



Discussion Guide

About the Book



Book Title: *Gilead*

Author: Marilynne Robinson

Published by: Farrar, Straus & Giroux , 2004

Book Website: <http://us.macmillan.com/gilead/marilynnerobinson>

Author Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MarilynneRobinson>

Questions for Discussion

- 1. What were your general impressions of this book?**
- 2. How did the Pastor's thoughts compare to other pastors you know? Have you ever been close to a pastor? Do you find this Pastor to be unusual or fairly typical?**
- 3. What did you make of the author's treatment of belief vs. disbelief? The Pastor's brother and his friend's son both were featured prominently as nonbelievers. How did you see the Pastor reacting to them? Did the Pastor try to talk them out of their lack of faith? Was the Pastor's response what you would expect? Why or why not?**
- 4. Quite a bit of time was given in this story to the subject of race. The grandfather's incident involving the civil war seemed to be fighting to free the slaves. What did you think of the Pastor's father and the Pastor's response to the grandfather? The issue of race comes up again with Jack's family. What do you think the author would say is the role of the faith community in times of war? In times of injustice?**
- 5. Why was the town and the book titled "Gilead"? The old hymn talks about Gilead as a place of healing. Who do you think was healing or healed in this book?**
- 6. Has your father or mother left any writing for you? If you don't have any written thoughts from your parents, do you wish you did? Why or why not? Did this book make you think of leaving some writing for your children?**
- 7. What did you make of the relationship the Pastor had with his wife? Was this a good relationship? Why or why not?**
- 8. If you were the son of this Pastor, how would you feel, reading this document?**
- 9. Read over the MAMs comments on the book. Which of them do you most agree with and why?**

Nancy and the MAMs discuss the book...



NANCY: Marilynne Robinson has created such an artful message through the pen of this dying pastor. I appreciated the gentle tone of his voice as he considered his own son and wife, and their future without him. As the daughter of a pastor, I found this book so intriguing. I wondered what my own father would have written, if he had tried to write such a memoir to me, and I do believe the tone of his letter might be very similar. A pastor must navigate so many different landscapes, among such a variety of people, always speaking love. I do think many of them become wise and introspective, and not at all as judgmental as you might think. The book covered many issues of faith thoughtfully, from a variety of perspectives, and the language was beautiful throughout, an excellent work of literary fiction.



SALLIE: Of course I'm focusing on the children. So first, I enjoyed the love of the pastor for his son and wanting to leave a message for him. It's so hard for young children to lose a parent. I like this approach. And I appreciated how the pastor enjoyed the son's playing. I also found myself wondering what happened to Jack during his childhood to make him live such a difficult life. There was something there we didn't hear in the story. He was the proverbial Preacher's Kid, getting in trouble, but something must have been troubling him.



ABIGAIL: Well, I loved the description of his atheist brother... After playing ball with him the pastor said he knew he would be okay in the hereafter. Such a wonderful way of expressing a view of a loving God. And Jack, the other nonbeliever also seemed to be going out on a limb with great love. Robinson probes the depths of God's love in this book.



MOLLY: What I found so interesting was the way Robinson dealt with racism. Beginning with the grandfather who had assisted the cause of the Yankees during the Civil War, raising the question of just war. And then continuing with the father's belief in nonviolence, and the pastor's, too. And finally, Jack's choice of a partner. In a book about the church, I'm glad this figured prominently.



PRISCILLA: On Page 91, the pastor talks about the difference between a vision and the everyday. He says, "An impressive sun shines on us all." He believed that his grandfather was too focused on the great vision and missed the ordinary daily events where God comes. That was deep! I'd say "both—and". God comes daily and also in visions!



KATHARINE: I picked this book for you all to read because I like to use it in my History of American theology class. It touches on several issues, including the role of the church during times of war, predestination, the differences among churches, fervor of worship, racism and the church's response. Spanning three generations, it covers a slice of American history between the grandfather, the father and the pastor, all to some extent products of their time. So you also see how the events shape the church. I've read some interesting papers from my students on this book!



JANE: I have to admit I didn't get into this book. I didn't get past the first chapter, but I loved the title! Gilead! We always used to sing that in chapel when I was in Catholic School. "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole." Was there a balm in that book? What do you say? Was someone healed? Could we take a trip to Gilead?