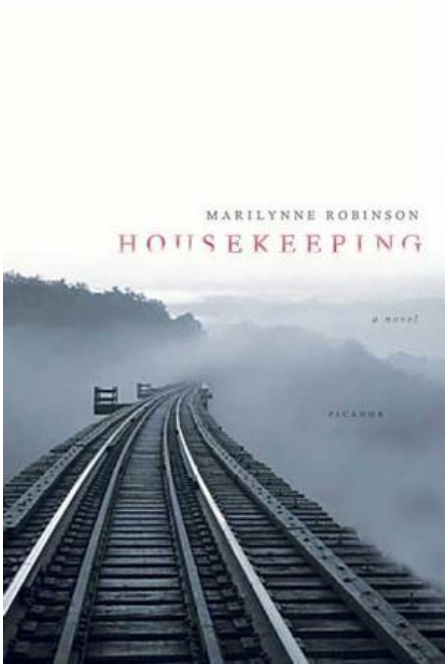

Housekeeping

Marilynne Robinson

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Housekeeping Marilynne Robinson
A modern classic, *Housekeeping* is the story of Ruth and her younger sister, Lucille, who grow up haphazardly, first under the care of their competent grandmother, then of two comically bumbling great-aunts, and finally of Sylvie, their eccentric and remote aunt. The family house is in the small Far West town of Fingerbone set on a glacial lake, the same lake where their grandfather died in a spectacular train wreck, and their mother drove off a cliff to her death. It is a town "chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather, and chastened again by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere." Ruth and Lucille's struggle toward adulthood beautifully illuminates the price of loss and survival, and the dangerous and deep undertow of transience.

Housekeeping Details

Date	:	Published November 1st 2004 by Picador USA (first published 1980)
ISBN	:	9780312424091
Author	:	Marilynne Robinson
Format	:	Paperback 219 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Novels, Literary Fiction, Literature, Classics

From Reader Review Housekeeping for online ebook

David Schaafsma says

"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, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door finally and stroke our hair with dreaming habitual fondness not having meant to keep us waiting long."

Wow. I knew of this book in 1980 when it came out, and in that year I must have picked it up in Shuler's Bookstore In Grand Rapids and read the opening page and found it rich and deep and I set it back down. About to descend into my own Dark Night of the Soul, in the next 3-4 years, I perhaps anticipated how unprepared I was to read this book. And now I am ready, and it was amazing to experience. This book has some of the most breathtaking and astonishing sentences I have read in a long time. I first read it two years ago and now have reread it again for a class.

Maybe it is because I have been reading so many graphic novels, I have been reading quickly, maybe too quickly, but this book forces you to read very very slowly; you didn't want to miss a single word.

The book takes place in a small western city, Fingerbone, on a lake. Ruthie is the narrator, and for much of the book she is almost inseparable from her sister, Lucille. Early on we learn that their grandfather, Edmund Foster, a trainman, has died, his train plummeting off the bridge into the lake. Then, his daughter, Helen, Ruthie and Lucille's mother, returns from Spokane to Fingerbone to visit her own mother living there, leaves the young girls with their grandmother, and drives her borrowed car off a cliff into that same lake. Grandmother is in no shape to raise two grandkids she doesn't even know. As the story goes, she will later live with two odd and also constitutionally-unable-to-parent great-aunts and then Sylvie, another odd aunt. Seem crazy? But maybe crazy is the wrong word. Robinson herself does not think any of her women are fundamentally crazy, but they do endure some trauma, of course.

What are the ripple effects of this trauma for Helen, Sylvie, Lucille and Ruth, of having lived through tragic death? What is memory and experience in the shaping of a life? In the process of our answering these questions, we meet along the way, usually just briefly, literally dozens of often (seemingly?) broken women, seen by Ruthie and Lucille and Ruth on passing trains, or talked to on trains by Sylvie, who was a drifter, a transient, a hobo. This parade of sad/mad women in the background of the main story provide a kind of thematic or imagistic backdrop to the tale, something I missed in my first reading. This is a book especially for and about women in a world of loss. How do they go on? Men hardly figure in the book, after Edmund's early death. We hardly meet them at all, except by reportage. This is a book about women's survival, coping and sometimes failing to cope with grief. The lake, the house, are also very much alive (and I think female) presences in this book.

