

## **An Interview with Marilynne Robinson, Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *Gilead***

By Scott LaMascus  
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*Marilynne Robinson teaches at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop and is the author of two novels. Gilead won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the 2004 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Housekeeping (1980) won the PEN/Hemingway Award for First Fiction and the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award from the Academy of American Arts and Letters. The novel was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and served as the basis for Bill Forsythe's movie of the same title starring Christine Lahti. Robinson also is the author of two volumes of non-fiction. The nuclear-energy industry is her subject for Mother Country (1989). The Death of Adam (1988) covers a wide range of topics from Darwin to Calvin. She has written many essays in publications including Harper's, Paris Review and The New York Times Book Review.*

*Robinson delivered the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual McBride Lecture for Faith & Literature on Friday, Oct. 5, 2007 at 7:00 p.m. in the Gaylord University Center on the campus of Oklahoma Christian University. The lecture was followed by a book-signing reception. Book sales were provided at the reception that evening by Best of Books, located in Edmond's Kickingbird Square.*

*Named for Bailey and Joyce McBride, the annual lecture brings nationally-known speakers to the university to explore the relationship of Christian faith and literature. Bailey McBride served as the university's chief academic officer for many years.*

*Co-sponsors of Robinson's visit included the Oklahoma Humanities Council and the Oklahoma Scholarship-Leadership Enrichment Program of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education. An OSLEP seminar will be conducted with students from across the state during Robinson's visit. Dr. Teresa Miller of Oklahoma State University-Tulsa also conducted an interview with Robinson which later aired on "Writing Out Loud," a broadcast of OETA/PBS in cooperation with the Oklahoma Center for Poets and Writers.*

*The early reception of Gilead has been positive and widespread. For example, Olivia Boler in The San Francisco Chronicle notes, "Gilead is chock full of rich, complex language, as well as plunges into intricate philosophical and spiritual introspections." Not only do reviewers find the story of John Ames to be meaningful, but the style of Robinson's writing inspires admiration. Michael Dirda, writing in The Washington Post, notes that her writing is "so serenely beautiful...that one feels touched with grace just to read it." Verlyn Klinkenborg of The New York Times writes of this unique style, "Marilynne Robinson rounded up the most ordinary words in the English Language and herded them into a single corral where she could sort them and dignify them by turning them into the thoughts of this quiet old man." In Gilead, Ames fears he will not live much longer, so he narrates his story for the benefit of a young son.*

**LaMascus:** You are prolific and your work has been recognized at the highest levels of our national culture, yet you are traveling the nation discussing *Gilead* and your other writing. Why do you accept invitations to travel when it would be so easy for a writer of your stature to be less generous with time and energy? How does the travel impact your thinking, writing, or teaching?

**Robinson:** I am indulging an interest of mine--of very long standing--in American civilization. I have an unusual opportunity to spend time in centers of regional culture, and religious culture, in this very large and active country. It is true that I am usually in a place because I have been invited to read or to talk about my own work, but I also watch and listen. In these times there is a very strong tendency toward caricature, outright ridicule, and even hostility between regions and among groups in this country, and I worry about this, not least because it departs from the truth, and stimulates an enjoyment in the departure from the truth, that we owe one another respect. I watch every important issue sink into a wallow of antagonism, and I tremble for my country. So I go out to prove to myself what I know is true, that everywhere there are good people working earnestly to enhance the common life. That education and the arts as well as religion flourish everywhere. I think a great many writers are consciously 'American' writers. Certainly I am one. But I can get very homesick for my country when I hear all this bitterness and denigration. So I go out on my travels, to reassure myself it is still there.

**LaMascus:** *Housekeeping* received critical praise when it was released in 1980 and later was made into a movie. Scholars have written about it. What has been said about that novel that makes sense to you? Why? How have scholars misunderstood *Housekeeping*? Do the great masses of readers understand your work better than scholars? What are your thoughts about the movie?

**Robinson:** I loved the movie. No writer and no book could have received more considerate treatment. I think scholars are attracted to books (at least contemporary, uncanonized books) in the same way readers are--they are drawn in and moved. Then they sit down to write about them, and the language and the current preoccupations of the academy enter--in part, I think, because these critics want to demonstrate that the book merits scholarly attention. Criticism is like paraphrase or translation. Anything decanted from one vocabulary into another is changed. I'm not sure the masses, if they tried, would articulate their reactions to the book more successfully than the critics do. Reading a fiction is an intensely inward experience. I don't read critics and scholars on my own work. I am grateful that they find it of interest.

