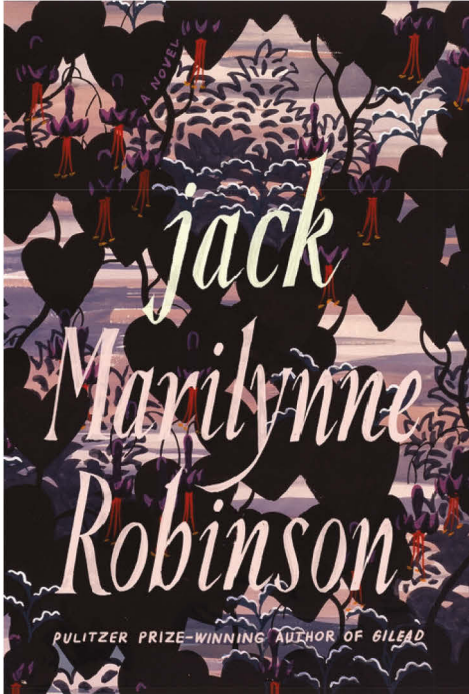


Jack: A Reader's Guide



By Christine Havens

1. Literary references abound in the novel. Here is a partial list: *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare; *Paradise Lost*, John Milton; *Oak and Ivy*, Paul Laurence Dunbar; “Sonnet 30,” William Shakespeare; “Acquainted with the Night,” Robert Frost; and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan; *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky. How do these works, individually or collectively, shape the story? How do they affect your reading of it?
2. Read the entirety of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 30.” How does this poem embody Jack and Della’s relationship, especially in the last line: “All losses are restored, and sorrows end”?
3. What is the significance of eschatology (theology about the end of the world, death, and the last judgment), in the book? How do Jack and Della each view these things?
4. Consider this quote from the book: “[Jack] could see the poetry in their misconception. . . . [A]s far as he was concerned, truth versus poetry was really no contest.” What is the relationship between truth and poetry for Jack? What about for you?
5. Jack frequently describes himself as “embarrassed.” What is the book trying to tell us about self-image and vulnerability?
6. What role do racism and segregation play in the novel? At the beginning of the book, why does Della risk being seen in Bellefontaine, the cemetery for whites only?
7. Why is Della’s teaching at Sumner High School so important to her and to her family? Do you find yourself sympathizing more strongly with them, or with Della and Jack?
8. Jack’s goal in life is “harmlessness.” Can a person live a life without hurting anyone? Does that equal a life without consequences? Is there a difference between being harmless and being kind?
9. What does Robinson suggest “great loneliness” can do to a person? Has there ever been a time you have experienced it? If so, do you identify with what Robinson describes?
10. Jack describes himself as an atheist. Do his actions in the book bear this out? Why or why not?
11. Why is it important to Jack to maintain his self-image as a thief?
12. What is grace? What role does it play in *Jack*?

Jack

By Marilynne Robinson
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020.
Pp. 320. \$27.00

Love and Loneliness

Review by Christine Havens

Jack. A name familiar to readers of Marilynne Robinson's three previous books set in Gilead, Iowa: *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*. Jack, or John Ames Boughton, is the self-proclaimed ne'er-do-well son of a Presbyterian minister, Robert Boughton. In the first three books, readers come to know Jack through the eyes of other storytellers: his father's best friend, Reverend John Ames, for whom Jack is named; his sister, Glory; and John Ames's young wife, Lila. In the first three novels, which essentially relate the same family histories from differing perspectives, Jack has returned to this small rural town after a 20-year absence from a family who saw him as the prodigal son even before he exiled himself.

In *Jack*, readers live solely in the depths of this "self-orphaned" man's head and heart during the latter part of his life in St. Louis. This is where he dwells in what he describes as the "outer darkness" of the gospel parables. This is when he falls in love with Della, a young Black schoolteacher he meets shortly after being released from two

more. Equally, readers for whom *Jack* is an entry into the Gilead sequence will find it just as satisfying to be able to understand this character before seeing him through the largely unkindly biased lenses of his family. The book also stands as a theologically-charged love story and commentary on racism and segregation in the 1950s and now, regardless of whether one has read the other books. The conversations and emotions between Jack and Della and between Jack and himself make my heart ache in recognition, joy, and sorrow.

Literature and poetry, in addition to Calvinist theology and metaphysics, spread like tree roots throughout the book, weaving texture into the inner lives of Jack and Della, connecting them profoundly. The third scene in the book, to which nearly a quarter of the novel is devoted, takes place in the whites-only cemetery, and is especially laced with literary and theological discussions about *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost*, among others. Robinson explores the difference between love and loneliness in depth here, allowing that theme to grow into the rest of the story as the

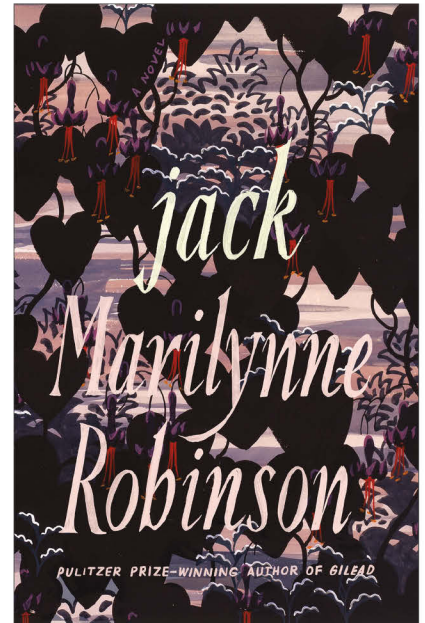
*Robinson has truly outdone herself
in unlocking Jack Boughton, releasing his life to
those who have read the first three books
and have waited to know more.*

years in prison. There are, of course, many obstacles to this relationship, including Della's disapproving family, who want her to remain employed at Sumner, a historic all-Black high school, and Jack's desire to remain "harmless" to all around him, especially her.

Robinson has truly outdone herself in unlocking Jack Boughton, releasing his life to those who have read the first three books and have waited to know

relationship between these two people burgeons despite all attempts, even Jack's and Della's, to extinguish it.

Robinson's own poetic language makes *Jack* a book to savor. My copy is full of exclamation points and a rainbow of sticky notes marking all the quotes I want to remember — the author shines such a light into all the sorrows and joys of being a postlapsarian human. References to Scripture are also deftly interwoven into the text,



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accenting the poetry and amplifying the themes of love, loneliness, pride, redemption, and poverty, elevating, in addition, all that is at stake for Jack and Della through the question of how God's grace acts in a world that is often blind to it. In this case, the drama of God's grace is enacted in the midst of segregation laws that make interracial marriage a crime, in a family that wants more for their daughter.

Jack is weighty without being overpowering, as deep and reflective as a work of theological literature (or literary theology) should be. It is at once transcendent and incarnational, expressive and provocative, romantic and tragic without being overblown. I would love to sit in a cemetery or a memorial garden with others and have the further and lengthy conversations this book warrants. This book will join *Gilead*, especially, as a much-beloved work. Robinson is the author I want to grow up to be like — insightful, visionary, authentic.

Christine Havens graduated from the Seminary of the Southwest and is administrative and communication assistant at St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Austin, Texas.