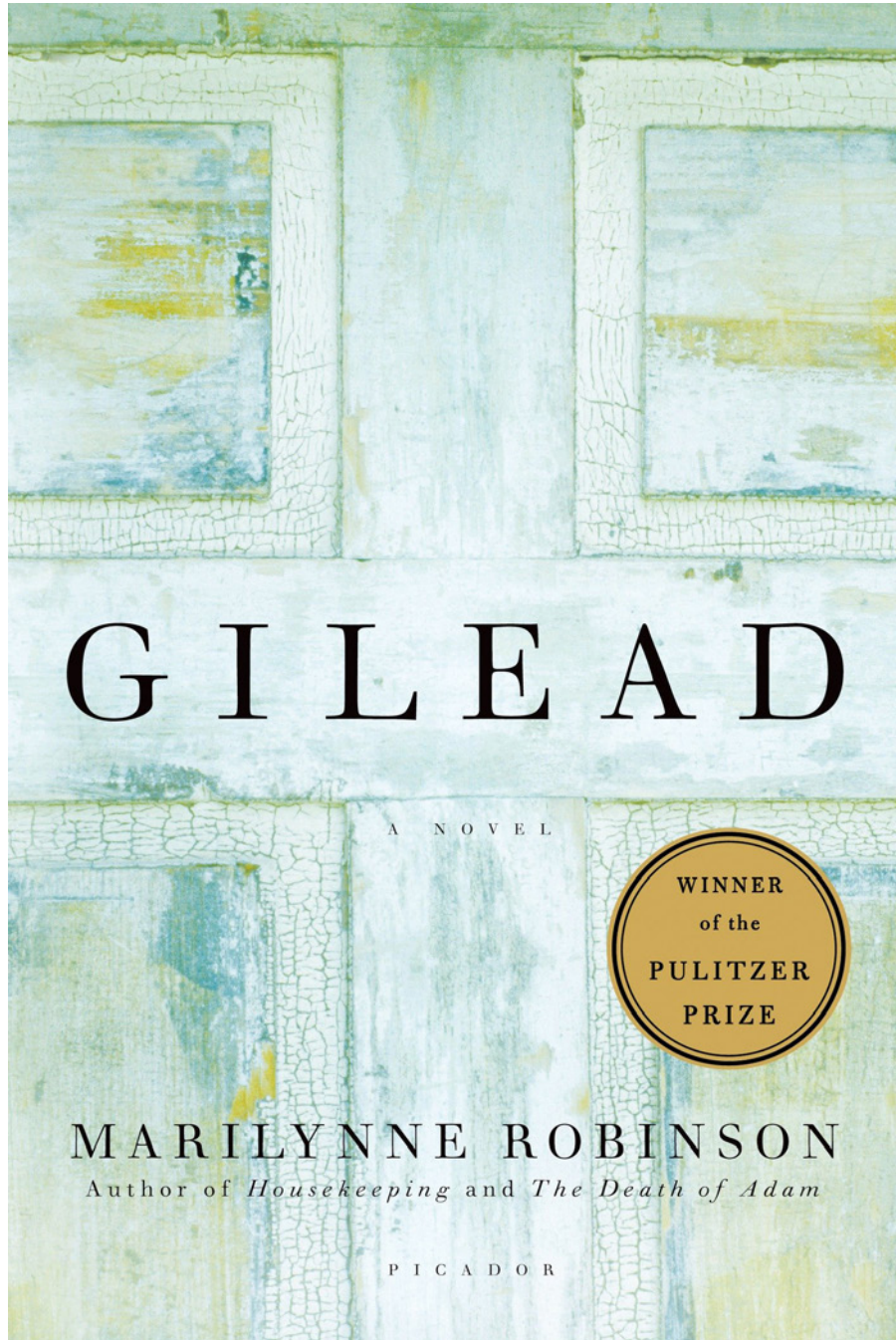
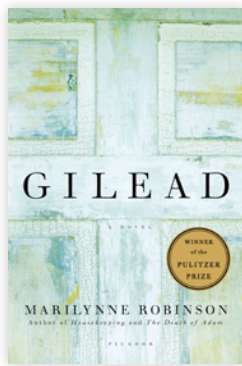


