

## Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

This Pulitzer prize winning novel by American author Marilynne Robinson tells the story of a congregationalist minister called John Ames who knows he is dying of a heart condition. It takes the form of a letter to his 6 year old son, to be read by him only in adulthood, as the reverend seeks to explain how he came to be who he was as a father.

There is a tenderness in the writing as he tells the history of his grandfather and his own father, who were also ministers, the former who fought in the American civil war to oppose slavery, and the latter who became a pacifist. He recounts the story of his first marriage, the loss of his first wife and baby daughter at her birth, and also his meeting with his second wife, the son's mother. We learn of the close connections between John Ames and his friend who is also a minister, a presbyterian.

There are humorous and philosophical touches which were enjoyed. Big themes are explored, such as war and pacifism, belief and the nature of sin, grace and forgiveness. The power and quality of the writing were admired, and the sense of authenticity in exploring what it is to be 'religious'.

However, many of us struggled with the unwavering doctrinal voice, and felt that potentially interesting themes were subsumed in a monologue of biblical references and an emphasis on righteousness. The effects, positive and negative, of a patriarchal, hierarchical religion in an isolated and impoverished society were laid bare, but the only narrator was that patriarch. For some of us this made it a stifling read.

It led to an interesting discussion about the effects of religion in society, within families and in the world, but was it was not a book most of us would recommend to a friend.

Scores on the doors:

3.5 for group discussion

1.3 to recommend to a friend to read

Ann Whitfield