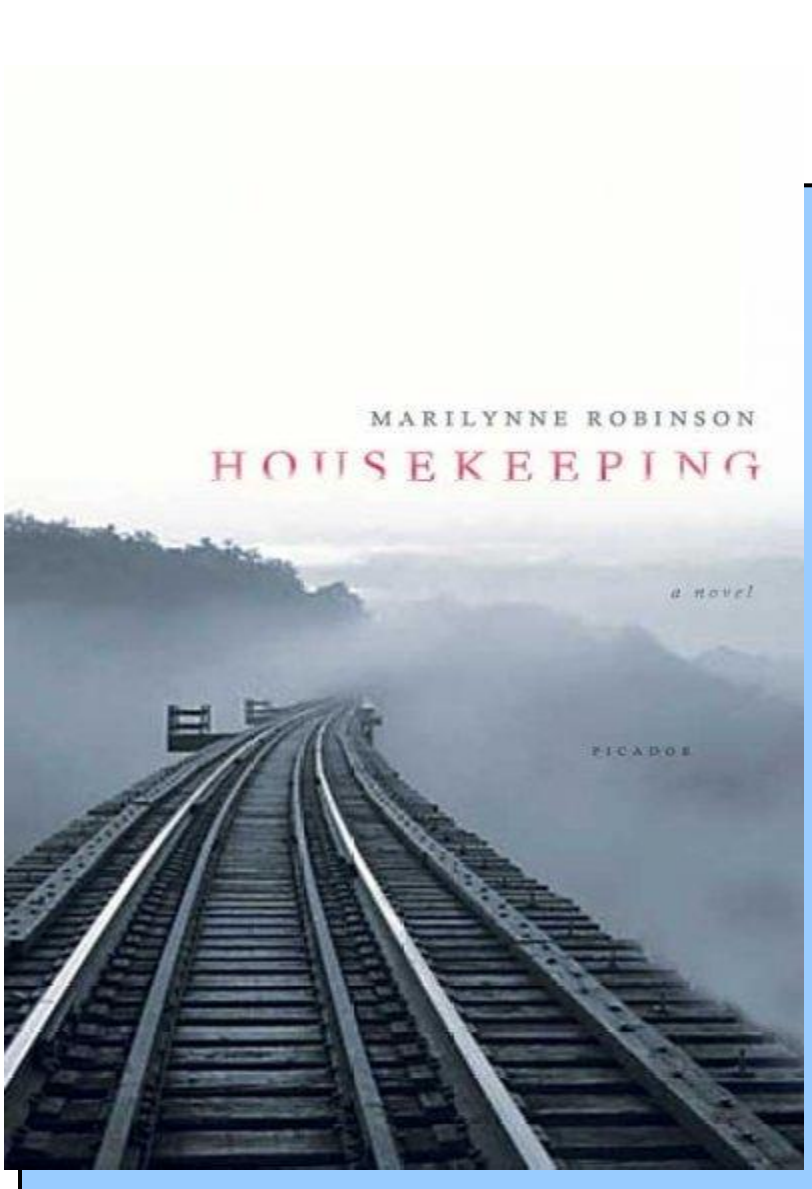


## About the book...



Ruth, the young narrator of *Housekeeping*, is taken with her sister, Lucille, to the small Idaho town of Fingerbone to live with their grandmother. They are brought by their mother, Helen, who leaves them on the porch and then drives her car into the town lake where her own father drowned years before. The girls are raised by a series of relatives, and finally come under the care of Sylvie, their aunt, an elusive transient who agrees to return to Fingerbone to make a home for them. At first her eccentricities seem unimportant to the girls, but as time goes on, her behavior becomes increasingly erratic. Lucille determines that she will lead a conventional life, and eventually separates herself from her peculiar aunt. The dreamy, inarticulate Ruth, grief-stricken by the loss of her mother and increasingly detached from the life of the surrounding community, responds to Sylvie's tragic yet powerful and poetic vision of the world and, in the end, joins her in her life of wandering. *Housekeeping* is a haunting and unforgettable work of art about the transitory nature of love and the impermanence of all things.

## About the author...

(<http://www.holtzbrinckpublishers.com/images/Books/ReadersGuides/0312424094RG.pdf>)

MARILYNNE ROBINSON was born and raised in Idaho, where her family has lived for several generations. She received a B.A. from Brown University in 1966 and a Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Washington in 1977. *Housekeeping*, her first novel, was published in 1981 and won the PEN/Hemingway Award for First Fiction and the American Academy and Institute's Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Award. *Mother Country*, an examination of Great Britain's role in radioactive environmental pollution, was published in 1989. Robinson lives in Iowa City, Iowa, with her family.

## **Reviews**

### *Kirkus:*

Robinson's brooding first novel is perhaps fatally weighed down with excess myth-and-symbol pretensions, but it's often exhilaratingly imaginative--as narrator Ruth becomes a kind of spectral presence in the tale of her own childhood and early adolescence in a remote, flood-prone lakeside village in Idaho. The village is where Grandmother lives--the Grandmother who takes in little Ruth and sister Lucille when their mother abandons them, promises to return, then drives to her death in the lake: "She. . . broke the family and the sorrow was released. . . a thousand ways into the hills." But the family is held together for a while by Grandmother--whose husband also drowned in that lake when a fine fast train plunged off the bridge; whose three daughters all seemed to have flown off at one time; who

cares for Ruth and Lucille well, as if "reliving a long day" with her own lamented daughters. And after Grandmother's death the girls are briefly tended by two aged, fearful relatives who gladly give them up to the care of Aunt Sylvie, one of Grandmother's missing daughters now miraculously returned. But Sylvie's a drifter attempting to housekeep--abstracted, gentle, given to wandering and eating meals in the dark--and Ruth is drawn to Sylvie's world of silences and quiet disappearances, with musings on the nature of loss when people perish and things remain: "The illusion of perimeters fails when families are separated." Lucille, on the other hand, maintains that "calm, horizontal look" of one who sees differences: she joins the "common persons" and leaves home. Finally, then, after Authorities plan to take Ruth away from her obviously unstable aunt, Ruth and Sylvie burn the house, hop the rails, and leave for a lifetime of wandering. A convoluted novel, obsessively striated with repetitive images of fluidity--flooding waters, blinking trains, the play of light and darkness, wisps of overheard tales--but if the poetry is over-stressed, the bottom-line talent in this highly promising debut is unmistakable.