We the People Book Club

**GILEAD**  
Reading Guide





**MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S** novel *Gilead* gives us the pleasure of meeting the Reverend John Ames of Gilead, Iowa. Though Reverend Ames is a different sort indeed than Huck Finn or Holden Caulfield, his is one of the great first-person narrative voices in American literature. His voice is the very diction and syntax of discernment and compassion.

In the person of someone who is gentle, aware, loving, and at the same time troubled like the rest of us, Robinson crafts a narrative that is itself a spiritual practice; Ames's meditative voice is a powerful influence, guiding us to do what he is doing: pay attention to life. The book consistently and credibly models the better nature we all have the ability to access: kindness to our neighbor and a capacious definition of "neighbor;" transcendence of petty troubles in favor of service to the eternal.

Robinson's first novel, *Housekeeping*, was published in 1982 and won the PEN/Hemingway Award. Readers had to wait 23 years for *Gilead*, her second novel, which won a handful of awards including the Pulitzer. She followed *Gilead* with two more novels set in the same town, *Home* in 2008 and *Lila* in 2014. Though popularly known as a novelist, Robinson has published far more nonfiction than fiction, and her many books of essays are also award-winners. One of her most faithful readers, President Barack Obama, awarded her with the National Humanities Medal in 2012.

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## About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on Marilynne Robinson, an overview of *Gilead*, and observations on Robinson's literary style. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel's democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

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## Background

**Marilynne Summers Robinson** was born in 1943 in Sandpoint, Idaho, a small town in the state's northern mountains. She attended Pembroke College (the women's college of Brown University) for her BA, and then achieved her PhD in English at the University of Washington.

She has been teaching Creative Writing at the eminent Iowa Writers' Workshop for nearly 30 years. She lives in Iowa City, where she is known to be a serious individual who keeps to herself, avoids small talk, and walks her dog around town with her head buried in old books.

In both Robinson's fiction and nonfiction, theology is a notable focus, especially an abiding interest in the works of John Calvin and deep engagement with Calvinist

ideas. Raised a Presbyterian, Robinson later joined the Congregational Church and sometimes preaches at the local Congregational United Church of Christ in Iowa City.

Robinson has two sons from her marriage to Fred Miller Robinson, which lasted from 1967-1989.

## Overview

After a very long period of solitude and grief following the death of his first wife and newborn daughter, Reverend John Ames is blessed with a young wife, Lila. As the narrative opens, they have been married long enough to have a six-year-old son (unnamed) who lights up old Ames' days.

Unfortunately, Ames has been told that his heart is weak and that he does not have very long to live. The novel is the letter he writes to his son to leave an account of himself and his ancestors — to impart the stories and the wisdom that will die with him. As Ames reflects, we learn about his relationships with his own father, brother, and grandfather; his relationship with his best friend and fellow minister John Boughton and with Boughton's son Jack; his joys and disappointments; his theological commitments and spiritual life; the abolitionist history of Kansas and Iowa; and the loss of his first wife and child, a loss that makes Lila and his boy seem like absolute miracles.

His remembrances are interrupted and then shaped by the psychic distraction of Jack Boughton, who returns to Gilead after a protracted absence. Though Jack was given to John Ames as a spiritual son — he was baptized by the Reverend under the name John Ames Boughton — the boy has always been a thorn in Ames' flesh, a presence who challenges the minister's best Christian impulses. Ames worries over Jack's intentions in returning, and his inability to be as compassionate with him as Jesus requires leads the letter into even deeper reflections on faith and practice.