Oh, and the crazy night Sylvie and Ruth spend on the boat on the lake, after waiting for the 9:52 train to come through, and reflecting on all those losses: "The lake must be full of people. I've heard stories all my life. And you can bet there were a lot of people on the train no one knew about." Sylvie is referring to the people who besides her father who died when the train plunged off the bridge into the lake. And a ripple effect of grief and loss for all the families who suffered these losses, and some of them, like her, transients, sleeping in the freight cars.

Ruthie, of her departed mother Helen: "She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and

nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished." Are we talking of ghosts here? If you like, sure, but this is what we all know, the presence of the departed in our every day lives.

The image of Ruth, our narrator, a young girl, is unforgettable in this book: "It was a source of both terror and comfort to me then that I often seemed invisible — incompletely and minimally existent, in fact. It seemed to me that I made no impact on the world, and that in exchange I was privileged to watch it unawares." Ruth's ghost-like presence is mirrored in the ghost of her mother and grandfather and all of her female family rendered ghost-like and nearly invisible through tragedy.

There is a Walpurgisnacht scene of burning that happens later in that is both frightening and breathtaking. The pace of the book is slow, very little seems to happen, but then there are these moments of very real drama and remarkable emotional effects in a few places, and in the climax of the book. I thought it was sometimes difficult--I need to read it once again for all the Biblical references--but finally astonishing and empathetic.

What does it mean to live in that house, in Fingerbone, or live on that water, in that town, with that past, with that darkness, with all that waiting, with memories, with that sudden need to leave, to get out, that most of the women come to feel? It took me 35 years to finally read this book, and it was worth the wait. And it was even better and deeper as I read it again.

PS: In this last reading I began to see the gothic influences in this book: the dark, the wild forces of nature, the tinge of the supernatural and the edge of madness. Ruthie says this is a town of murders and accidents, and Sylvie says there must be dozens of bodies in the lake, she's heard stories. Ruthie says she feels like she has become a ghost, like she describes most of the drifters passing through. But I don't think of it primarily as a ghost story; I think of it as a book about the trauma that comes to these women, and many women. And after three readings I am still haunted by and can't fully understand the ending, which I love because Ruthie and Sylvie, fingers crooked, beckon me, back to Fingerbone.

Spoiler alert: I think in the end Ruthie has joined her aunt Sylvie on the road, each traumatized by the death of a parent, not quite able to participate meaningfully in "civilized" society, increasingly invisible and ghostlike to the rest of the world, Ruthie cut off perhaps forever and sadly from her sister Lucille.

Sue says

I have been thinking about this book since I finished reading it and still am unsure what to say. I believe it has some of the finest prose I've read....causing me frequently to stop, go back, read again once, twice, or more, before I continued with the story. There are parts that are woefully sad, in fact the story is one of total sadness and trying to eke out a life through the melancholy. But these women somehow seem to transcend (or outrun?) the melancholy in their own way. Grandmother by being strict and conforming and never mentioning love. Of her daughters, Molly ministered to heathen, Helen ran away then came home and flew into the air. Sylvie, well Sylvie lived in her own world. In the next generation, Lucille decided to break the cycle.

But Ruth..."When did I become so unlike other people? Either it was when I followed Sylvie across the bridge, and the lake claimed us, or it was when my mother left me waiting for her, and established in me the habit of waiting and expectation which makes any present moment most significant for what it does not contain. Or it was at my conception."(p214) Thus begins the final pages of the story, some of the most

beautiful writing I've ever experienced. I want to copy these last pages out here and read every day.

I had many passages marked for inclusion in this review, but I'm going to leave it with just the one above.

This will likely be forever one of my most favorite and moving reading experiences.

Sara says

I finished this book last week and have been traveling through its landscape ever since, much like Sylvie rode her railcars from town to town. Marilynne Robinson creates characters that beg you to live with them, to dig deep and touch their souls. They are unlike any people you have ever known, and yet they are every person you have ever met. They struggle with how to connect to one another and how to suffer the loneliness of the connections they cannot make. The worlds that are most real are those within their own heads.

How much of who we are is in our DNA? Lucille and Ruthie are bereft of their mother through her suicide, they are raised by their grandmother, left to their two bumbling great-aunts and finally left to somehow find their way with their off-key aunt, Sylvie. Their problems are the same, but their reactions are worlds apart. Lucille sees in Sylvie a foreign creature and Ruthie sees a reflection of herself. There is isolation, abandonment, estrangement, and yearning; the desire to be a part of something and the need to be free.