Housekeeping is the 1981 [Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award: PEN Award for First Fiction](#)

## **Literary Criticism**

Title: 'Sighs Too Deep for Words': Mysteries of Need in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*  
Author(s): George Toles

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[(essay date winter 1991) *In the following essay, Toles addresses problematic aspects of language and artistic expression while examining Robinson's approach toward questions of being, nature, and transcendence in Housekeeping.*]

For when all is said and done, we are in the end absolutely dependent on the universe; and into sacrifices and surrenders of some sort, deliberately looked at and accepted, we are drawn and pressed as into our only permanent position of repose. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*

In chapter 8 of Marilynne Robinson's novel, **Housekeeping**, the young narrator Ruth accompanies her aunt Sylvie on a frigid, early morning journey by rowboat to a "secret" place in the valley. Their destination is an abandoned homestead, which includes a "stunted orchard and lilacs and stone doorstep and fallen house, all white with a brine of frost" (Robinson 151). On her first viewing of the scene, Ruth complains of the cold and her hunger, and wonders "how anyone could have wanted to *live* here" (151). Sylvie makes it clear by her example that they

should wait quietly among some rocks along the shore for several hours until conditions are right for a second approach. When they eventually return to the ruined dwelling, it is as if "the light had coaxed a flowering from the frost, which before seemed barren and parched as salt" (Robinson 152). As Ruth becomes entranced by this spectacle of beautiful desolation, Sylvie leaves without warning.

At this moment of abandonment (in a text filled with images and thoughts of desertion), the reader is presented with what is perhaps Ruth's most enigmatic and demanding meditation on human needs:

Imagine a Carthage sown with salt, and all the sowers gone and the seeds lain however long in the earth, till there rose finally in vegetable profusion leaves and trees of rime and brine. What flowering would there be in such a garden? Light would force each salt calyx to open in prisms, and to fruit heavily with bright globes of water--peaches and grapes are little more than that, and where the world was salt there would be greater need of slaking. For need can blossom into all the compensations it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know anything so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing--the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one's head is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again. Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an

angel, fosters us, smooths our hair, and brings us wild strawberries.(152-53)

Sometimes the passage in a work which strains most unyieldingly against our knowledge or experience of the world is nothing less than the core mystery of the writer's imagination struggling to make itself felt. It is a second coming, as it were, of the original summons to create, which the narrative as a whole dreams of encompassing. Ruth speaks here of answers to need, or rather proposes that need is a sufficient answer unto itself, not depending for its fulfillment on natural and human actualities. I cannot talk myself out of believing that Robinson herself supports Ruth's calmly extravagant claims in the quoted passage at every point. Nothing else that the narrative reveals to us requires us to draw back from the extremity of Ruth's declarations.

Privation or lack ultimately *does* accommodate those in the world of ***Housekeeping*** who put their faith in it. An emptiness that flowers into fullness is response to longing is the central metaphor of Robinson's fiction. This metaphor must find ways to engage us at the level of lived experience if the novel's redemption of need is not to seem purely fanciful. Ruth's fantasy demands a firm ground to stand on, one which will bear the weight of our reality.

How ought we to test the truth of statements made by characters, or implied authors, in literature? So often we manage to evade this question of truth by recollecting that our belief in story always reposes in the saving provision, "as if." Participate in the world of a novel *as if* it were comparable to the world of experience. Submit to literary

order and its meanings *as if* our actual circumstances, with all their difficulties, were a coherent structure to be resolved by interpretation. When Robinson speaks of imaginary berries breaking upon the tongue more sweetly than real ones, she is surely cognizant that dream berries are the only kind that literature can finally offer to us. The berry that might answer our unappeasable longing would have to be better than any berry that we have actually tasted. Robinson's language confidently leaps into another realm of existence, where such berries flourish.

Carson McCullers's novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, provides a comic version of the idea that storybook feasts have the power to relieve hunger. Bubber, a boy of about seven, asks his sister to:

"Pick out stories [from the library] with something to eat in them. I like that one a whole lot about them German kids going out in the forest and coming to this house made out of all different kinds of candy and the witch. I like a story with something to eat in it ... But I'm getting kinda tired of candy," Bubber said. "See if you can't bring me a story with something like a barbecue sandwich in it. But if you can't find none of them I'd like a cowboy story." (McCullers 139)

There is an enviable freedom, McCullers suggests, in Bubber's ability to satisfy his hunger by dwelling on the pleasurable depiction of eating in a fairy tale. (While Bubber is reading, one imagines, he is so wholly involved with Hansel and Gretel's reality that he can actually *taste* the house of gingerbread.) But Bubber's reading imagination is comic because it fails to recognize

boundaries; it is an expression of a defective judgment, after all. His talent for feeding himself with words is very close to neurosis.

A character's fall into error or delusion or neurosis is not the issue when Ruth proclaims: "So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again" (Robinson 153). Nor do I think it is an instance of Robinson safely invoking literature's privilege to grant--in imaginative terms sequestered from life--magical dispensations to the lonely, bereaved soul. I think she is attempting, far more hazardously, to part a metaphysical curtain that is as tightly drawn and unamenable to human hopes in the language world of the novel as it is in ordinary experience. How does the world, against the logic of our innumerable defeats and emotional starvation, lie open before us? ("For need can blossom into all the compensations it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow ... And here again is a foreshadowing--the world will be made whole" [152].) If we respond to such revelations in the spirit in which they seem to be offered, we are like believers struggling with a difficult Biblical consolation or promise. Robinson uses the rhetoric of religion to *save* us from our misunderstanding of the world.