## Genre, Language, and Structure

*Gilead* is often referred to as an epistolary novel because it takes form as a letter from a father to his son. Though epistolary novels typically involve a back-and-forth of voices, here Ames' voice is the only one: he is writing not to *receive* a response but to *give* his son a sense of himself and his life. He is writing a piece that he hopes will be a companion to his son as he grows up in the absence of his physical father. As such, his remembrances (or "begats") read more like a fictionalized memoir.

The letter form, unintrusive as it is, allows Robinson a good deal of freedom to write discursively, as one does in a letter, with little thought to conventional structure. The novel takes the shape of Ames' musings, associative and non-linear; the narrative is unencumbered by the artifice of chapters but rather shaped organically by the logic and structure of someone who is attentive and thoughtful.

Somewhat akin to George Saunders' short stories, *Gilead* is driven more by voice and inner exploration than by plot. Everything that "happens" in the novel is either historical — stories about the grandfather's involvement in abolition and the Civil War — or marginal — the stories of Jack's transgressions both moral and social.

The language of *Gilead*, thus, may move you more than the story. The Reverend's sentences combine the elegant syntax of classical prose with the sensibilities of midwestern plain-speaking, ministerial humility, intellectual self-awareness, and American awe. The measured rhythm and reverent tone of his voice create an atmosphere that is, in a way, tacit instruction on how to read the novel: slowly, with great attention, stopping a while to savor a feeling, a thought, an image.

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## Themes

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### The Beauty of Existence

Ames is a sort of muted Whitman: all the enthusiasm with none of the yawp. His “yes” to life is not expressed in bursts of passion, grand adventures, unconventional living, or gregarious social behavior; it is lived out in the microscopic and meditative observation of life's essences. His awe towards life and his “aww-shucks” humility combine to make the prose infectious: “I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its eyes again. I know this is all a mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it.”

What really sets off the contagion of awe in the reader, though, is the fact that his awe is inspired by beauty we all have access to, reminding us that the miraculous and the transcendent are *within* the everyday. Passage after passage focuses the microscope on elements of daily life: the human face, the crown of a baby's head, cats, quiet Sunday mornings, birds perching on electrical wires. And water — Ames is wonderful on the subject of water:

“There was a young couple strolling along half a block ahead of me. The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. I wish I had paid more attention to it. My list of regrets may seem unusual, but who can know that they are, really. This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it.”

The element of light is also a particular pleasure of his, and this preoccupation is in fact central to the novel's existence. Robinson had an image in her mind of a beautiful sunset illuminating the figures of an old man writing at his desk and a small child playing at his feet. From this image, *Gilead* took shape. There is a reminiscent scene in the novel itself, in fact: Ames and his father praying against a hard Kansas landscape presided over by a skyscape of both moon and sun at once. It is, for his father, a blessed reminder that places of pain can also be beautiful.

