

FICTION

A prodigal son returns in brilliant 'Gilead' sequel

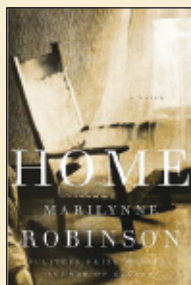
BY ALDEN MUDGE

Summary and compression cannot come close to capturing the moment-by-moment beauty of Marilynne Robinson's third novel, *Home* (Farrar, Straus, \$25, 336 pages, ISBN 97809374299101). It is a novel that unfolds slowly in hushed, carefully observed scenes whose disquieting emotional import vaults off the page. Its power is as much spiritual as literary. And its cumulative impact has as much to do with the pain of misunderstanding that exists among its three main characters as the love that seeks to bridge those misunderstandings.

Home is a companion to Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Gilead*. Set in fictional Gilead, Iowa, in 1956, *Gilead* was told as a discursive letter written by a 76-year-old Congregational minister named John Ames to the seven-year-old son he has fathered late in life. Late in that novel, Ames is visited by the prodigal son of his life-long best friend, a Presbyterian minister named Robert Boughton, now on his deathbed. The son, Jack, named after Ames, seeks spiritual counsel, and Ames, a good man, tries to provide it. But ultimately Ames cannot completely understand or forgive Jack for what Ames perceives as his cruelty to his father.

Home offers a deeper, richer, more compassionate view of the sometimes charming and frequently discomfiting Jack Boughton. The new novel is told from the perspective of Glory Boughton, the youngest Boughton child, who at 38 years old returns to Gilead to care for her dying father after her own wounding failures in life and love. When her older brother Jack shows up after a 20-year absence, the two struggle to make peace with their pasts, with each other and with their father. Jack, one of the most unsettling characters in recent fiction, is haunted by a kind of spiritual emptiness. At one point he sadly observes, "I create a kind of displacement around myself when I pass through the world, which can fairly be called trouble." In fact, the trouble this prodigal son creates is palpable, but in Robinson's inspired telling, it also moves us to empathy. This makes *Home* a more excruciating but no less beautiful or rewarding read than its predecessor, *Gilead*. ♥

Alden Mudge writes from California.



INSPIRATIONAL

God is in the details

New Christian fiction shows diversity of the genre

BY JOANNE COLLINGS

So what makes a novel a Christian novel? There's no quick answer. The four novels considered here are but a small taste of the wide variety now available in Christian fiction. Each fills the category's basic requirements: good and evil are clearly defined, and characters are tested by real-world temptations and aware of what their choices mean in religious terms.

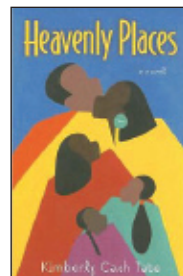
For suspense fans

Sinner (Thomas Nelson, \$24.99, 400 pages, ISBN 9781595540089) is part of author Ted Dekker's Paradise series, which, along with the Circle Trilogy and the Lost Books, makes up his Books of History Chronicles. Dekker describes them as "circular, not linear," and has created a world readers can really dive into. This fast-paced tale is a thriller involving characters with very special powers, a series of lynchings and a constitutional amendment limiting free speech in order to prevent hate crimes. One of the amendment's results is the National Tolerance Act, which "opens the doors to laws that could make the teachings of Christ a hate crime" because they include claiming that Christ "is the only way to enter the Kingdom, [implying] that another's path is wrong."

Dekker is especially adept at examining the way people can be seduced into thinking that their talents give them rights others don't deserve. *Sinner* is thought-provoking; it left me feeling uncomfortable, but that may have been Dekker's intention.

The dangers of tolerance are also part of the plot of James David Jordan's *Forsaken* (B&H Publishing, \$14.99, 400 pages, ISBN 9780805447491). Former Secret Service agent Taylor Pasbury, a woman who is haunted by her loss-laden past and who drinks and avoids relationships, gets a big client for her new security firm: televangelist Simon Mason, who's been getting threats from Muslim extremists and is especially concerned about the safety of his daughter and only child. Simon, too, has had a large personal loss to shoulder in the death of his wife, but his faith has buttressed him. Taylor is drawn to Simon, who is not without flaws and secrets, and who can be extraordinarily thick when it comes to women.