Present experience is lost to us because, in Nietzsche's phrase, "we cannot give our hearts to it." And we cannot give our hearts to it because we are in mourning for what has so far been taken away or for what we have no chance of ever attaining. We swallow back our love for things because we are too beleaguered to extend our vulnerability any further. We cannot trust our being to find its way "out" to something worthy of unconditional assent,



or, aiming lower, something worth our undistracted attention. We cannot bring home to our individual spirits what does not truly belong to us; and we know that the world we live in is not ours.

Emerson writes in his journals of 1855 that if a writer (thinker) "proposes to show me any high secret, if he profess to have found the profoundly secret pass that leads from Fate to Freedom, all good heads and all mankind aspiringly and religiously wish to know it, and though it sorely and unusually taxes their poor brain, they find out at last whether they have made the transit, or no ..." (Cavell 27).<sup>1</sup> Robinson's doubt-transcending pronouncements on need and compensation excite in me something akin to a desire to share another's faith. What does she know that I don't? Has she made the transit from Fate to Freedom in *more* than a literary sense?

How far away Ruth's intuition of the foreshadowed "whole" stands from the coercive playfulness of postmodernism. The post-modernist spirit seems to deny value to the concept of struggle, both in art and, by implication, in the conduct of life. No system of meaning, according to the new orthodoxy, is more worth striving for than any other. There is nothing ineffable for the artist seeking to overcome, say, a sickness or weariness of self, to aspire to touch--either in the form and movement of a work, or in what Robert Hass calls "the feel of the center" (being *in* the idea) (Hass 59). Transcendental yearning seems to be the principal human activity that postmodernism is designed to foreclose, or at least the one which goes most deeply against the grain of its continually professed delight in discontinuity and de-centering. Surely the spirit,

godhead, Being, teleology cannot be transplanted to the margins, and endure there (playfully?) in any meaningful form.

The forces of transcendence--and the wholes with which they are linked in our minds--have always been beyond our control. The part of us that lies open to these forces is at once vulnerable (painfully aware of our mortal frailty and incompleteness) and fundamentally serious (as a matter of life and death). The heart of the spiritual quest is struggle. There is so much to be overcome if we are to realize our right relation to things, to achieve second sight, as Ruth does after patiently waiting and emptying herself: so that the world she "craves" is almost present to her, and the needs built up from within "are carried off in every direction the way one cry of alarm is carried among birds through the whole of the woods and even the sky" (157).

Postmodernist and post-structuralist theorists appear to have as their core-fantasy the vision of an art in which nothing will remain a problem, once everything is acknowledged as a language problem (and every language problem as of roughly equal magnitude). As we learn to rejoice in our shared confusion about what our words are saying and where they might be leading us, we can make a home in the play of "differences," finding a mechanism and a set of conventions that show us how to proceed in the face of certain linguistic uncertainty. The objective here, as always, is control; at least there will be no further worry about "uncover(ing) the nerves that connected daily life to the metaphysical" (Schwartz 156). Once we decide that language has no direction, other than that which we impose on it for our cultural and social uses, and that

language precedes and forms all of the world that we can see or inhabit, we have in effect engineered our own apocalypse, and survived it. The irrational, the nameless, the immortal are confined, like everything else, within language. They will not descend on us, or make themselves felt within us, from some other place.

If language is our origin and fixed address, how can we be at liberty to wander? We can be no more lost in language than we already are (however little we know it), and presumably there is no "outside" of language for us to find, should we feel unknown to ourselves where we are and long to find ourselves elsewhere. There can be no struggle in post-modernist narrative because there is no human possibility of failure. Failure of discourse supersedes the idea of personal failure. The hope of a real transit to freedom through Emerson's "profoundly secret pass" has ceased to be tenable, so how is one to honor (or think about) the distance one has traveled? If it is reassuring to know that one's language need never fall short, since one is free to disregard the rules of the language game at the first sign of difficulty, it is disconcerting to realize that there is equally no high, elusive dream of success: of finding an opening, a luminous structure of possibilities for self-realization.

One of the aphorisms of the Greek philosopher Epictetus, who believed that the aim of philosophy was to see the world as a whole, and thus grow into the mind of God, has to do with learning to bear (or bear up under) what we know. "Everything has two handles, one by which it may be borne, the other by which it may not" (quoted in Schwartz 155). We take the wrong handle of language, it

seems to me, if we think of language as prisoner's rations, something we are bound to, or condemned to, as our sole means of thought, our only form of access to our world. The handle by which language may be borne situates language within a totality that is not identical with it. Language appears to carry us near to things, and stands in for them in our minds, to such an extent that we cannot separate word and thing any more easily than Hume could separate an object's existence from its qualities. But language is most powerfully nurtured by our familiar and sustaining awareness that it can only approximate, never wholly unite with, the things we aim at and talk to.

What interrupts the flow of language most effectually is the sense of surfeit in our immediate surroundings: the world literally retreats from us as we fashion language pictures to tell ourselves exactly where we are and what is happening to us. But surely it is in that felt resistance of the world to the approach of words that the world unmistakably declares itself. The world seems to wait for us at the edge of whatever words we have at our disposal. On those rare, mystical, living occasions when the world replies to our failed efforts at contact by coming to us, we are invariably taken by surprise. What we experience lies outside any verbal picture we have on file; nor do we feel the need of words to make what is present real to us. It is only later that we attempt to form an account, either so that the experience can be made available, in some dim fashion, to others, or so that we can mark it in our minds, which is, of course, not the same as being "present" to things. Language, like the room I'm working in at this moment, is a place to return to. But one must abandon the

idea of return, which at times I see as the basis of all fulfillment, if one rejects the possibility of one's ever having been away. A world that *may* be ours stands apart from our available language. This is a dualism necessary to personal and cultural sanity. (No wonder the self, denied any world except language, dissolves so quickly when Derrida and others abolish it.) One cannot find a future in a language that cannot be interrupted. If language can engender nothing but other words, it cannot propose any life-awakening tasks that might bring us to an opening, other than death, where words are not already installed. Who then can "save us from the magic circle of our self-created evil?" (Zimmer 229).