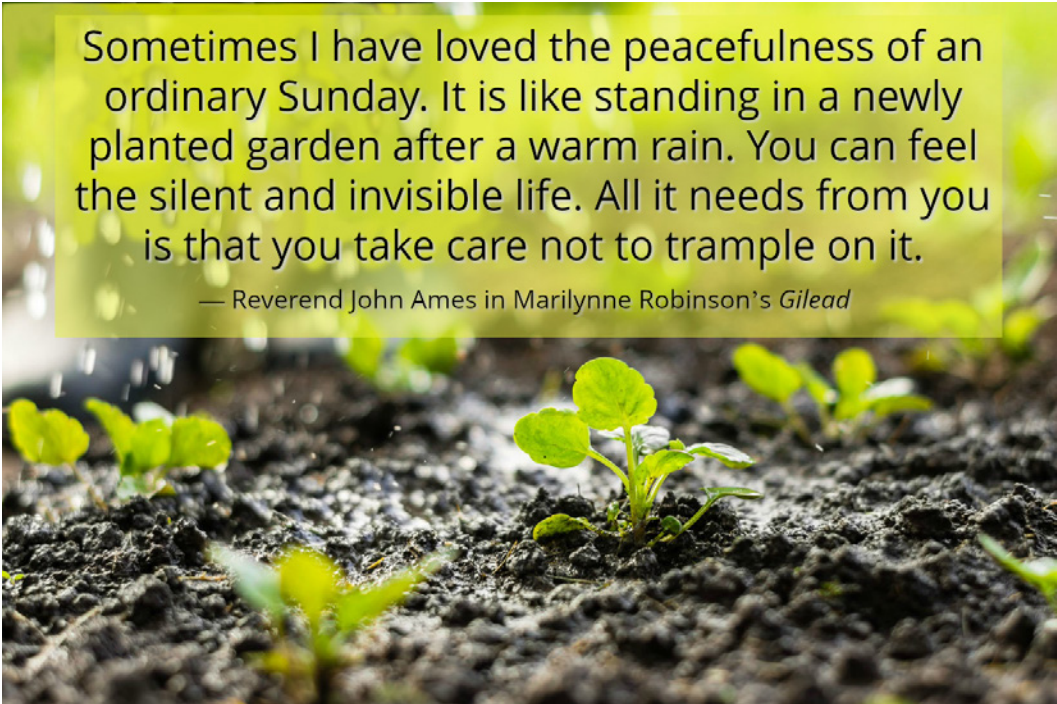


And, indeed, that belief is fundamental to Ames' sensibility: he admits, in fact, that he "really can't tell what's beautiful anymore." It seems closer to the truth to say that he really can't tell what's *not* beautiful anymore because so much seems beautiful. Luckily for the reader, his lack of judgment does not keep him from recording the beauty — and helping us see *more closely* in two senses: the first, that we see our world more closely, in more detail, and the second, that we realize how close beauty is, that it is all around, like light and water. Beauty is just at the other end of paying attention.

Paying attention is, in a way, setting a thing apart so that you can *really* see it, and so that you can really see *it*. It is an anti-synthetic impulse that grants being to something as it is in and of itself, that does not evaluate its use or value but acknowledges it for its existence.

This paying attention to existence allows us to experience the sacred. Instructing his son with a reflection on the Ten Commandments, Ames points out "a pattern in these Commandments of setting things apart so that their holiness will be perceived. Every day is holy, but the Sabbath is set apart so that the holiness of time can be experienced."

When this attention sets a person apart as loved for their very existence, divinity and humanity co-mingle. Ames tells his son that his mother "has watched every moment of your life, almost, and she loves you as God does, to the marrow of your bones. ... You see how it is God-like to love the *being* of someone. Your *existence* is a delight to us." And the love of the son, in turn, will reveal not only his mother's essence but God's as well: "When you love someone to the degree you love her, you see her as God sees her, and that is an instruction in the nature of God and humankind and of Being itself."



Sometimes I have loved the peacefulness of an ordinary Sunday. It is like standing in a newly planted garden after a warm rain. You can feel the silent and invisible life. All it needs from you is that you take care not to trample on it.

— Reverend John Ames in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*



THINK

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1. Ames returns again and again to the moment his father gives him a bite of the ashy biscuit, that day in the rain helping the Baptists tear down their church. Why do you think this moment of “communion” with his father means so much to him?

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REFLECT

2. Describe a favorite spot where you live. Is it a row of trees, a diner, the library, the baseball field, your back yard? At what time of day does it show the best? How do you feel when you are there?

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PRACTICE

3. Ames writes, “When things are taking their ordinary course, it is hard to remember what matters.” *Gilead* is about remembering what matters, so it ought to help us practice staying in touch with what matters. This passage suggests that doing so requires interrupting the normal course of things. Practice this interruption for seven days. Change course and, each day, commit to at least 15 minutes of transcendent thought about what really matters to you. Write these thoughts down in a journal, in a text or letter to a friend, on a blog, etc. Try for depth, not breadth, so that you can live in a concentrated way, focusing on what is most meaningful.