**LaMascus:** You have not always been recognized as a "Christian writer," but *Gilead* has been widely and, for the most part, kindly, reviewed in a wide range of publications. What have readers noticed about the novel that particularly pleases you? Have you noticed any differences yet in the popular and learned receptions of the novel or its characters? Does the designation as a "Christian writer" seem helpful or unhelpful?

**Robinson:** Whether I am thought of as a "Christian writer" seems to depend on where I

am. A great many writers are religious in one way or another, though this element may be implicit in their work, or, indeed, absent from it. I have been writing on Scripture and theology for many years, much of it for a literary journal in New York edited by some very secular friends of mine. In that context I have never felt in any way set apart because I have explored my faith in essays. Non-Christian writers and readers have treated me with every kind of interest and respect. This is one thing I wish I could make my own students and all young writers understand--do what matters to you as well as you can and you will find that other people will respond to it with generosity. Christians are not an embattled minority in this country, though they alienate themselves from the culture at large when they act as though they are. I am always saying, respect other people. This is crucial because you cannot act, or write, in good faith, from your heart, if you do not respect your readers. There is a tension in writing that is encapsulated in specialized religious terms that comes with an absence of trust--which does not feel Christian.

**LaMascus:** One of my favorite moments in *Gilead* comes when John Ames, the narrator, observes two young men laughing over something coarse. When they see him, a pastor, they stop laughing. Can you discuss this episode and your vision of humor and holiness?

**Robinson:** Ames is old enough and lovingly detached enough from the world to see it in broader than conventional terms. It is beautiful that there are young men, that they laugh, that they are embarrassed by an impulse of respect, that they laugh anyway. He would like to be in on the laughter, or at least not to disrupt the beauty of it. Laughter is one of the great blessings. It is a profoundly good thing, like music. If whatever the young men said was a little coarse, the laughter and the sunlight speak of grace.

**LaMascus:** In *The Death of Adam*, you criticize American culture for the “collective eagerness to disparage without knowledge or information.” Can you expand what you mean by this? How can writing change this?

**Robinson:** I went on about this in the answer to the first question, I think. It is so I won't find myself doing this too often that I travel and keep myself as broadly informed as I can. More generally, I find that people pass along attitudes about historical figures and movements and books and ideas that are simply cliches, often polemical or simply mean. Reading can change this--primary-source reading wherever possible. Writing may or may not result, but the effort is unbelievably enlightening. It justifies itself.

**LaMascus:** Many contemporary writers whose work addresses spirituality – I think of Kathleen Norris in *Dakota* or the poet Walt McDonald in his poems about West Texas – have pointed out the importance of geography in their work. What role does *place* or *landscape* play in your fiction? Why?

**Robinson:** I am always aware that this is an amazing planet, and that the particulars of a place are suggestive in themselves and deeply meaningful to people who live there--with any degree of awareness, and for any length of time. I think it is a mark of writers whose

awareness is spiritual that place, experience--being--are mysterious and inexhaustibly rich, if they are given any part of the attention they deserve.

**LaMascus:** As a teacher of writing, you invest a lot of energy in aspiring writers. What makes you most hopeful about the literary arts in the U.S.? What dangers do you see ahead for aspiring artists? Why?

I am hopeful because I see so many fine, gifted young people who are serious about their writing. More generally, when I go out into the world I see any number of people who are passionate about books, not only readers, but also agents and editors. It is hard to get a book published, true, but that is because so very many are written and submitted. It appears to me that book clubs and writers groups are another national pastime. They are everywhere, and they are very important to the people who belong to them.

My worry, and frustration, is that there is so much groundless negative talk about the declined state of American letters and the post-literate future of America and the need to condescend to the public and on and on that good talent goes to waste, doing work that is unworthy of it. Cynicism is a death-wish. Nothing of quality can come from it. Yet so many voices in the culture urge it on the rest of us, as if morality were somehow served by their doing this. (And cynicism is un-Christian. If we are not immune to it, we had better worry about that.)