

## Housekeeping



## INTRODUCTION

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARILYNNE ROBINSON

Marilynne Robinson was born Marilynne Summers in Sandpoint, Idaho in 1942. She was close with her brother, who also grew up to become a writer and an art historian. After studying American Literature at Pomona College (the former women's college at Brown University), she went on to earn a doctorate in English from the University of Washington, where she wrote her dissertation on Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 2*. She penned *Housekeeping* in the late 1970s, and though she expected it to receive little attention, it became a subject of national acclaim and the winner of the prestigious PEN/Hemingway Award for best first novel. After the publication of *Housekeeping*, Robinson turned to nonfiction and completed several books of critical work—she would not release her last novel, *Gilead*, for over twenty years. In 2005, *Gilead* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and Robinson wrote two follow-up novels, which follow the characters from *Gilead* over the course of the next ten years. She received a 2012 National Humanities Medal from President Barack Obama, and currently lives in Iowa City, where she is Professor Emerita and a former faculty member at the distinguished Iowa Writers' Workshop. She lectures regularly around the country and is honored to be at work on a fourth installment in the *Gilead* saga.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There is no explicit declaration within the text as to what year the events of the novel take place, but Robinson has stated in interviews that she imagines *Housekeeping* taking place in the 1970s. Robinson herself was born in 1942 in Sandpoint, Idaho—a small town on the edge of a vast lake—and no doubt the atmosphere of her hometown has made its way into the pages of her acclaimed novel. Though the women of *Housekeeping* seem both removed from and unmoored in the political and social world beyond—and even within—their small town, the characters' and townspeople's attitudes about Sylvia's transient ways and ambivalence about her mother's marriage reveal deeper fears about both the breakdown of the idyllic nuclear family unit as well as the idea of women seeking their "duties" and living in pursuit of their own physical, emotional, and intellectual freedoms.

## RELATED LITERARY WORKS

One of Marilynne Robinson's primary influences is the composition of *Housekeeping* seems to be Henry David Thoreau. An American writer of the Transcendentalist style, his

book *Walden*, about his life lived apart from society on the edge of an idyllic lake in Massachusetts, contains a deep reverence for nature, an ideological investigation of what it means to be a part of society, and the balance between and beauty of life itself. Robinson also takes inspiration in both her fiction and nonfiction from the sixteenth-century religious thinker and satirist John Calvin, whose magnum opus of thought on the Christian religion is known today as *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The future Robinson's cousin—which began with *Housekeeping*, her first novel, in 1980—consists of an accomplished body of fiction and nonfiction which wrestles with the major questions facing humanity: love, responsibility, religion, science, and nature. The themes of memory, loss, and nature established within *Housekeeping* resurface throughout her later novels, most prominently *Gilead*, and her works of nonfiction including *Mother Country* and *When I Was a Child: Four Books*.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Housekeeping*
- **When Written:** 1970s
- **Where Written:** Ashland, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1980
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction, generational saga, coming-of-age tale
- **Setting:** The fictional town of Fingerbone, Idaho
- **Climate:** Sylvia and Ruth turn down their families' protest of home and leave Fingerbone behind.
- **Antagonist:** Lucille
- **Point of View:** First person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Happy Accident:** Marilynne Robinson's interest in the metaphorical language of sixteenth-century American writers, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, led her to work on what was a series of extended metaphors as an exercise during her PhD program at the University of Washington—an exercise that would become the framework for *Housekeeping*.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The adult Ruth Brown looks back on her unrooted childhood. After Ruth and Lucille's mother, Helen, commits suicide, the two sisters go to live in Fingerbone, Idaho, with their grandmother Sylvia Foster. After their grandmother's death, the girls enter the care of their ambitious, spinster great-aunt,

# Housekeeping Study Guide

**Wenbin Ji**



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