she would bring into heaven with her. She says she can't imagine heaven without any of those sons of bitches. She isn't satisfied with a personal faith.

**Peter:** Ames says, "We have to keep you with us" and then Lila's mind goes to all of the people that she has to keep with her. These last paragraphs draw our imagination out to wider and wider circles. It becomes a sanctified vision of all humanity.