About Marilynne Robinson (b. 1943)

Biography from the National Endowment for the Arts Big Read Website: http://www.neabigread.org/books/housekeeping/readers-guide/about-the-author/

As one might imagine from reading her work, Marilynne Robinson is passionately tied to the dramatic northwest landscape of her childhood. She was born in Sandpoint, Idaho, where her family had lived for four generations: her grandparents were farmers and ranchers; her father was in the lumber industry. Robinson recalls hearing the whistles of passing trains, though "nothing ever seemed to stop" at the railroad junction in town.

She spent many hours at the edge of Sandpoint's large, cold, beautiful lake. Robinson’s two sets of grandparents lived at opposite ends of the bridge that crossed the lake, which claimed the life of her mother's brother in a sailing accident before Robinson was born.

After graduating high school in nearby Coeur d’Alene, Robinson followed her brother to Brown University in Rhode Island, where she studied with the writer John Hawkes and nurtured her interest in nineteenth-century American literature and creative writing. She graduated in 1966, and from there went on to earn a PhD in English from the University of Washington in Seattle.

Once she completed her dissertation on Shakespeare, she was ready to begin work on Housekeeping, her first novel. She wrote much of it while teaching in France and, after that, in Massachusetts. She gave a draft of the novel to her friend and fellow writer John Clayton, who passed it on to an agent without her knowledge. "If he hadn't done that," says Robinson, "I'm not at all sure that I would ever have submitted it for publication." It was published in 1980 to widespread critical acclaim, winning the PEN/Hemingway Award for best first novel.

Since Housekeeping, Robinson has written many essays and book reviews in journals such as Harper's, The Paris Review, and The New York Times Book Review. Robinson’s second novel, Gilead, was published in 2004. It won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction.

Robinson has served as visiting professor and writer-in-residence at several colleges and universities in the U.S. and abroad. In 1991, she joined the faculty of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She currently resides in Iowa, where she teaches and writes.

“I have spent my life watching, not to see beyond the world, merely to see, great mystery, what is plainly before my eyes.”

—Marilynne Robinson from The Death of Adam
Each of you will read this novel in your own way, forming your own distinctive impression. It’s those impressions, and how your life experiences have shaped your reading that we wish for you to bring to the book discussions with faculty and your peers. You are not expected to prepare for the conversations on Wednesday, August 27, but if you would find it helpful, the following questions may enhance your reading of *Housekeeping*.

1) How does the town and landscape of Fingerbone shape the novel’s characters? How does their house itself affect Ruthie and Lucille? What might be the influence of your own hometown and childhood home on the person you’ve become?

2) Why might Marilynne Robinson have titled this novel *Housekeeping*? What does the concept of “housekeeping” mean in the context of the novel?

3) Why does the novel begin with Ruth and Lucille’s grandfather Edmund Foster’s dream of living among mountains?

4) How do the pairs of sisters – Sylvie and Helen, and Lucille and Ruthie – compare to one another in terms of personalities and habits? Why do you think Robinson wanted these characters to have their similarities and contrasts? How do they reflect and distort each other, both as sisters and across generations?

5) When Lucille leaves home to live in her teacher’s spare bedroom, her move puts Lucille’s ideals and expectations about life, and by extension the whole town of Fingerbone’s, into open conflict with Sylvie’s ideals. Where the prevailing sentiment of Fingerbone seems to value stability and be suspicious of persons who don’t accumulate conventional comforts, Sylvie’s way of life seems to suggest that community stability and material possessions are not the most important things. Do you think that *Housekeeping* makes an argument for one set of ideals over the other? Or is Robinson trying to suggest something else by creating this conflict?

6) The *Idaho Statesman* said of *Housekeeping* that “[t]he book is topical, exploring issues of mental illness, conformity, and family dysfunction.” Here we might object: though the characters are a little wild, even feral, can they aptly be described as “mentally ill?” What motivations (other than mental illness) could explain their actions and choices?

7) *Housekeeping* makes frequent references to the Bible and to other texts from western culture. How much is it necessary to recognize and acknowledge these correspondences when one reads the book?

These questions are revised and adapted from the *Housekeeping* reading guides provided by the National Endowment for the Arts (http://www.neabigread.org/books/housekeeping/readers-guide/discussion-questions/) and the Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest (https://www.washington.edu/uwired/outreach/cspn/Website/Classroom%20Materials/Reading%20the%20Region/Northwest%20Schools%20of%20Literature/Commentary/9.html).