The efforts Sylvie and Ruthie make to fit into the roles society declares they must fill are heartbreaking. There is a thread of sadness, melancholy and near helplessness that runs through the lilting prose. I found myself rooting for the underdogs and despairing of hope for them in the same breath.

If Marilynne Robinson had written only this novel, she would have cemented her place among the great writers of her time. She did more than this, however, and the body of her work has awed me. She waited 25 years between writing this book and her next, Gilead. I am hoping she will gift us with a few more before she ends her career.

Dolors says

“Housekeeping” is an introspective, almost ethereal coming of age story that navigates the hazy division between presence and absence, loss and survival, radiance and darkness.

Lucille and Ruthie have been left to the care of their elderly grandmother in Fingerbone, their mother’s natal village in Idaho. When the old woman passes away, their eccentric aunt Sylvie returns to Fingerbone with her unorthodox personality and her particular way of understanding life that will open a chasm between the two sisters. Sylvie discards everything she considers superfluous and acts accordingly to her transient essence. She meanders at night, listening to the silence of darkness, finding comfort in it, not minding the impression she might be making to the disapproving neighbors. Her priorities do not correspond to the tangible aspects of daily life.
As they grow, Lucille and Ruthie will be confronted with the uncertain nature of existence and they will have to choose between the rituals of a socially accepted normality or embrace Sylvie’s deeper vision of a parallel world where memories, dreams and reality become a permanent heritage in detriment of material stability.

The story is replete with symbols that acquire mystical magnitude: a lake that floods the region recalling Biblical myths, the dark, dense woods of the nearby area, an abandoned house with a life of its own with ghostly children that only those who are in tune with silence can hear.
The recurrent idea that we feel absent family members more keenly when they are gone resonates throughout the book with spiritual force; and the unfathomable deep waters of a lake become a kind of heaven where those we loved find shelter, never to return to us physically, although they remain forever present in our dreams and memories, evoking the best version of any alternative reality.

Reading Robinson's prose is like a sensory experience. The unruly quality of abstract thoughts captured in immaculate words makes it beautiful like the wilderness, like some untamable creature that can't be caught, only admired from afar. It has a life beyond the reader's consciousness.
Sometimes, it also reads like poetry, for there is total harmony in the slow paced hues of the narrative voice and the uncommon sensitivity that gives sustenance to the sinuous meditations on identity, loneliness and belonging the novel revolves around.
Robinson reminds us how useless it is to hoard material richness as we will leave this world in the same way that we came into it. Unwillingly, helpless, bared, innocent. Her solitary chant is easy to forget in the hasty, superficial practicalities of living, but we should tune our ears to the sound of her music, which transcends corporal boundaries. There is no more doleful or beauteous melody than that, than hearing a soul sing.

Elyse says

I was craving a book like this...had wanted to read it forever.
I can't express how much I appreciate this book. The story itself had me in the palm of my hands. The writing was so rich and breathtaking- I felt like I was being taken out to an expensive fine-dining experience-- savoring every bite.

No POV alternating chapters - not a long-winded 500 page novel. This powerful novel with many themes: family, loss, death, abandonment, unconventional lifestyles, small towns, with memorable characters - and an ending I never saw coming was only 219 pages!

A PERFECT FLAWLESS NOVEL!!!!

Nick says

I'm going to throw the gauntlet down and say that I thought this book was terribly overrated considering how many of my friends--whose taste I've come to respect--recommended it to me. All the critics from 1980 seemed amazed that this was a debut. Seemed like a first novel to me.

The thing that people praise most about the book was the beauty of her language. I'll admit that there were some wonderful passages, and some great imagery, but there was just as much "writerly" prose, overwritten prose, pyrite prose. I felt like I was possessed by the spirit George Orwell as again and again I read poor word choices: "achromatic" for "colorless;" "simulacra" for "semblance." These words are not poetic substitutes but verge on jargon. Blandishment? Come on. That's about as poetic as "esophagus."

I also thought the philosophical meanderings of Ruthie bordered on pretentiousness: "So memory pulls us

forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory--there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine." Whenever it appeared, this vague, didactic prose seemed to stifle what little story there was. And let's not forget that these ideas could never have come from the mind of Ruthie, teen aged or aged. One who spends her days trying desperately to be ignored and can barely speak does not later become a meditator on memory and the Garden of Eden.