When I taught ***Housekeeping*** last year in a graduate seminar, I remember saying, with respect to the "craving" vs. "having" riddle, that the only place where this equation could hold as a truth is within language. It is "craving," after all, that sets words in motion to gain back, in the near-palpable presence language sometimes confers, what we have lost from our lives. Or, equally often, language makes the earth more radiant than we have ever beheld it, and tries to put it in our hands. It seems clear to me now that the moment I began to think of Robinson's "flowering" emptiness as a "playing" with words, I was misrepresenting not only her meaning and the way her language works, but also the much larger problem of truth in literary art.

I think that too often we settle for a false dichotomy between literature's freedom to make things up and its less obvious freedom to make things known. The pressure or struggle in fiction writing and poetry surely derives, in

large part, from balancing the sanction to invent with the moral (for lack of a better word) requirement to respect the world's enormous power to oppose (or stand wholly separate from) our wishes. Whether one gives precedence to the demands of form or those of content, the word "demands" corresponds to something real. It is a matter of earning the shape that the creative imagination, for whatever reasons, needs to seek out and realize. For the moment I am willing to conceive of the earning process, in language terms, as an effort to engage the world in conversation.

One begins, necessarily, in a state of monologue, with all the skepticism about subjectivity and imprisonment that finding oneself too much alone is likely to engender. In time, if the writer's work does not come to nothing, she feels that her words have a kind of ground beneath them, that a productive friction is being established between her words and the manifold conditions of life that language dreams of entering and standing on equal terms with. But friction is not the end point. Language is always tempted to claim the world for itself *before the world has been allowed its full separateness*. While nothing prevents the writer from making such claims, the possibility of conversation is thereby forfeited. The world wears the aspect of a stranger (or a hidden presence) from whom the writer is seeking some form of acknowledgment. Initially she writes (helplessly) within and toward silence--the world feels absent from her words, turned away. At what point, if ever, does her language begin to feel an answering pressure, and the space of otherness begin to feel open rather than closed to her voice?

Robinson personifies this otherness in ***Housekeeping*** as the spirits of wild, orphan children, permanently in the cold. Ruth can never know their presence directly, with her senses, but feels them draw near to her behind her back when she gives up the hope of seeing or touching them. A writer's dialogue with the world commences as fragilely as this, and with as much danger of being broken. I am struck by Robinson's unassuming representation of nature itself as small and cold and cast out in the woods--something to be rescued, with perhaps the same patient, forbearing spirit that one would strive for in rescuing an abandoned child. Trying to engage nature by a show of force is, for Robinson, a violation doomed to fail. The writer will always go away empty-handed. (Her longing is only aggravated. Craving of this sort does not release the ministering angel Ruth speaks of, which "fosters us" and "smooths our hair" [153].)

Perhaps Robinson is the first American writer to consciously approach the mystery of Being as though it were synonymous with the mystery of the abandoned child. The world is understood as an orphan waiting to be found by a willing mother, and somehow *held*, though it has forgotten how to be. Toward the end of the novel, Ruth attempts a final reconciliation with the fact of her mother's suicide:

Then there is the matter of my mother's abandonment of me. Again, this is the common experience. They walk ahead of us, and walk too fast, and forget us, they are so lost in thoughts of their own, and soon or late they disappear. The only mystery is that we expect it to be otherwise.(215)

***Housekeeping***'s narrative voice does everything in its power not to fall into bitterness or emotional derangement over failed mothering. Since the mother's bond with her child, however deeply desired, is understood at all times to be an excruciatingly tenuous one, it is a bond that also expresses the struggle of consciousness to find a nurturing force in the mountains, water, or earth.

When Sylvie leaves Ruth, with no explanation, by the site of an utterly collapsed house, Ruth discovers that the "stone step was too cold to be sat upon ... there was no comfort for me here at all ... If I went down into the cellar hole, out of the wind, I could build a fire and be warm. This could not be done easily since the cellar had received the ruins of the old house" (155). Ruth imagines the possibility that this abandoned homestead was the single source of all the tales of "perished settlers" in the mountains, and when the house "broke" (like some ripe pod or shell), it might have gently blown thousands, or "millions," of invisible "unsheltered folk" into the wind (157). After giving up the pretense of not knowing she is alone, and coming again to loneliness as an "absolute discovery" ("once alone, it is impossible to believe that one could ever have been otherwise" [157]), Ruth tries to occupy herself by pulling planks out of the cellar hole. She begins to imagine herself a rescuer:

Children had been sleeping in this fallen house. Soon I would uncover the rain-stiffened hems of their nightshirts, and their small, bone feet, the toes all fallen like petals. Perhaps it was already too late to help. They had lain under the snow through far too many winters, and that



was the pity. But to cease to hope would be the final betrayal.(158)

Imagining herself in their place--a child whose house falls in on her while she sleeps, her dreams terrible at the last moment before all dreaming ends in darkness--she concludes that it is "better to have nothing" that one counts on. Any support we entrust ourselves to is too frail to hold us, or to afford the least protection from the accidents of life. In the very midst of the cold, unsheltered spirits who "almost breathed against [her] cheek and almost touched [her] hair," Ruth seeks some saving remnant of her dead mother: "It would not have to be her eyes, her hair, I would not need to touch her sleeve" (154, 159). Mother has become "a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished" (160).

Will I make sense when I suggest that in this section of her novel Robinson has successfully traversed the distance between the space of word, lit by the light of fantasy, and the space of world? The latter emerges as a sense of something unsayable being brought forth from hiddenness--made fully present--in such a way that "the hidden mystery persists in and through and around what is disclosed" (Barrett 170). Ruth visits the "meager ruin" of a forgotten house in the mountains, and experiences utter abandonment there. All the relative solidity of shelters, whether formed from the faces and enveloping arms of loved ones; from the comfort of walls, roof, and lighted windows; from memory and wish; from crawlspaces in nature itself--all shelter gives way for her, and suddenly she belongs to nothing. Or to put it less starkly, as Ruth

does in her dreams after returning home with Sylvie, whatever she belongs to, she does not know where she is, and there is no one to tell her.