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## The Complex Blessing of Family

A lifetime before John Ames sits down to write, he is married to his childhood sweetheart, Louisa, and she dies in childbirth. The child, too, dies, shortly after being christened Angelina by John Boughton. Bereft of family, Ames spends decades alone ministering to his congregation: watching other families, especially Boughton’s, multiply and flourish, baptising their babies and resisting covetousness (“the beauty of other lives was a misery and an offense to me”).

The absence of his own family makes even the most sincere gifts hard to receive. Boughton “gives” the Reverend his son in baptism, naming him John Ames, but this gesture of restoration hurts more than heals because it reinforces his loss. He describes his feelings as “some sort of loyalty to my own life, as if I wanted to say, I have a wife, too, I have a child, too. It was as if the price of having them was losing them, and I couldn’t bear the implication that even that price could be too high.”

All of that sadness, all of that painful guarding against covetise, was not too great a price, and the Reverend’s loyalty to his own life prepares him for the absolute miracle of young Lila and their son: “Now that I look back, it seems to me that in all that deep darkness a miracle was preparing. So I am right to remember it as a blessed time, and myself as waiting in confidence, even if I had no idea what I was waiting for.”

The gift of his family so late in life is deeply felt as a miracle of restoration, a luminous, un hoped-for hope that redeems the darkness, that in fact makes the darkness meaningful. A sense of awe seems native to Ames, and passages where he is observing wife and son — this flesh not his that he can call his own — are suffused with the same sacred awe as his reflections on light and water. He writes about them with an unmistakable tenderness born of wonder, astonished at their very existence and presence in his home.

The sweetness of kinship is no simple matter, however. Families, bound by nature or nurture, are just small communities, charged as much by the poles of cohesion and division as any other gathering of human souls — or perhaps more, electrified more intensely from greater intimacy. For the Ames, this means the sorrow of temporality that co-arises with their transcendent joy. Ames worries that his meager resources will leave his young wife and son unprotected after his death. The satisfactions of being husband and wife give rise to impossible yearnings: “I could show you how to do that,” Lila says when she sees Ames swaying to music, an expression of joy one imagines the Reverend felt rarely in the years before Lila. “She came and put her arms around me and put her head on my shoulder, and after a while she said, in the gentlest voice you could ever imagine, ‘Why’d you have to be so damn old?’

“I ask myself the same question.”

For John and Lila, there is not enough time; family is a blessing that exposes the most irrational human desires, leaving defenseless the desire for eternal return. The Reverend’s weak heart beats out the moments, a metaphor for both the preciousness and the precariousness of life’s joys: “*Again*, all any heart has ever said, and just as the word is said the moment is gone, so there is not even any sort of promise in it.”

In other instances, there has been perhaps too much time in families. As decades pass, families weather tragedies, or don’t; they do their best, or don’t. They grow and change. They drift. Rifts gape. Edward returns from Germany an atheist, drawing his father’s disapproval. Jack Boughton violates his family’s Christian teachings and common decency but is welcomed back like the Prodigal Son: forgiveness without repentance. Father Ames and grandfather Ames offend one another in matters of life and death, slavery and liberty, each deserting the other in a time of need — but father Ames risks starvation in hardscrabble Kansas to find and restore his father’s grave.

It is no superficial matter that the stories of the elder Ames reverends (Ames’ father and grandfather) are told with the Civil War in the background. The family, like the nation, divided, fought, and reached a truce that did not so much resolve tension as clearly define it. The uneasy unity that keeps nations and families together is itself beautiful, however; there is faith and hope in the effort, such that the tension, uncomfortable, is itself a sign of love. As Ames writes, reflecting on his lonely years watching the boisterous life of the Boughton clan: “But good fortune is not only good fortune, and over the years things happened in that family that caused some terrible regret. Still, for years it all seemed to me to be blindingly beautiful, And it was.”