I probably would have been more forgiving of the novel in these aspects if I thought there was a strong story. There is not. Rather, Robinson decided that a gauzy, limp tale of loss would preclude the need for any kind sustained dramatic tension. We are treated to uninspiring characters with no real redeeming qualities. The only dynamo in the story is Lucille and because of her conforming attitude, we are distanced from identifying with her. Instead, we get to hang out with Ruthie, the world's most inactive protagonist.

Now, I will qualify everything. I will say that I did enjoy chapters 4-8. I actually enjoyed them a lot. The conflict between the two sisters was wonderful. But a good middle does not make a good book. The first two chapters were all but unnecessary--drawn out exposition that could easily have been woven into the rest of the book--and the ending just fell flat. What was Robinson trying to say? That grief makes you drift? That the power of memory can drag you towards oblivion? I think my frustration stems partly from dashed hopes that the ending would unite and triumph. Instead, I was left with a handful of images, nothing more.

Michael Finocchiaro says

Marilynne Robinson's first novel Housekeeping were it a piece of music, would ressemble Sibelius' Violin Sonata in D Minor - slow and foreboding, full of winter's solitude and loneliness. The setting, Fingerbone (most likely in Idaho) is quite reminiscent of Finland actually. There is the small town surrounded by snow-covered mountains with a huge lake not far from which live Ruthie, the narrator and her sister Lucille. They have been surrounded by death and loss: their grandfather died during a railroad accident on the rail bridge across the lake (representing a way out of the life in Fishbone - death or escape), their mother committed suicide by driving herself in a borrowed car off a cliff into the lake, their father walked off never to be heard from again and neither girl had memories of him, and their grandmother dies clutching at life in her sleep.

The motif of housekeeping is evoked by the pristine state of the awkward house built by the not-so-talented hands of their deceased grandfather while they are cared for by their two aunts Lily and Nona who escape as soon as another aunt Sylvie comes to take care of the girls. From this point on, the house deteriorates: there is a flood which rots away the furniture and books and Sylvie is so dislocated in her own mind that she collects garbage and paper and the girls start skipping school.

The atmosphere in the story is relatively mournful and heavy:
"A narrow pond would form in the orchard, water clear as air covering grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched grass and fallen branches, and on it an image in an eye, sky clouds, trees, our hovering faced and our cold hands." (p.5)

"Fingerbone was never an impressive town. It was chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather chastened again by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere." (p.62)

Ruthie becomes more and more pulled under the addictive detachedness of Sylvie:

"...it seemed to me that there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, momento, bequest, memory,

thought, track, or trace, if only the darkness could be perfect and permanent." (p.116)

Neither Sylvie nor Ruthie are attached to anything of value in the house for "To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow." (p.152) but rather filled it with detritus "because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping." (p.180).

Lucille has since abandoned Sylvie and Ruthie to live a "normal" life in town while the other two women ruminate about sorrow:

"Every sorrow suggests a thousand songs, and every song recalls a thousand sorrows, and so there are infinite in number and all the same." (p.194)

"...sometimes I think sorrow is a predatory thing because birds scream at dawn with a marvelous terror." (p.198)

The town becomes alarmed and yet "timid about threading the labyrinths of [their] privacy" (p.182) and all that is left to do for Sylvie and Ruthie is flight - across the fateful railroad tracks over the lake to a life of vagrancy.

Perhaps this book is too depressing given the current political climate, but perhaps it also explains a mindset of the small towns of the red states that are so terrified of change and their vengeful god that they will cling to anything to maintain a semblance of normalcy- because the alternative of rootlessness represented by Sylvie and Ruthie scares them even more.

A beautiful book and one that makes me with to read her Pulitzer winning Gilead.

KFed says

Another reviewer labeled this book as good for "Women who love descriptive writing." Well. I loved this book, so either I'm due for an identity crisis or someone here is a little misguided about writing and gender. Or both.

Either way, I can't say enough about this luminous, challenging and sobering book.

Robinson starts her novel with a cross-generational tale of loss. The narrator, Ruthie, recounts the story of the death of her grandfather, who went down with a train that sailed off of the bridge at the outskirts of their town and into a lake. She recounts the story of his children, her mother among them, who forever live in the shadow of his mysterious and surprising death, and then tells us of the day her mother left her and her sister at their grandmother's house and promptly drove her car off of the same bridge, into the same lake, in an act of suicide.

The rest of the novel concerns her and her sister's lives in the care of their grandmother, and when she dies, the care of their grandmother's sisters, and when they leave, the care of their mother's eccentric and wandering sister, Sylvie. It is this last relationship that dominates the novel, as the two young girls attempt to gain some sense of normalcy and stability under the care of a woman who has, herself, never had any sense of 'home' or anchor. It is about belonging to a world that continues to slip through one's fingers and not-

belonging to the world at large.