Throughout ***Housekeeping*** there is a persistent tension between the pleasures of containment (in a home where the familiar, in perfect silence, gathers itself around you in thick folds) and the harsher pleasures of displacement (of shivering, wild and hungry, in the darkness outside). Ruth's grandparents' house lures the reader indoors with its promise of a healing calm. It is a sleepy domestic heaven where one might woolgather contentedly for all eternity. In a world where everything seems in danger of disappearing, or succumbing to disaster, the house is a place where bits and pieces of the life of cherished things could be salvaged--"so much of what I remembered I could hold in my hand" (124). Lost in the depths of a house that at flood times becomes a sunken galleon, Ruth can pass back and forth like a spirit committing beloved things to memory. It is an arduous but worthy task to know the contents of even a single, small room by heart. Ruth spends her childhood and early adolescence solemnly attending to the secrets of the family dwelling. Time does not seem to flow here; it feels plugged up, closed, as though melancholy could suspend further loss by turning a blank face to it.

Ruth's deep refuge (call it hiding) in her home is an ongoing prayer for reunion with absent loved ones. Until she is restored to them, she feels she will be lost wherever she is. There is not enough light to see by. Nothing in the ordinary universe seems to have its rightful proportions, or to be in its proper place. Out of shreds and patches she

weaves apparitions and gives names to them, and can almost hear them calling to her in love and concern. Though one can never be *safely* within doors, the house affords her whatever consolation there is in softness. Like a cloth doll worn out from years of tender use, the interior of a house can soften its features and become fragile in love for one who cares for it. Plato tells us that love seeks out the softest things there are for its true dwelling place. The house knows what there is to know of solace, in the absence of a comforting human voice, and offers it freely, but it is finally not enough.

At the end of the novel, when Ruth too has fallen out of sight and drifted to regions where no one can reach her, she returns in spirit to the house she once occupied, dreams of peering through its windows "a thousand times" and entering through a side door in the form of leaves and the smell of lake water (218). The world had perhaps not really been lost to her as a child if she can complete the journey back that she long ago dreamed others might undertake, for her sake. If whoever lives in the house now, in *her* absence, were to look for her, she could not be found there. No trace or sign of her could be cited as proof of her hovering presence. But she is present, nonetheless. It is out of the fact of absence, after all, that apparitions come beckoning in the darkness, their invisible gestures answering to the bereftness that calls them forth.

So many books about wandering break ties with home (the emotional contours of a settled, inner space) without ever feeling the force of these ties. ***Housekeeping***'s argument with the protective intimacy of shelter is different. Robinson is genuinely of two minds about dispossession.

Her narrative grieves over the necessity that "every soul," one way or another, must be "put out of house" (179). Robinson shows how tempting it can be to "drift," but also sees wandering with a mixture of elation and terror, as a "propitiation of dark powers" (178). In ***Housekeeping*** the freedom to flee involves nothing less than a complete dying to self, with no assurance that a rebirth will bring reality any closer. The transient enters a darkness that is disturbingly impersonal and akin to death. It is generally represented as a falling away, not only from the gaze of the world and its myriad distortions, but also from all sense of bodily and mental placement. The orphan spirits in the woods in Chapter 8 figure displacement: "their eyes were gone and their feet were broken" (159).

Ruth's one sentence summary of the Bible (193) suggests that there must be an expulsion, an end of housekeeping, before there can be a reconciliation and return, but exile by itself does not make the earth more habitable. It is a summoning to suffer still further removal from the things one's soul craves, waiting in the outer darkness as the tethers of need break. In this darkness one may be in a state of grace, lifted up and transformed in the spiralling air, or, just as possibly, one may simply be perishing, forgotten in the cold, covered by snow or "the lake's heavy, blind, encumbering waters" (193). On what terms can we shed our former lives and step into nature? Can Cain find Abel again in his wanderings by bending to the earth and listening? Does the ground remember the blood that has stained it, and sing with sorrow to the murderer craving forgiveness? Where shall the outcast go for wisdom? Where is the place of understanding?

This is the full narrative context for the "craving" passage with which I began, where Ruth imagines need "blossoming" into all the compensations it requires. If we approach the passage, as I did in my seminar, as a dance of language, wherein words become bewitched by their own power to make up for what we lack (another shelter), we are losing sight of the fact that the world is made real to Ruth in Chapter 8 as absolute non-accommodation to the imploring heart. Ruth's meditation on need is remarkable for its refusal to qualify itself in the face of such experience, its refusal to enter into dialogue with the fact of Ruth's stripped-to-nothing loneliness. I sense no irony in this dysfunction. The silence surrounding the solemn assurance that need will itself restore what is gone is like the silence attending Jesus's parables: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Whatever analogies are drawn from experience to reveal the meaning of Jesus's parables, no appeal to experience is sufficient to nullify or refute that meaning. In the language theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, scriptural truth is termed "absolute utterance," the kind of word that admits no authorship. Absolute utterance "can only be cited, and recited. When spoken, it belongs to no one; when written, it is Scripture" (Morson 123).

Even though Robinson begins her passage on need with a directive to "*Imagine* a Carthage" and ends by granting that when "longing, like an angel, fosters us" we are dreaming and hardly know it, her concern is not to improvise new attributes for need which will serve the purposes of her fiction, but rather to come face to face with need in its true character (152-53, emphasis added). She is determined to make the law of need, as it were,

clear and evident to the spirit. Irony always opposes such an aim. As Bakhtin writes in his notes of 1970-71, "Irony is everywhere. It has penetrated all words and forms. ... Modern man does not proclaim, he speaks. That is, he speaks with reservations" (Morson 179). Because of this state of things, the novel, in its essence, imitates, rehearses, offers rejoinders; it does not proclaim.

