

Discussion questions for "Gilead" by Marilynne Robinson

1. The narrator writes a long letter to his son. He says "I am writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle." What other reasons does the narrator have for writing his letter?
 2. Why is the epistolary format of this book effective? How has the author used the format to tell the story and to reveal her characters?
 3. The narrator seems particularly interested in and observant of the nature and quality of light. "I have paid a great deal of attention to light, but no one could begin to do it justice." Later he calls light a metaphor. How does the narrator describe light throughout the book? What special significance does light have to the narrator?
 4. The narrator explores relationships among four generations of fathers and sons. What principles (such as respect or loyalty) govern these relationships? How do they help the relationships? How do they fail?
 5. What happened to cause such a deep chasm between the narrator's father and grandfather? Why was it so important for the narrator's father to find the grandfather's grave?
 6. How did each of the three Reverends Ames fulfill their roles as minister to their congregations? How were they similar? How did they differ?
 7. The Civil War and the earlier fight for abolition of slavery in Kansas profoundly affected the Ames family. What drove the grandfather to step out of the pulpit to fight for the free soilers? What shaped the father's unforgiving pacifism?
 8. "There have been heroes here, and saints and martyrs, and I want you to know that. Because that is the truth, even if no one remembers it." Was the grandfather a hero? The father? Why or why not? Do all small Iowa towns have their saints and heroes?
 9. The narrator tells of his grandfather's fiery sermons urging his congregation to take up arms in the fight to free the slaves. "He did preach those young men into the war. And his church was hit hard." The narrator's father, on the other hand, preached pacifism. Which one was right? What is the appropriate role of the clergy in times of war and crisis?
 10. The grandfather claimed to have visions, direct encounters with the Lord. The narrator's father says this was simply typical of the times. The narrator reflects on visions by saying "I believe that the old man did indeed have far too narrow an idea of what a vision might be. He may, so to speak, have been too dazzled by the great light of his experience to realize that an impressive sun shines on us all. Sometimes the visionary aspect of any particular day comes in the memory of it, or it opens to you over time." (p92?) What "visions" did the characters experience? Do any events or experiences in your life correspond to any of these three interpretations of visionary experience?
 11. "I felt certain that he should hide the guilt of his father, and that I should also hide the guilt of mine. I loved him with the strangest, most miserable passion when he stood there preaching about how the Lord hates falsehood and how in the end all our works will be exposed in the naked light of truth." (p86) How did the Ames men cope with these deep contradictions in belief? In what other situations does the narrator find similar conflicts? How does he deal with them? Does he resolve them?
 12. How does the author use language effectively to convey elusive or difficult concepts? What is your favorite passage in the book?
 13. Why was it so difficult for the narrator to forgive or accept Jack Boughton? Do you see parallels in this relationship with the relationship between the narrator's grandfather and father?
 14. The sacraments of baptism and communion recur through the narrator's reflections as pivotal moments in his life--the baptism of the cats, the baptism of his daughter, the biscuit his father gave him after the church fire, his own son's first communion. Discuss the author's presentation of these concepts and their role in everyday life.
 15. What is the balm in Iowa's Gilead? Does the narrator find it?
 16. Who is the narrator's young wife? Where did she come from? Why did she marry him?
 17. Discuss the narrator's relationships with the women in his life--his mother, his wife Louisa, and his second wife, as well as the women of his congregation.
 18. The narrator spent 45 years alone between the death of his first wife and marriage to his second wife. How would you characterize those 45 years?
 19. Why did this book win a Pulitzer Prize?
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