I don't know how one boy could have caused so much disappointment without ever giving anyone any grounds for hope. ... He is not the oldest or the youngest or the best or the bravest, only the most beloved.

— Reverend John Ames on Jack Boughton in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*



THINK

1. Is John Ames “radical” enough to accept Jack Boughton’s family, embrace them as neighbors in Gilead?

Why or why not?

REFLECT

2. This puzzling sentence might strike you as true based on your own experience: “A man can know his father, or his son, and there might still be nothing between them but loyalty and love and mutual incomprehension.” How has this been true for you? Think about a family member whom you would claim to “know” but who is still a mystery to you. What maintains the distance between you? Do you prefer the mystery? Is there risk in greater closeness, something that could be lost? Is the “incomprehension” a way of circumventing the conflict or disappointment that might result from greater intimacy?

PRACTICE

3. Ames writes this letter to his son so that, hopefully, even though his son will grow up not “knowing” him, he will not be “incomprehensible” either. Write a letter to a family member that explains the sort of person you are. Send it or don’t, but imagine that person as the audience, explaining as honestly and simply as you can what has been most important to you in life.



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## Moral Light and Moral Blindness

There are at least two broad expressions of what Robinson herself, in an interview with the BBC, called “moral blindness.” There is ignorance, willful or not: not knowing, not looking, turning away, and forgetting. And then there is blindness by light, utter devotion to one cause that casts a shadow on other, perhaps just as important, concerns. *Gilead* explores both kinds.

The purest expression of moral blindness in the novel is Jack Boughton, who impregnates a girl from an impoverished family. When his sister Glory asks if he plans to marry her, he says simply, “You’ve seen her.” He abandons her utterly, treating the girl as if she is disposable and his child as if it bears no relation to him. He leaves this shame behind for his family and friends and skips town. Neglected and impoverished, the little girl dies, and Jack never shows much remorse. Though he returns to town a more mature man, the grief of his moral blindness is perhaps too much because, though he has grown into a sense of responsibility, it is entirely beyond his power to make any recompense.

The purest expression of a moral conviction that blinds in the novel is Ames’ grandfather: “He thought we should all be living at a dead run.” He is the sort of man who makes everyone else feel they are not doing enough, and it is hard to disagree on gospel grounds. The “dead run” means living according to the Bible’s command to help the orphan, the widow, and the stranger — “the least of these.” So he steals from the Presbyterians’ offering plate because he suspects them of hoarding. He steals from his own family whenever he becomes aware of another who is in need, an impulse Ames attributes to “an innocence in him. He lacked patience for anything but the plainest interpretations of the starkest commandments, ‘To him who asks, give,’ in particular.”

“[S]tripped of all the accretions of smugness and pretense and triviality,” grandfather Ames makes no concessions to social convention, and in particular brooks no gradualism or half-steps on the issue of slavery. He moves to Kansas to establish the right to vote during the “free soil” movement. He risks his privilege to help John Brown, who attacks slavery directly. He helps smuggle blacks through the underground railroad. And when war comes, he preaches his congregation into it and goes himself as a chaplain only because they won’t accept him as a soldier. For this John Ames, abolition is the only light — it is, for him, gospel light — and the shadow cast by the extreme violence of “any means necessary” is not in his view.

His son, Ames’ father, does see that shadow and is disgusted by his father’s enthusiasm for violence and his misinterpretation of scripture to support it: “I remember when you walked to the pulpit in that shot-up, bloody shirt with that pistol in your belt,” he tells his father. “And I had a thought as powerful and clear as any revelation. And it was, This has nothing to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing.” For Ames’ father, the moral light is peace. And this light too is blinding, for it is a too simple, reactionary peace: peace as the absence of war, even the absence of conflict.

Ames’ father wants to forget the violence in Kansas and the bloody years of war that followed. In the country and in the family, there is no stable resolution to conflict, so the resolution is to forbid talk about it. Ultimately, it is the commitment to this kind of

peace that sends grandfather Ames back to Kansas to die. He leaves a note containing these words:

“No good has come, no evil is ended.  
That is your peace.”

