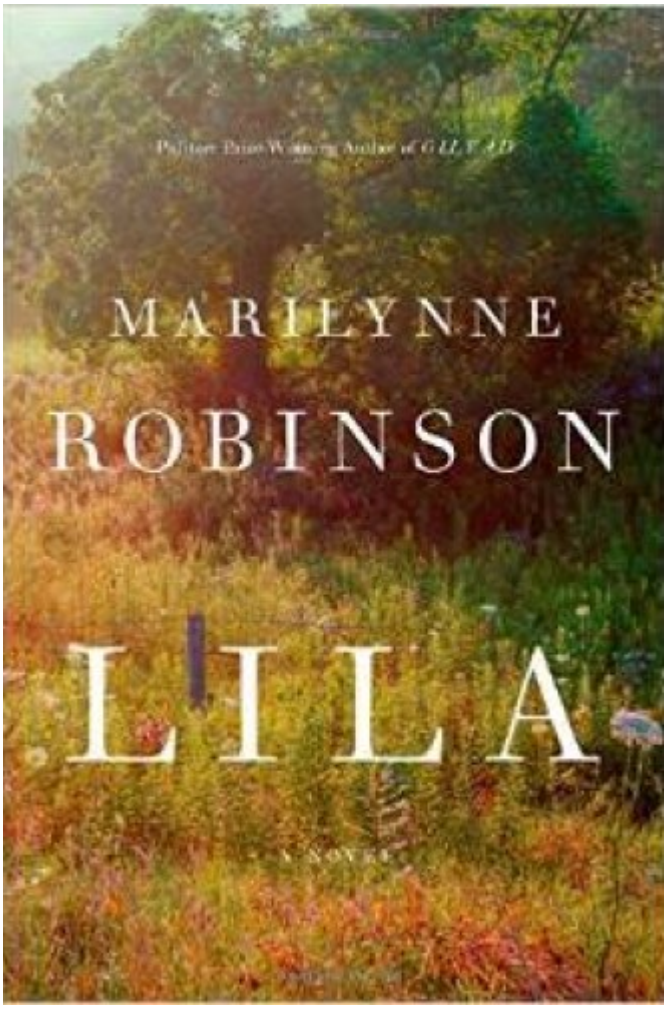
The preacher’s wife

by Amy Frykholm in the December 10, 2014 issue

In Review



Lila

By Marilynne Robinson
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Marilynne Robinson’s readers already know the title character of her new novel, having met Lila twice: once as the mother of John Ames’s son in *Gilead*, and once as a skeptical but sympathetic presence in *Home*, the story of *Gilead*’s Boughton

family. And I felt that I had met Lila in Robinson's other work, perhaps in the characters of Sylvie and Ruth in Housekeeping, two women torn between homelessness and home, between something wild in themselves that resists domesticity and something that craves shelter. Early in *Lila*, the title character recalls John Ames telling her about a bird that had flown into his house during a storm. "It left a blessing in the house," he told her. "The wildness of it. Bringing the wind inside." Lila knows that this is Ames's way of acknowledging their relationship, the bit of "wind inside" that she is to him. It is also Ames's way of acknowledging that she might not stay with him. He has no right to keep her. She is free to go if she must.

Lila grapples with her desire for both freedom and shelter. Throughout the novel, she tells her own story to herself, from the moment that her surrogate mother, Doll, stole her off a porch, through the birth and baptism of her son. She tries to understand this story in light of her new circumstances, and she wonders what of it she will share with Ames.

At the beginning of the novel, she decides only to tell him sweet things about her past:

> She would tell the old man, I didn't use to mind tansy. I still like an apricot now and then. She pretended that he knew some of her thoughts, only some of them, the ones she would like to show him. Mellie with her babies. Doll smiling because she had a bit of sugar candy from the store to slip into Lila's hand when the others weren't looking. Any one of them could walk through the field, plucking at the blue stem and the clover, thinking their own thoughts, natural as could be.

But gradually Lila wonders how to address the darker parts of her past: the whorehouse, the wandering, the wrenching and unrelenting loneliness that Ames cannot relieve. "You don't know nothing about me," she blurts out. "I got feelings I don't have names for. There probly ain't any names."

"People do talk to me," Ames says in response, a little defensively maybe. "About all sorts of things. Sometimes it helps."

She also keeps her theological musings to herself. Particularly mysterious to her is baptism, which haunts the novel from beginning to end. On every page, the novel plays with this mystery. Water and washing, belonging and blessing. Doll washes the child Lila, and as she does so, she says, "Don't know what I think I'm doing." Ames's

second baptism of Lila is accompanied by the same words, “I don’t really know what I am doing here.” When Lila washes in the river, she somehow belongs to the river. When she is washed by Ames, she belongs mysteriously to him or to what he represents. And yet she never belongs to either one of them—always her mind, like the bird in the house, retains a wildness of its own.

Whatever baptism means, it does not mean the certainty of outcomes, and she and Ames both feel this. “That was existence, and why didn’t it roar and wrench itself apart like the storm it must be? . . . Even now thinking of that man who called himself her husband, what if he turned away from her?” Each step in their relationship is fraught with risk, and the fragile ground under their feet erupts at nearly every moment. Ames is all but certain that Lila will leave him. Lila believes that she will finally tell Ames the very thing that will make him want her to go. And yet each gesture leads them a step closer to one another. Thinking that Ames will one day die, Lila starts to meet him at the church so they can walk home together in the evenings. Imagining that Lila will leave him, Ames learns that she is expecting a child. Prepared for that child to die, Lila and Ames lie together on his bed and become more intimate in their terrible vulnerability than either knew was possible.

Perhaps the novel stands or falls on how authentic the reader finds the love story that entwines these two unlikely lovers, who are separated by 30 years and entirely different backgrounds. Ames lives in the home in which he was born, which has housed so many people related to him that there is a ghost in every room. Lila can barely read or write and does not have enough words for her experiences. Ames has almost nothing but words. Books and ideas have been the essential food of his life.

Lila copies passages from her stolen Bible to teach herself how to write. “I had to learn the word ‘existence.’ You was talking about it all the time. It took me awhile to figure out what you even meant by it,” she tells Ames. Yet she has worlds of experience to offer him. Ames tells Lila, “I know you have things to tell me, maybe hundreds of things, that I would have never known. . . . Maybe you don’t realize how important this is to me, not to be—well, a fool, I suppose.” But she tells him very little. Nearly everything goes unsaid between the characters in this novel of theological contemplation, but almost nothing goes unthought or unfelt. Ames and Lila build their relationship on both longing for intimacy and respectful distance. Their path to love is the gradual removal of the internal barriers that keep them apart.

I couldn’t help but wonder why a novel that essentially consists of the thoughts of one character as she pieces together her identity from scraps of past and present isn’t boring. There are not many scenes that interrupt the flow of what one reviewer calls Lila’s “soul voice.” In perhaps the most crucial section of the novel, Lila spends the morning thinking. Ames comes home for lunch, and they talk. Ames leaves, and Lila continues thinking. And yet, the novel is not dull. Its exquisite language is working on so many levels at the same time that the reader has to give it equally exquisite attention or miss the most important moments of transformation. Its questions are both internal and eternal. “Pity us, yes, but we are brave, she thought, and wild, more life in us than we can bear, the fire infolding itself within us. . . . Someday she would tell him what she knew.”