***Housekeeping*** is, on the one hand, a work whose most indispensable word is "almost," and whose most conspicuous repeating phrase is "Say that" (i.e., allow that this might be the case). On the other hand, it is a work which takes for granted, more than any modern novel that I know of, its right to proclaim truths whose authority is neither derived ironically from the narrator's fallible perspective (or any other specific source), nor submitted to the reader's experience for testing. It is this closed quality of the novel's discourse that at times compels us to wonder, as with a prophet, about Ruth's (and the implied author's) sanity.

What criteria does Robinson establish to make judgments about sanity? Ruth tells us that she has "never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming" (215), but does not concede that our ordinary way of separating the two holds for anyone. She rejoices in the possibility of hearing "some word so true we did not understand it, but merely felt it pour through our nerves like darkness or water" (215). In another passage, frightened by the thought of shattered images knitting themselves up again, Ruth concludes: "What is thought, after all, what is dreaming, but swim and flow, and the images they seem to animate? The images are the worst

of it" (162). The mind unfolding itself in ***Housekeeping*** seems to take its imprint from whatever natural element (earth, air, fire, water) lies nearest, as though, by a tactical reversal of the pathetic fallacy, it is forever reflecting back the nature of things. The process is to be taken as more than a reflection of *mere* appearance.

Self-assertion, in Robinson's terms, never means standing in opposition to nature. She simply cannot imagine putting oneself above nature, or setting out to control it. When she appears to be speaking with the authority of Scripture, from the region of the "not-I in me," it is as a purified transient that she addresses us, her fellow transients. To the extent that her words succeed not only in reaching but in reading us, we must come to recognize ourselves as barely here, souls "all unaccompanied" in a world that we inhabit as though we were dreaming it, and will not remember except in stray images when we awaken. We are born into nature, and we will die into nature, and nature will survive our passing through. Our will to power is a desire to possess something; if not ourselves, then the world. But if none of us holds the secret of owning the spirit, of knowing how or under what conditions it might be ours, then can it be possible we are capable of possessing anything else? "Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy" (73).

To keep house in nature means, above all, to give up all rights (and thoughts) of ownership. Leave the house as open as possible to the elements, so that the house does not come to seem a barrier to Being. It should not be a place guarding against the potentialities and threats of

what lies open. It makes sense to have a roof over one's head, and walls solid enough to keep one from dying in the cold. But the danger of the house is that it encourages in us the habit of resistance and exclusion. Ruth's aunt Sylvie recoils from the "disequilibrium of counterpoising a roomful of light [in the evenings] against a world full of darkness" (99). As we register the modern oddness of a house whose interior light departs with the light of day, we might at the same time wonder at the number of ways houses reinforce our sense of having conquered what lies without, and of being safely removed from it.

It should be noted at this point that the natural setting of ***Housekeeping***, Fingerbone, is as bleak and unfavorably disposed to human occupancy as any landscape other than the Arctic could be. It offers no sentimental assurance that nature will befriend those who seek to dwell there. If nature can properly be regarded as a home for human existence, it is a home that affords no security at all. If Sylvie and Ruth come into themselves more fully as they sojourn, as outcasts, in the wilderness beyond Fingerbone, they seem to shed their solidity in the process. It is as ghosts that they confront us, and Ruth herself characterizes them that way. They are not rooted; they do not find stability; they are not sustained by closer proximity to the life of terrestrial things. What is enhanced, and it is by no means a negligible gain, is an instinct for lightness in Ruth's and Sylvie's own being.

As Ruth embraces ever more eagerly Sylvie's desire to forget everything about housekeeping (except the reclaiming and storage of things "utterly without value") and drift, it is as though she is loosening her ties to the



material world and discovering, inwardly, how to rise up. Ruth and Sylvie take to the woods for the same reason that Ruth's grandfather once walked to the railroad from his perfectly horizontal underground home in the Midwest, and traveled by the train to the mountains. He was seeking to lighten his load, to find a path upward, having determined that he was not meant to live horizontally. Edmund was not a "settler," any more than his daughter and granddaughter prove to be. He dwelt in the mountains so he could more freely dream about them in his paintings. Similarly, Ruth and Sylvie choose a life-open on every side to the elements because it is the surest means of gaining fuller access to what is elemental in their own psyches. They recover nature as the primary substance of their dreams, waking and sleeping.

The massive internal effort most of us make to will a place for ourselves in the world, and to secure it against assailants and deprivations of every sort, ultimately serves to increase the weight of our presence. And that seems a sensible--indeed, a commendable--life purpose. The essence of security is to relinquish nothing that is ours, and in that way to make what is ours count for something in a universe where we never feel visible (or solid) enough. This is because we are always stuck at an uncomfortable remove from our own center and the center of nature. But let us suppose that weight, both the idea and the reality of it (say, in our growing accumulations) puts us at odds with our dreaming faculty. Perhaps we are living backwards; perhaps, in the phrase of Gaston Bachelard, "days were created to explain nights" (Bachelard 28). His analysis of our dreams of flying begins with the "great truth" that

dream flight is "never winged flight" (i.e., we have no need of wings to fly). He describes our sensation while flying "of a really substantial lightness involving the whole being, a lightness-in-itself which has no cause of which the dreamer is aware" (Bachelard 28). Spiritual life thrives on lightness rather than heaviness because it encourages one in the belief that ascension is not only possible, but a simple, ordinary form of travel. There is a force within us that weight and rootedness obscure. Let us call it, with Bachelard, our "aerial hope."