This is a haunting, troubling work, its plot almost overridden by deeper questions of loss and transience and its pages filled to the brim with images of light and water -- those aspects of our lives that are forever fleeting and yet constantly present. Definitely worth re-reading.

Paul Bryant says

This is Literature with a capital L in the form of a Doric column so high you'll get a crick in your neck trying to see to the top of it. You really do feel like you are becoming a better person as you read this novel, even as you fight the drowsiness which is baked into each and every sinuous delectable palpable sensuous lapidary paragraph. Huh? What? What was that??

The story, such as it is, and it really isn't, is that two little sisters are orphaned and then looked after by their grandmamma who ups and dies and then they are looked after by elderly great aunts (they were my favourites but alas they didn't last long – I think they couldn't wait to get out of this book too) and then by their mother's sister Sylvie who is like this kind of elegant bag lady drifter who lets the house go to rack and ruin and cares not a fig if the girls go to school.

There is a lot of mooning about in this novel. This is the third novel I read in recent times in which the protagonist is a teenage girl and who kind-of narrates the whole thing – *I Capture the Castle* and *We Have Always Lived In the Castle* were the other two. Maybe this one should have been called *Castlekeeping.* Okay, maybe not.

When you look at movies narrated by teenaged girls they seem to have a lot more *zest*, and hardly any mooning about. I'm thinking of *Badlands, Clueless, Amelie, Freeway, True Grit, Mean Girls, Easy A,* etc. Girls with some *pep* to them. In *Housekeeping*, sisters Ruthie and Lucille mostly troop about boredly observing small examples of nature, like bees and ripples and each other's coats. About three quarters the way through, Lucille gets a little hacked off with this teenage novocaine Walden experience and slings her hook. The reader looks longingly after her but knows he must trudge on.

Here is how you can tell this is literature:

Lucille almost ran down the stairs. We heard the slish and moil of her steps in the hall

Yes, the hall is flooded, but slish and moil, hey? Here's another:

Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy.

That's on the same page as slish and moil. Okay, here's another good one:

She seemed to dislike the disequilibrium of counterpoising a roomful of light against a worldful of darkness.

(Not a world full of darkness, a *worldful* of darkness. Important difference.)

This actually means that the aunt liked to eat her evening meal in the dark and not switch on the light.

Here's another one:

Lucille would say I fell asleep, but I did not. I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings.

This is some fancy hifalutin chat coming from such a callow youngster. And it never stops. Here she is thinking about her mother and her aunt (thinking about the mother and the aunt accounts for around 88% of Ruthie's thoughts, with another 12% spent on her sister. She's the only teenage girl ever who didn't once think about pop music.) :

They were both long and narrow women like me, and nerves like theirs walk my legs and gesture my hands.

Eventually the profound musings became like a form of transcendental muzak :

Thoughts bear the same relation, in mass and weight, to the darkness they rise from, as reflections do to the water they ride upon, and in the same way they are arbitrary, or merely given.

Did I think this was any good? Well, you know, some people like Albert Ayler, some people like Jeff Koons, some people even profess to like the films of Eric Rohmer. What is Art? Rock Hudson said Art is a boy's name.

Maybe we could rephrase that question then. Did I like it?

No.

RandomAnthony says

Two things you should know about my thoughts on *Housekeeping*:

1) I think *Housekeeping* is a great book.
2) Finishing *Housekeeping* gave me a palpable sense of relief.

Housekeeping is darker and more intense than the author's better-known *Gilead* . The former is also a tougher read; even the most careful reader would, I imagine, find herself returning to some passages a few times in an attempt to follow the beautiful but difficult language. So while I don't regret reading a tough and rewarding novel, by any stretch, there were moments when I felt like I was reading the damn book because it was good for me but not very much fun. And even though I marked and will later photocopy some passages, and I would gladly recommend Housekeeping to anyone up for a caliginous and meticulous exploration of loss, depth, and identity, I'd sure as hell point out the ride wasn't going to be easy.

Not a resounding recommendation, eh? Well, I'm giving the book four stars, more than I give most books, and I might read the book again someday. *Housekeeping* seems like the type of book I'd want to read again. And although the psychological and metaphorical (I'm deathly afraid of drowning, thank you very much, and

underwater metaphors lurk on just about every page) explorations are intense, the book will haunt me in ways that I can appreciate for the foreseeable future. Check it out. You are warned.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

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Sarah says

About a girl who really hates to talk and never talks but the author can't stop babbling. She just goes on and on and on and on and on.

