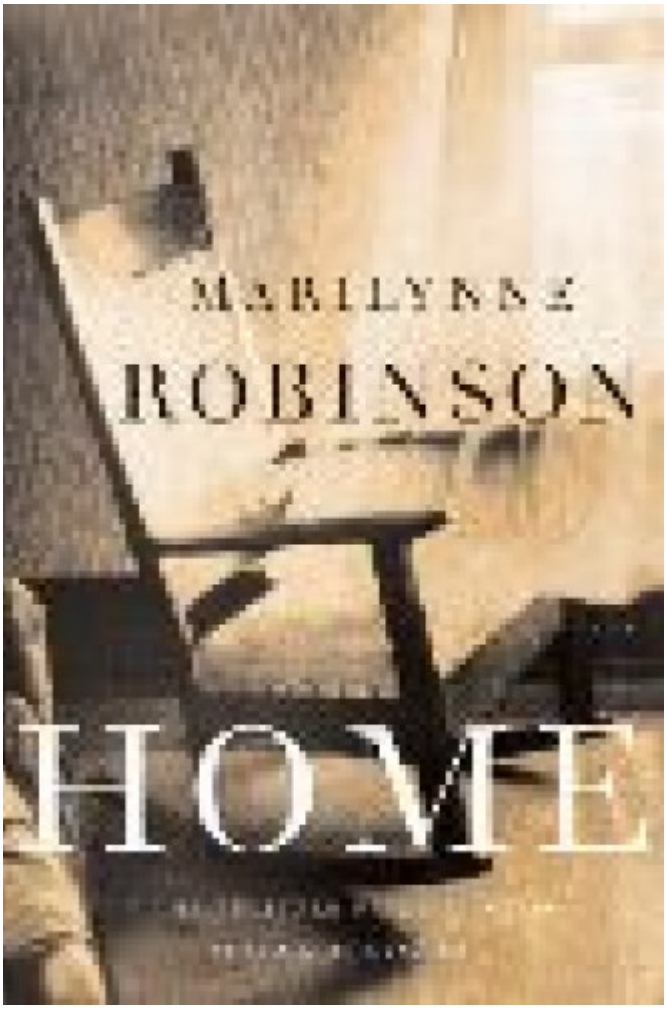
Back home in Gilead

By Will Stafford Joyner in the February 10, 2009 issue

In Review



Home

Marilynne Robinson
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

In the last few months, virtually every mainstream periodical in the United States that pays attention to serious fiction has carried a prominent review of Marilynne

Robinson’s new novel, *Home*. And just as with *Gilead*, her 2004 novel, the critical response has been an oddly illuminating combination of adulation, puzzlement and exasperation.

Virtually all of the mainstream reviewers grant that *Home* is an estimable, possibly classic literary creation—like *Gilead* and Robinson’s debut *Housekeeping*, her more easily revered novel of almost 30 years ago. But most also reveal themselves to be uncomfortable with the new book’s being—like *Gilead*—not only a novel but also a complex, unabashed expression of Christian belief. *Home* and *Gilead* are companion novels, each involving the last days of two Protestant ministers who have been lifelong friends and have not lost their capacity for fervent praise, intellectual awe and biblical analysis.

It would be easy to dismiss this nagging discomfort as simply the latest manifestation of a flawed perception within our largely agnostic American cultural dialogue about what constitutes a Christian believer. It would be easy, that is, to say simply, “There they go again, patronizing a first-rate writer by deigning to credit her with genuine literary achievement despite her genuine religious commitment.” But I think it’s important to go a step further, without embarrassment, and point out that Robinson is purposefully using her fiction as well as her gemlike neo-Calvinist essays to create a practical theology for American Christians whose spiritual lives have more to do with wonder and imperfect striving than they do with certainty. *Home*, an old-fashioned, inwardly sprawling novel that banks on questions more than answers, is probably the finest representation of her theology yet.