Of all metaphors, vertical metaphors ("of height, elevation, depth, sinking") seem to bring us closest to nature, even though language, "conditioned by forms ... is not particularly well suited to them." Nothing, Bachelard provocatively insists, "explains them, and they explain everything" (Bachelard 10). If reason balks at such a claim, it cannot easily refuse to concede their enormous power in our imagination. As unhoused spirits, "fleshed in air and clothed in nakedness and mantled in cold," Sylvie and Ruth attend more closely and ardently than their neighbors in Fingerbone to everything in nature that rises and falls (204). When the two wanderers at last set fire to their possessions, they too feel assumed by some high wind: "We could watch the heat from the fire pull and tease the air out of shape, stretching the fabric of dimension and repose with its furious ascending" (199). The cost of prolonging such contemplation is that it separates us from the life of our bodies, from not only the sorrows but also the intense delights that come from embracing for dear life. Instead of clasping what we must

soon enough lose, the aerial spirit touches with a calm "as slight as the skin on water" (198).

Contemplation, pursued as Ruth and Sylvie pursue it, to its furthest extremity, wills an exchange of the body and all the creative power available to it, for a de-personalized participation in the motion of whatever is seen and dreamed. The earth grows strangely silent for the contemplative soul. As Ruth becomes "all vision," she dreams of nature eternally saving in the act of losing, like a mother drowning as she lifts her children toward the air (193). Everything one experiences as absence in the shared human realm may be preparing itself, through successive metamorphoses, for a return to us in a shape we will feel, if not recognize. As we become more detached from our own needs, images of their fulfillment may attain a greater quality of presence, almost touching us in passing.

***Housekeeping*** is essentially a dream of flight fulfilled, but it is also a work that cannot leave memory behind: "Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it" (194). After every rising motion, a hymn of loss intervenes that draws the dreamer, in a slow-motion fall, to the death-laden bottom of Fingerbone lake. The lake is where Ruth's mother and grandfather and a host of nameless others lie drowned, and no act of leaving or leaping that does not answer for them as well can bring an end to her mourning. The voice of the wind that would lift her up, unresisting, carries as its possible truest word infinite regret for what stays below, for all that is left behind. "Divine is the heart of forgetting," the poet Desoille tells us. "Wouldst feel at home in the heights? Throw thy

heaviest load in the sea!" The load that he alludes to is the past's weight of love and affliction. To annihilate that "load" is to sever our bonds with those who met, held, anticipated, harmed, and forgot us in our difficult (therefore, heavy-laden) crossing of the earth--the "loss" that does not survive translation into lightness, "the part of us which *is* earth" (Bachelard 143, emphasis added).

Ruth has obviously lost her way with people after the early defection of her parents, and the profound distraction of the guardians that take their place. She dwells endlessly on the fate of all that is fragmented, marooned, passed over, all that lies forgotten in out-of-the-way places. She dreams of a "general rescue" on the Last Day, when there is a final "releasing of fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles, of neighbors and kin, till time and error and accident were undone, and the world became comprehensible and whole" (92). Such visions are not projected from inside a committed faith. Ruth does not so much read the Bible as dream it, in the same way that she dreams nature. The power of the Bible's images and stories is that they strengthen her hope that whatever is sharply missed and faithfully remembered, like Jesus after His death, can be restored to those who need it. The Bible is a book of wanderers who find a way home against insurmountable odds.

Hope, rather than faith, is the substance of Ruth's piety. Like Sophia in Thornton Wilder's *The Eighth Day*, her hope is not a "sporadic cry," but "deep grounded": "a climate of the mind and an organ of apprehension." Wilder intriguingly presents a picture of hope as "so defenseless ... before the court of reason that it stands in constant

need of fashioning its own confirmations. It reaches out to heroic song and story; it stoops to superstition. It shrinks from flattering consolations. It likes its battles hard-won, but it surrounds itself with ceremonial and fetish" (Wilder 49-50). I like the paradoxical, but surprisingly unforced, juxtaposition of elements here: hard-won battles somehow reconciled with home-made "confirmations," superstitions balanced by a shrinking from deceitful forms of solace.

When Ruth's mother drops off Ruth and her sister Lucille at a house in Fingerbone and never comes back, it establishes in Ruth "the habit of waiting and expectation which makes any moment significant for what it does not contain" (214). The inner space ordinarily given over to social consciousness and social forms seems reserved, in Ruth's case, for those who have gone away and may some day come back, "not having meant to keep us waiting [so] long" (195). When she grows older and her sister too finds it necessary to leave her, it is as though a new wing of longing is added on to the original empty house. One never knows, after all, how much space the returning loved one may require. The psyche that is undistracted by social commitments and the noise of an active life is able to keep faith with the heart's first images. "There is so little to remember of anyone--an anecdote, a conversation at table. But every memory is turned over and over again, every word, however chance, written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh ..." (195).

The "little" that there is to remember, properly nurtured, can expand to become a world for the one who is left behind. She is either condemned to expectancy, or

released to it. Is the channel of lack, finally, any narrower than other channels open to us for experiencing "the huge spiritual desires that surge through human life?"<sup>2</sup> Aunt Sylvie tells a story of a mother who had neglected her four children completely when they lived with her, but cared for them perfectly as an old woman, adding five beds to the original four, and tucking all of her "children" in, over and over again, while walking the floor all night (185-86). "Lack" is perhaps the weightiest true element in Ruth's close-to-weightless existence. If Ruth is not free to "have" those that she loves, who are either turned away in their own reverie or have disappeared, she does have (intimately) the natural world because she asks nothing of it. She is not at war with the idea of her own insignificance. She never conceals from herself that she walks among things, all but invisible, possessing nothing and arriving at no security. Ruth is deeply attentive to natural signs and wonders, but does not *will* nature to reflect her when she claims something for her imagination. Fragments of the quotidian are held up for her wondering gaze before floating off, as in the Fingerbone flood that fills her house. And Ruth settles for that, in the midst of hoping that the "dear ordinary" will somehow be resurrected. Robinson's language touches the world in a mystical fashion through Ruth, who sees it very clearly from an expectant lover's distance. The world that she needs is intensely present to her in the fact of being just out of reach. It is a lighted shop window early in the Christmas season, viewed by a child reconciled (almost) to her family's poverty. Her language and imagination cannot take her all the way through the window, but she is not quite excluded either. She comes away from it dizzy with

the impact of so much seeing and wishing and closeness. She has perhaps felt the gaze of another child (a doll?) on the inside of the window, looking out at her, orphaned, as in a dream. The sense of an approach, a glimmering, a rustling from "the other side" is crucial to Robinson's experience of the world--the sense of an intention, in other words, "its enacting inexplicably deferred" (115).