The ending really sucks, just like the middle and the beginning.

Orsodimondo says

LA RAGAZZA DEL LAGO
Pur se con atmosfera radicalmente diversa, questo romanzo mi ha spesso fatto pensare a *Les Revenants*. Immagino che sia per la forte presenza del lago, un elemento importante della narrazione, così come nel film, e nella serie tv che da quello è stata tratta. Un luogo che assume al ruolo di personaggio.
Il lago di queste pagine, il lago di Fingerbone, Idaho, è un essere vivente: respira, pulsa, nutre, genera, è pieno di gente, e di cose, perfino un intero treno, nasconde, conserva, si estende, e si restringe, una volta l'anno allaga il paese. Si è portato via sia il nonno di Ruth, l'Io narrante, sia la sua stessa mamma.

Immagine dalla sigla di testa della serie *Les revenants*, ambientata e girata in Savoia intorno ad Annecy. Ma questo lago invece è in Italia, a Capestrano, in Abruzzo

Ma come dicevo, l'atmosfera è molto diversa da *Les Revenants*: qui siamo piuttosto dalle parti di Ralph Waldo Emerson e del suo romantico concepire il mondo vegetale, del suo sentimento di unione mistica con la natura.
Le parole che seguono sono sue, e secondo me spiegano bene anche la poetica di Marilynne Robinson:
Stando sulla nuda terra, il capo immerso nell'aria serena e sollevato nell'infinito spazio, ogni meschino egotismo svanisce. Divento un occhio trasparente, non sono niente, vedo tutto; le correnti dell'essere universale circolano attraverso di me; sono una parte o una particella di Dio.
L'occhio trasparente assorbe più che riflettere, accoglie tutto quello che la Natura ha da offrire, è lo

strumento per fondersi con la Natura, che ci protegge se ci mescoliamo all'energia e alla bellezza che dio ha disperso nel mondo (cioè, nella Natura). Emerson considerava questa sua teoria una posizione scientifica tanto strutturata quanto la Bibbia.

Il lago di Capodacqua a Capestrano, in provincia dell'Aquila

La stessa casa dove abita Ruth con sua sorella minore, Lucille, sembra parte della Natura, non è un'entità chiusa, ma partecipa del mondo vegetale che la circonda: condivide vegetazione, polvere, ragnatele, mancano i vetri alle finestre, è regolata dal principio di accumulazione (di lattine, di giornali vecchi…), i gatti portano dentro uccellini morti, i topi e i ragni sono accolti, più con rassegnazione che con vero entusiasmo.
La vita nel petto di tutte le creature, umane animali e vegetali, forse batte piano, ma batte uguale in tutto e per tutti, con la certezza che *il giorno come sempre sarà*.

Ruth e sua sorella Lucille insieme alla zia Sylvie, nell'omonimo film del 1987 (in italiano *Una donna tutta particolare*). La regia è di Bill Forsyth, da me molto apprezzato per il suo *Local Hero*.

L'housekeeping del titolo non è l'economia domestica, non le cure domestiche in senso stretto, ma nel senso più ampio: di fronte alla perdita, mantenere una rifugio spirituale per se stessi e la famiglia, per le ragazze che nel loro percorso di crescita sperimentano una serie di abbandoni.
È tutto uno sparire: il nonno nel lago, la madre, la nonna, il padre più o meno ignoto, le prozie…

La zia Sylvie, sorella minore della madre, che torna a casa per prendersi cura (non molto domestica) delle ragazze, si comporta come una sorella, maggiore solo per età anagrafica, ma certo non svolge la funzione materna.
È una donna che, come dice lei stessa, "ha perso di vista" il marito da un bel po', ha vissuto a lungo come una hobo, da vagabonda, salendo al volo sui treni merci per spostarsi da un posto all'altro, senza una meta, senza un piano. Si porta dietro uno stile di vita eccentrico, e soprattutto brado, con poche lasche regole, e nessuna imposizione, la negazione del concetto d'autorità di cui si dice i figli hanno invece necessità.
Anche in casa dorme vestita sdraiata sul letto, senza togliersi le scarpe, pronta a partire, andare, tornare, e partire di nuovo.