Simon's faith is tested in a terrible way when his daughter is kidnapped. The drama then moves to another stage, and some last-minute surprises are sprung. *Forsaken* is a highly readable book, and Taylor is a character who is worth another visit—Jor-



dan is hard at work on the sequel, *Double-Cross*.

Traditional romance

Cathy Marie Hake's *Whirlwind* (Bethany House, \$13.99, 384 pages, ISBN 9780764203190) is well named: it's a traditional historical romance that moves from England to Texas without a hitch. After Millicent Fairweather loses the two little girls she's been nanny to for years when their father unaccountably decides to send them to boarding school, she sets off for America with her sister and brother-in-law. When widower Daniel Clark discovers his young son's nursemaid has fled the ship, Millicent finds herself employed. Millicent is something of a super nanny who soon wins over her young charge and, unbeknownst to her, his father. Although they end up marrying for the sake of appearances, each is hiding romantic feelings for the other. This is classic Christian fiction: the characters are devout, and it is common for them to talk with and about God. It is tempting to complain about the too-neat ending, or to find Daniel too perfect. But this frothy tale will entertain fans of inspirational fiction and romance.

Women's fiction

In *Heavenly Places* (Walk Worthy Press, \$13.99, 359 pages, ISBN 9781577948575), the affluent African-American residents of P.G. County, Maryland, also talk to God regularly, even the not-entirely-saved Treva Langston.

In Kimberly Cash Tate's charming debut, Treva has reluctantly returned to the place where she unhappily grew up and the mother who caused her misery. She can't find a new job (she was a lawyer in the Washington, D.C., area), and now has to stay at home with her three daughters, something she's never done. Treva can't get out of joining her sister's prayer group for stay-at-home mothers, but she doesn't feel at home with the women in the group.

Readers will identify with Treva, berate her for her lack of appreciation for her husband (who is on a level with *Whirlwind*'s Daniel in terms of perfection) and her inability to see how great her daughters are, all the while admiring her for her honesty. Treva is not guilty of wanting it all, because she only wanted the career, not the children; and like most of us she's never had it all because something has always had to be sacrificed in order for her to have something else. In the end, she finds balance and discovers what *Heavenly Places* are. ♥

Joanne Collings writes from Washington, D.C.

TRENDS

Simple gifts

Glance at any inspirational fiction shelf these days, and you're sure to run across at least one Amish-themed book. Series from authors like Beverly Lewis, Wanda E. Brunstetter and Lauraine Snelling are all regulars on Christian fiction bestseller lists. The books are easily recognizable: series titles include the words "sister" or "daughter"; covers almost always bear the image of a woman in an old-fashioned white bonnet, staring wistfully into the distance. Every Christian publisher has at least one Amish series to its credit. Thomas Nelson chimed in last month with *Plain Perfect* (\$14.99, 320 pages, ISBN 9781595546302) from debut novelist Beth Wiseman. Her editor, Natalie Hanemann, says the genre "provides an environment that is centered on God, making it a perfect



landscape for Christian fiction."

Other aspects of the Amish lifestyle make it intriguing to readers. "Everyone loves a good romance story, but the perceived simplicity of the Amish community moves it away from the common stresses of our everyday life," says Shannon Marchese, an editor at WaterBrook who works with Cindy Woodsmall on the Sisters of the Quilt series, including her recent release *When the Soul Mends* (\$13.99, 336 pages, ISBN 9781400072941). "We can imagine a 'loftier' romantic story for these people who still travel by buggy."

Both editors say the future of the genre is bright, and see it diversifying (secular publishers like MIRA Books have also had success with Amish stories). "Amish is beginning to mix with other genres—suspense and mystery, for example," says Hanemann. "I personally love these books and would be thrilled to bring on more authors who write well . . . the competition is stiff, but the readers' appetites seem to be insatiable!" ♥

—TRISHA PING