

Women's  
Prize for  
Fiction

2020

25

## 2009 WINNER

### HOME

BY MARILYNNE ROBINSON

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Marilynne Robinson is the recipient of a 2012 National Humanities Medal, awarded by President Barack Obama, for “her grace and intelligence in writing”. In 2013, she was awarded South Korea’s Pak Kyong-ni Prize for her contribution to international literature. She is the author of *Lila*, a finalist for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award, *Gilead*, winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Home*, winner of the Orange Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and a finalist for the National Book Award. Her first novel, *Housekeeping*, won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Robinson’s non-fiction books include *The Givenness of Things*, *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, *Absence of Mind*, *The Death of Adam*, and *Mother Country*, which was nominated for a National Book Award and *What Are We Doing Here?* Robinson lives in Iowa City where she taught at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop for twenty-five years.

#### PLOT SUMMARY

Prodigal son Jack Boughton has been gone from his home town of Gilead for twenty years. He returns home seeking refuge and to make peace with the past and his father, the local preacher. Jack is and always has been a bad boy, an alcoholic who can’t hold down a job and a sinner of the most grievous kind.

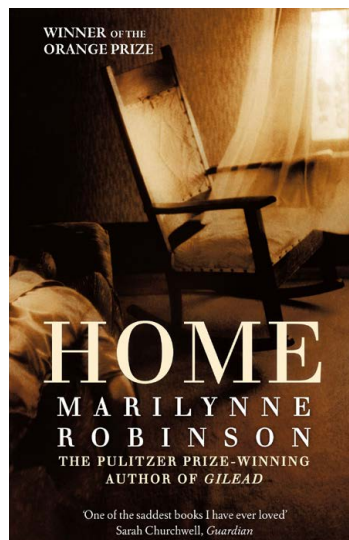
Perpetually at odds with his surroundings and with his traditionalist father, he nevertheless remains the favourite and most beloved child. Told by his sister Glory, who has also returned to the family home to care for her dying father, this is a moving book about families, love, death and faith.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Marilynne Robinson’s quite formal choice of language style in *Home*, often using long sentences and biblical references, reflects the pious ways of the Boughton family. We get a sense of the language in which Glory thinks, according to her religious upbringing, as well as a strongly traditional feel of the whole community; the language used by the Boughtons shows how important religion is to the Reverend and how it influences the daily reality of living in Gilead.

In many ways, Jack Boughton’s story parallels Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son. Returning home after a long estrangement, and after gambling all his money away, the Prodigal Son’s repentance of all his wrongdoing means that his father loves him more than his loyal older brother: the

moral of the story being perhaps that God loves a repentant sinner more than a continually faithful follower. Yet Robert Boughton continually refuses to grant his son absolution, and his close friend, Reverend Ames, also sees Jack as unforgivable, adding tension throughout the plot.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

Though we don't see it directly in *Home*, race riots are happening in other American cities which are more ethnically diverse than the Boughton's Gilead.

“ HOME IS ABOUT GOING HOME IN ADULT LIFE AND WHAT YOU HOPE THAT HOME WILL GIVE YOU. BOTH JACK AND GLORY HOPE THAT IT WILL BE A HEALING EXPERIENCE, AND THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE ENORMOUS GAP BETWEEN EXPECTATION AND REALITY ”

FI GLOVER  
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2009

When Jack and his father watch coverage of the riots in St Louis, Jack is shocked at the police attacking children, but his father refers to his religion as a support for 'law and order' and says, "you can't have people running around the streets like that". Later, we find out that the woman Jack is in love with, Della, is black, and her relationship with Jack is frowned on by her family. Jack mentions that he has spent time at Della's church.

Jack and his father Robert discuss politics – whether they support the nuclear bomb, for instance, and whether they'd vote Republican. Is Glory involved in these discussions?

How does Marilynne Robinson present attitudes to civil liberties in small town Iowa in the 1950s? And how do religion and politics intersect? Where is the gender politics in all this?



## QUESTIONS

Think about all the associations you have with 'home' and look at how those themes are explored in the book. For instance, home might be the family home as a building; how is that represented, and what does that say about the family it belongs to?

*Home* is also the people we associate with our home town. Has Gilead been welcoming to or judgemental of Jack Boughton?

How does Glory feel about being home again after having been independent?

Home is also the people in our family. How would you describe the Boughton family? How has their mother's death affected them?

Think about other phrases like home is where the heart is and you can never go home. How do they relate to this novel?

## NEXT STEPS

Write a short story or poem titled *home is where the heart is*. You might like to base it on memories of your childhood home, write it about your current home or even an imagined, utopian home that would make you happy. How do you convey the emotion of home? And is that emotion happy, cosy, sad, cold, lost, confused? You might describe one item as being integral to the way your home feels. What is it and what does it represent?

Jack and Glory's stories are both sad ones, though they find solace in getting to know each other as adults. Is there a sad story in your family history that needs to be told? Is there something in the telling of it that releases it, gives it a new life or puts it peacefully 'to bed'? Talk to older relatives or family friends and see what old stories they can tell you – you might be surprised!

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

GILEAD AND LILA BY MARILYNNE ROBINSON  
HOMEGOING BY YAA GYASI