Il romanzo è ambientato nel corso degli anni Cinquanta, ma tranne pochi accenni (le automobili, l'elettricità…), potrebbe essere anche il secolo precedente, nessuna eco della guerra mondiale, né di altro evento storico.
Mi pare che l'unico modo per datarlo con qualche certezza sia dal titolo di un libro che Ruth legge, *Nessuno resta solo* (Not As a Stranger) di Morton Thompson, che fu un bestseller nel 1954, e da cui venne tratto un film con Olivia de Havilland e Robert Mitchum, diretto da Stanley Kramer.

Ci sono alcuni momenti (scene?) che spiccano per bellezza: l'incidente del treno che cade nel lago, le ricerche dei sommozzatori; i giochi con i cani e le passeggiate sul lago ghiacciato; i duetti delle prozie (esilaranti, sembra di sentirli! E di vederli. Se ci fosse anche un pizzico di ferocia sembrerebbe di leggere la Grande Signorina, Ivy Compton-Burnett! Peccato le due donne spariscano presto, se ne sente la mancanza);

l’accensione della luce nel buio della cucina durante una cena; le conversazioni della zia con le donne del paese che vengono in visita recando in dono cibi nutrienti accolte in un salotto invaso da pile di giornali vecchi…

Il nonno di Ruth, quello che scompare col treno nel lago, regalò alla moglie un orologio da tasca da usare come collana sul quale aveva dipinto una coppia di cavallucci marini. La nonna *desiderava vederli persino mentre li stava guardando.*

Siamo in presenza di un esordio strepitoso che annuncia da subito una scrittrice di razza (che dopo questo primo romanzo, lasciò passare ventiquattro anni prima di produrre il secondo).
Una scrittrice che guarda indietro, e sceglie come fonti d’ispirazione i grandi dell’Ottocento.

Trovo speciale questo articolo di Nicola Lagioia che racconta la sua intervista a Marilynne Robinson e dichiara il suo amore incondizionato per la sua scrittura.
http://www.internazionale.it/opinione...

L’ammirazione tra artisti quando non è piaggeria è contagiosa.
Come in quest’altro caso, semplicemente meraviglioso:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ7qK...

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laura says

written in exquisite detail, as everyone has noted, but a lot of the rest of what's been written in the more recent reviews i find sort of troubling and, frankly, misleading. recommended for 'women who like descriptive writing'? gross. this novel was given to me by a dude, and further recommended by a (male) writer i know-- a guy who counts earnest hemingway among his favorite writers-- as one of the best novels of the 20th century. this is not, as has been implied, some kind of lady-book.

marilynne robinson's 'housekeeping', like all great literature, is a revelation. it's a revelation of lonliness in particular, and of transience (two subjects often, if stupidly, associated with male psyches and literary tastes). it resonates less, in my opinion, as a girl-comes-of-age story or as a tale of sisterly bonds than it does as just the story of a person trying to make it in a family trying to make it in a town trying to make it in this world. about the survival strategies of each. about how things just keep going, keep trying to make it (or stop trying), and why.

albert camus wrote that "there is but one serious philosophical problem and that is suicide"--the problem of why we should and shouldn't go on living. robinson, of course, is a novelist, not a philosopher, and she's not in the business of telling us why we should or shouldn't go on, but of showing us how (and sometimes why) we do or don't. 'housekeeping' is nothing less than a narrative account of this most profound and universally relevant fact: the fact that we keep going, or that we don't, and how we do or don't (and sometimes why).

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"there was not a soul there but knew how shallow-rooted the whole town was. it flooded yearly, and had

burned once. often enough the lumber mill shut down, or burned down. there were reports that things were otherwise elsewhere, and anyone, on a melancholy evening, might feel that fingerbone was a meager and difficult place.

"so a diaspora threatened always. and there is no living creature, though the whims of eons had put its eyes on boggling stalks and clampled it in a carapace, dimished it to a pinpoint and given it a taste for mud and stuck it down a well or hid it under a stone, but that creature will live on if it can. so fingerbone, which despite all its difficultes sometimes seemed pleasant and ordinary, would value itelf, too, and live on if and as it could. so every wanderer whose presence suggested it might be as well to drift, or it could not matter much, was met with something that seemed at first sight a moral reaction, since morality is a check upon the strongest temptations."

marilynne robinson
'housekeeping'

Bram says

I might as well cut to the chase here: this book was a pretty significant and unexpected disappointment for me. *Housekeeping* falls into one of my favorite literary sub-genres: mostly plotless, character-driven novels (e.g. *To the Lighthouse*, *In Search of Lost Time*). I'd seen the Pen/Faulkner Award, the "best of" status among recent American books voted on by “writers, critics, editors and other literary sages” (http://www.nytimes.com/ref/books/fict...), and the high ratings from friends with impeccable taste. But while reading, my emotions were never really aroused, and I feel that Robinson’s flirtations with profundity remain just that, occasionally failing to ring true at all.

