*Gilead*

Marilynne Robinson, [*Gilead*](http://www.amazon.com/Gilead-Marilynne-Robinson-ebook/dp/B000O76NMS/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1412696007&sr=1-1&keywords=gilead)(New York: Picador, 2004).

Summary:

John Ames, a Congregationalist pastor in Iowa, is going to die. He has a heart condition which prompts him to begin a series of letters in 1957 to his seven-year-old son in order to teach the boy that which Ames will be unable to impart. The novel *Gilead* is an epistolary collection of those letters. At the novel’s opening, Ames is an old man, and his first wife and child died in childbirth years ago. He married Lila late in life and had a second child, who is the recipient of the letters. Ames lyrically muses on subjects ranging from nature to theology to his family to racial history, quoting John Calvin, Christian Scripture, and the atheist Ludwig Feuerbach. The novel won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Themes:

* Fathers and sons. Several father/son relationships are depicted: Ames and his son, Ames and his father, Ames’ grandfather and Ames’ father, Jack Boughton and Ames, and “Old” Boughton and Jack.
* Faith. John Ames is a Congregationalist pastor and best friends with a Presbyterian minister. He comes from a family of pastors and has decades as a single man to contemplate the faith.
* Racism. There potentially is an undercurrent of racism in the town of Gilead, and Ames seems at times to be dismissive of it, such as when Jack Boughton mentions the church fire.
* Death. Ames is dying, and as a pastor he has counseled many in the same position, telling them that death is like going home.
* Writing. This book is a collection of letters that comments on the art of writing, which Ames compares to praying.
* Beauty. Ames sees beauty in baptism, the human face, sunrises, and even in Jack. His capacity for marvel is high, especially considering the “weary” town of Gilead in which he lives.
* Memory. The novel presents many memories from Ames’ experiences, memories that Ames likens to visions that come in retrospect.

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss Ames’ conclusion that in this world “there is more beauty than our eyes can bear.”
2. How do water and light function in this book as symbols?
3. What happens to Jack Boughton after the novel ends?
4. Will Ames be, as he believes, “one of those righteous for whom the rejoicing in heaven will be comparatively restrained”?
5. Calvin writes that we are actors on God’s stage. Ames says this makes us “artists of our behavior, and the reaction of God to us might be thought of as aesthetic rather than morally judgmental.” Why or why not would you agree?