There are no black families in Gilead in the present of the novel, all having been scared away by an act of arson at their church that Ames himself does not even take seriously. The moral fire of grandfather Ames' time — when towns like Gilead were founded to support the work of abolition — has become the soft light of a peace brokered on segregation and forgetting.

As much as Jack Boughton is, for Ames, a thorn in the flesh, he is for the novel a reminder that the calm, meditative voice of John Ames, the quiet of Gilead, comes at a moral price. Ames wonders if Jack has come to make amends, but his main function is to pose a question that reveals others' transgressions, to reveal this racial bargain: is there peace where people are not free? Is there peace in a place where black families do not feel safe, where a white man and his black wife are not free to live? Robinson addressed this, the great moral blindness in the novel, in her interview with the BBC:

“These very good little communities which had already wandered into sort of the forgetfulness of their origins — there was a larger transgression that they had not yet found the word ‘transgression’ to describe, you know. I mean it’s sort of like, just out of the accident of love, you know, Jack Boughton loves a black woman, and he has a child whom he loves, and, therefore, he can see beyond the limits that were set around people in society at that time. He understands the cruelty of things that other people are not yet ready to understand as cruelty. So, there’s a way in which he’s a legitimate moral judge of a world that considers him morally at fault. Which he is, too, you know. It’s sort of putting a circle around the circle, in a certain sense, realizing that people who were sincere about generosity and, you know, harmlessness of various sorts, nevertheless lived in a landscape as a transgression against the same values that they consciously cultivated in themselves. And [there’s] moral blindness, you know, which of course always afflicts us, and which, frankly, I think our period now is perhaps more characterized by ... than the Civil Rights period was because so many issues rose up and became sharply articulated.”

“Set up in the heat of an old urgency that is all forgotten now,” Gilead is one of those forgetful towns, and John Ames and his father are the generations who have forgotten, or at least turned aside and let the past be past, as if war and pacifism were the only ways to liberate.

Some of Ames' last words are hopeful on this matter, albeit in his typically equivocal way: “It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of creation and it turns to radiance — for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light ... but the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like Transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?”

Most of the young men seemed to feel that the war was a courageous thing... I believe that plague [the Spanish flu that spread during the WWI draft] was a great sign to us, and we refused to see it and take its meaning, and since then we have had war continuously.

— Reverend John Ames in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*



THINK

1. Reverend Ames burns the sermon he wrote interpreting the Spanish flu as a sign from God, an epidemic unleashed so that the drafted young men would not commit the great sin of murdering their brothers overseas. He explains why he did not deliver it, but why did he destroy it? Consider that, in hindsight, he wishes he had kept the text so he could hand it down to his son. How might this sermon have changed his son's image of him? Is the missing sermon the only evidence of Reverend Ames' courage?

REFLECT

2. Ames' father and grandfather have different conceptions of peace. What are they? What is your definition of peace?

3. Reread the quote that concludes the commentary, above. Do you think we are living in a time of fire or a time of ember? What events or phenomena lead you to your perspective?

PRACTICE

4. While we might not put it into practice just as grandfather Ames does, "living at a dead run" is a pretty sound philosophy insofar as it expresses not taking time for granted and intently pursuing ideals that are crucial. If you are not living at a dead run, find just one way to live more intensely in line with your deepest values. If you feel you are already successfully in line with your ideals and making the most of your talents and energies, find at least one opportunity to inspire others to kick their lives into high gear.

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**Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:**

*The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

*The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead

*A Good Man Is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor

Selected Poems of Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou

*Tenth of December* by George Saunders

*Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson

*Puddnhead Wilson* by Mark Twain

*The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin and

*Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko

*The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen

*The Partly-Cloudy Patriot* by Sarah Vowell

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

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**The Practicing Democracy Project** offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

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