Any reflection on *Home* requires a quick glance back at *Gilead* because the two works are related in a rare, gratifying way. Each book is set during the summer of 1956 in Gilead, Iowa, a small town near the Kansas border that in the 1850s served as a haven for the marauding abolitionist John Brown. Each tells the story of the elderly, ailing Reverend John Ames, a Congregational minister, and the likewise elderly and ailing Reverend Robert Boughton, a Presbyterian. And each uses for its small measure of traditional fictive tension the unexpected return to Gilead of Boughton’s favorite child, Jack, a quietly desperate prodigal. At age 43, Jack has been out of touch with his hometown for 20 years, perpetually breaking his father’s heart as he did as a misfit youngster, and perpetually infuriating Ames, who baptized him and for whom he was named.

Beyond these common elements, the two novels are strikingly different in tone and authorial approach, although Robinson's deeply lyrical, deceptively simple style is so consistent that dipping back and forth between the books on second reading is never jarring.

Gilead is a first-person testament, framed as Ames's gently meandering future-letter-from-the-grave to his adored seven-year-old son, Robby, the child of a late second marriage. This earlier book amiably ambles along as a genealogy that touches on issues of race and violence, as a personal spiritual summing-up and as a collection of lovely sidelong observations of the transient everyday that obliquely, almost begrudgingly, addresses the mysterious contemporary troubles that appear in the person of Jack Boughton.

Home is a much longer, more formal, more explicit and harrowing account of the crisis brought back to the Boughton homeplace by Jack, who in leaving Gilead for St. Louis long ago disgraced his parents by deserting an underage country girl whom he had made pregnant. This new book—tilted a bit away from *Gilead's* pure poetry—is told in the third person, from the point of view of the youngest of Boughton's eight children, 38-year-old Glory, who has reluctantly returned to Gilead to care for her dying father, a widower, after being shamed by a long-deceptive suitor.

In scene upon scene, Robert and Jack Boughton engage in an articulate, biblically infused confrontation over the possibility of a son and father's repentance and forgiveness. This confrontation gains in bluntness and frustration day by day, occasionally tempered by visits from Ames and his young wife and boy. Meanwhile, Glory acts as a jealous but always forgiving referee and interpreter, cook and housekeeper. As the old man falls into longer periods of sleep, Glory, with many tears, gets to know her brother, watching him as he feverishly tries to avoid the bottle by making repairs around the house and restoring their late mother's garden plots. She comes to realize that he is a good, loving person, albeit one who will likely never be healed.

One of the compelling aspects of the dynamic between the two novels is that unlike Glory and her father, we previous readers of *Gilead* know at the beginning of *Home* that Jack is a good man—in fact, a loving and sensitive man—who has returned to Gilead to try to figure out whether it is a place where he can reunite with his common-law wife, a black woman, and their young boy. Several critics have complained about this particular piece of irony, suggesting that it's a coy device by

which Robinson is somehow indulging in the dated role of novelist as godlike puppeteer, manipulating her characters and readers alike while revealing too little of her own grand purpose. My reaction, though, is quite the opposite. Having provided such crucial knowledge about Jack in *Gilead*, Robinson has freed the reader to look at him early on in *Home* as something other than a moral monster, and therefore she can draw the reader closer in as a compatriot as she examines nuances of guilt and redemption.

Much of the language in *Home* does have a dated, quaint feel to it. Here, for example, is a passage that describes the Boughton siblings' ambivalence about their return to Gilead: "Home. What kinder place could there be on earth, and why did it seem to them all like exile? Oh, to be passing anonymously through an impersonal landscape! Oh, not to know every stump and stone, not to remember how the fields of Queen Anne's lace figured in the childish happiness they had offered to their father's hopes, God bless him."

Several critics have objected to this diction, seeing again a godlike remoteness on the part of the novelist that, as one critic puts it, demands a leap of faith that an agnostic reader cannot necessarily make. I believe, on the other hand, that Robinson's slow accretion of visual detail and spoken nuance in *Home* eventually makes for an almost painful evocation of time and place—perhaps a more heightened evocation of the holy amid the everyday than would be possible with more contemporary language.

Robinson has been blessed with a host of careful, serious readers, in the popular media as well as in seminary classrooms and church-related reading groups. The reservations of some are a valuable part of a vital conversation about faith and American culture. But those of us who wish that the Christian life were known more broadly as a witness of personal reverence, imperfect social dedication and perpetual intellectual exploration—rather than of blind certainty—should realize that we badly need Robinson's odd, powerful body of thought to be applied to our national cultural landscape.