Not long ago, my three-year-old niece was building a man out of Mah Jongg tiles in my brother and sister-in-law's living room. She named his body parts for me before stacking some additional tiles on him and calling the new form a fish. Then she proceeded to bury the fish under a large pile of tiles and colored plastic chips. "He's dead now," she gravely assured me. "He's very, very dead. He's gone away and he's never coming back." After pushing her hands through the pile for a few moments, as though she were washing her hands in the ocean that the fish/man had drowned in, she said in a quiet voice: "He's a little bit alive now." A short pause. "Now he's very much alive!" So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back again. It is out of lack, perhaps, that the psyche always renews its images, and the empty tomb is the place where our vision and baffled hope of Resurrection always returns.

## **Discussion questions**

1. Why do you think Marilynne Robinson has chosen Housekeeping as the title for her novel? What does the concept of housekeeping mean to Sylvie? To the girls' grandmother? To Lucille? Why is the idea of housekeeping such an important one in this book?

2. How do the geography and character of Fingerbone mold and shape the lives of the people who live there? What does Ruth mean when she says that Fingerbone was “chastened” (p. 62)? How does the fact that Fingerbone is “shallow-rooted” (p. 177), a “meager and difficult place” (p. 178), affect Ruth and her family?
3. “So long as you look after your health,” their grandmother tells Ruth and Lucille, “and own the roof above your head, you’re as safe as anyone can be, God willing” (p. 27). Do the experiences of her daughters and granddaughters confirm or refute this opinion?
4. Do you find that the three generations of Foster women—the grandmother, Sylvie and her sisters, and Ruth and Lucille—share certain unusual or eccentric qualities? Do they have similar attitudes toward men and marriage? Do you notice a family resemblance between these women? Why might they, as a family, have kept themselves isolated from the rest of the community?
5. After the death of Edmund Foster, the women of the Foster family inhabit a world entirely removed from masculine influence. What effect does this have on their lives and characters? Why do you think Sylvie and Helen eventually reject their own husbands so completely?



6. Why do you think that Sylvie ventured out onto the railroad bridge (p. 81)? Was it from simple curiosity, as she assures the girls, or is it possible that she was actually thinking of killing herself, of dying in the lake like her sister and father? Where else in the novel can you find images of drowning?
7. Lucille, Ruth believes, thinks that Ruth and Sylvie are alike. Do you find that Ruth is really like Sylvie, or does she come to resemble her during the course of the story? If so, why?
8. At what point in the novel do you begin to notice the differences between Ruth and Lucille? Is Lucille's wish for a 'normal' life evident early in the story, or does it take hold only as she reaches adolescence? What is the significance of Ruth's and Lucille's dreams (pp. 118-20)? What does each dream say about the dreamer's character and eventual destiny?
9. Housekeeping is told through Ruth's very distinctive point of view. Do you feel, as she seems to, that Lucille's defection from the family unit was an act of emotional dishonesty and betrayal? Or do you think that Lucille's decision was the only way she could save herself. What is Lucille's attitude toward Ruth? Does Lucille purposely leave Ruth behind, or does she try to save her?

10. If you were one of Sylvie's acquaintances or neighbors, you might consider her mad. After seeing her through Ruth's eyes, do you believe that she is in fact mad? Which of the characters in the book do you think are mad? Which ones do you think are sane?
11. What happens to Ruth during the day she spends alone at the abandoned house in the mountains (chap. 8)? How does this experience affect the direction she will take in life? How does her relationship with Sylvie change at this point?
12. Do you agree with the sheriff that Ruth would be better off separated from Sylvie, in a "normal" household? Do you believe that if he were to succeed in separating her from Sylvie at this point, Ruth would grow up to lead a normal life?
13. "Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings" (p. 116). What is Ruth saying in the long paragraph which contains this sentence, and how does this central idea of illusion, the unreality of reality, contribute to her leaving Fingerbone with Sylvie?
14. Do you think that Ruth would have become a transient had she never met Sylvie? When Ruth leaves Fingerbone with Sylvie at the end of the novel, is it wittingly or unwittingly?
15. One of the lessons Ruth has learned from her early life, and from Sylvie, is that all things are

impermanent: “the appearance of relative sordidity in my grandmothers house was deceptive . . . It is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall. It is better to have nothing” (pp. 158-59). And, “once alone, it is impossible to believe that one could ever have been otherwise” p. 157). Do you find this point of view convincing? Why has Lucille, obviously an intelligent young woman, not received the same message from their shared childhood?

16. Ruth’s life has been permanently shaped by her grief at her mothers abandonment and death. Sylvie and Helen, too, suffered from the shocking loss of a parent. “Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it,” Ruth reflects (p. 194). Do you see the events of Housekeeping as springing primarily from grief and loss? Can the novel be seen as a story about the different ways in which people cope, or fail to cope, with grief?

17. “Even the illusion of perimeters fails when families are separated” (p. 198). What does the concept of “family” mean to the various members of the Foster family? To which people is the family most important, and why is it so overwhelmingly important to them? Which of the characters is ultimately willing to sacrifice the family and his or her own place within it?

18. Why do Sylvie and Ruth attempt to burn down the house at the end of the novel?

## Multimedia

Author Interview on NPR "Writer Marilynne Robinson"  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4561100>

Film adaptation released in 1987

## Read alike

Alice Munro, *Runaway: Stories* (2004)  
Jenny Offill, *Last Things* (1999)  
Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (1971)  
Elizabeth Strout, *Amy and Isabelle* (1998)

## Extras

Have each group member discuss if and/or how different housekeeping activities or outdoor chores helps them center themselves.



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