

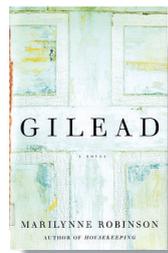
Life imitates literature

Reflections on pastors, prophets and the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel 'Gilead'

BY TOM MONTGOMERY FATE

My initial response, nearly a decade ago, when I first read Marilynne Robinson's novel, "Gilead," was gratitude — for the sheer beauty of the language and the moral complexity of the central character. And since religious themes and language in mainstream literature are sometimes belittled by the critics, it was refreshing that such a book won the Pulitzer Prize.

The novel is written as a long letter from Rev. John Ames — a congregational minister in Gilead, Iowa — to his young son. Ames is 76 and has a bad heart, so he wants to tell his son everything in print that he may never get a chance to tell him in person. In the end it is Ames' quiet, miraculous voice that haunts readers, a voice so full of the "sad wonder" that predominates his life that readers can't help but rediscover lost, essential pieces of their own lives in his.



Gilead

By Marilynne Robinson, Picador, 247 pages, \$15 paperback

ful community.

Given my intimate knowledge of the life of a small-town pastor, I was also thankful for how carefully the novel explored that life. Rev. Ames, the protagonist, is a quiet, dutiful intellectual — a pastor in the best sense. And he is contrasted with his grandfather, who was less pastor than prophet — a passionate, uncompromising truth-seeker who is always stirring the pot.

I sometimes noticed this conflict in my father. What was his role — pastor or prophet? Both, of course. Sometimes he would walk in front of his flock, making pronouncements and passionately condemning injustice or espousing some new theological insight as a mandate for action. But he also knew that his University of Chicago education wouldn't seamlessly translate in Maquoketa, Iowa — that theologians like Tillich and Niebuhr might be less important than corn prices and high school football.

And, like any good shepherd, he knew to spend most of his time walking behind the flock, wading through all their crap and assisting anyone who got trampled or left behind. It seemed the essential skill was not speaking but listening — an aptitude that I presume is related to prayer, to listening for God in daily life. A small-town pastor has no choice but to pursue a theology of daily life — of endless potlucks



Robert Neubecker

and coffee shop discussions and late-night prayers in some dark hospital room.

Several years ago, in a conversation with Marilynne Robinson, I asked her about such a life. I inquired whether her protagonist, Rev. Ames, wasn't kind of "stuck" in Gilead, if his intellectual gifts weren't somewhat wasted in such a small town. Her response: "There isn't any necessary relation between the scope of one's mind and where they live. Ames is highly educated. He knows what books to read, he knows what's going on in the world, and thus is intellectually sophisticated. A life lived well is never wasted no matter what the scale of that life is. He lives toward God. And there is no way of measuring that."

All of this matters more now, since my dad died in May. And the meaning of "Gilead" is deepened by the fact that Dad and Marilynne Robinson were friends and attended the same church for many years. For a short time, he was her pastor. He confided that he found her both an intimidating intellect and exceedingly kind.

I remember being startled when Dad told me that Robinson, a teacher at the University of Iowa's Iowa Writers' Workshop, was also teaching in the basement of the church — for anyone who wanted to come. So I attended a class one Sunday night and listened to an enthralling talk about Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass."

That night I heard a resonant and challenging theme I have found in much of Robinson's work — a theme perhaps best revealed in one of John Ames' final notes to his

son: "Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?"

Robinson suggests that for both the pastor and the artist/writer, the essential part of faith is the creative courage it takes to see the holy in the everyday world, and then to respond. This passage also seems to reveal how the roles of prophet and pastor might converge.

Robinson wrote a lot of lovely things about my dad in a remembrance for the Iowa City newspaper, the *Press-Citizen*. She also did something she did in "Gilead" — she celebrated the importance of the small-town pastor.

"The role of pastor is ancient and complex," she wrote, "especially difficult now, when institutional religion seems to hold a more tenuous place in society than it has through most of history." And later: "There is no way of reckoning the value good pastors bring to the lives and communities that are privileged to know them, or the extent of their influence, which is usually quiet, unfolding over time."

These days, as I remember my dad, and reread "Gilead" and "Home" and Robinson's other books, it strikes me that the value of a good pastor may have a lot in common with the value of a good book.

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