My requirements for this sub-genre are few but demanding. I'll go ahead and split them into three groups, although all three bleed together: 1) I need to *feel* something at some point; 2) the prose should be exceptional in some way, which for me is actually very much tied into #1); 3) my understanding of humanity and myself should be expanded through contact with the characters and their minds.

This book failed me to some degree on each of these points, which is not to say that I think this book isn't good or wouldn't fulfill all of these requirements and more for another reader. Regarding point 1, I felt strangely empty and uninvolved throughout, despite reading this under ideal conditions—long, unbroken stretches. It’s very difficult for me to analyze this lack of response, but I think it’s primarily tied to the prose and the characterization. I should be clear about this: the writing is good, even very good. Perhaps I’ve become spoiled or overly-influenced by Modernist stylists (Woolf!), but the prose is often plain, occasionally beautiful, and sometimes clunky in its strivings for transcendence. In the end, Robinson’s nondescript approach--and this is a very relative claim--didn’t capture my imagination.

Perhaps my greatest disappointment with the book, and this was a BIG surprise, was with the characterization. Robinson gathers everyone into two main groups, the conformists and the nonconformists, with whom we are meant to identify via Ruthie's narration. With the possible exception of Ruthie and Lucille’s grandmother, each character fits neatly into these two types. Can anyone who’s read the book tell me what the difference is, really, between Ruthie, Sylvie, and Helen? They each fall into a very specific outsider-by-nature category: drifters or transients with a strong connection to the past, a weak connection to the present, and a malaise that somehow seems a little too pleasant considering the ever-present specter of suicide. I felt as if I couldn't quite follow this specific idea of non-conformity, that it didn't feel true/real, and

that I couldn't really access or understand their lives, their desires, their concerns. We're gently directed to see Lucille as intolerant, as misled in her desire for a normal life and for friends. After stepping outside the fantasy of dreamy living contained within the book, however, I find her desires entirely reasonable and I think her concerns with her living situation are probably *more* than reasonable.

Now, one aspect of reviewing that's always annoyed me is when people complain about disliking characters or being unable to relate to them as a reason for disliking a book, when often the book is crafted to elicit such responses. Perhaps in the past I've been too judgmental in this respect. Or maybe the important thing is simply that the characters cause you to feel some emotion, any at all, and that you can feel these people to be real, multidimensional beings. I didn't get that from *Housekeeping*. I couldn't feel the pain that Ruthie may have been experiencing because I was never sure *what* she was feeling, no matter how grave the situation. The fallout from bad events and neutral events felt more or less the same; Sylvie and Ruthie's instincts felt foreign, removed, and with Sylvie in particular, borderline insane: the 'imaginary kids' storyline was a particularly forced attempt at profundity that struck me as silly and unrelatable. And my chief annoyance with Robinson is that she seemed bent on pushing me toward one limited character type and away from another when, if I'm forced to live in this dichotomous world she's created, I'd almost certainly choose the other path—the one of Lucille, the one that would lead me out of Fingerbone to the promise of Boston rather than to greasy diners, truck stops, and train cars. Robinson doesn't exactly romanticize the latter type of living, but it's still portrayed as the preferable way of leaving a trapped existence.

When I say that I have limited access to these characters and this world, and that it ultimately felt untrue, here's what I mean (this is Ruthie in the final pages of the book): *I have never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming. I know my life would be much different if I could ever say, This I have learned from my senses, while that I have merely imagined.* Really? It's character revelations and discoveries like this that pepper the book, and for each one that I could say 'Yes, I get this, I'm with you,' there were two or three like that quote above where I just couldn't grasp the experience or couldn't relate to the introspection. For me, that ring of truthiness was missing.

It's tempting to view this story broadly and crudely. We see the decay that occurs when one stays in the same place—the same small, sleepy, petty town. Ruthie must, at some point, become active and move on toward something different or face troubling consequences. Yet a similar impetus drives Lucille, the conformist. What are we to make of this? Is the point that different personalities have different paths, and these shouldn't be limited or overly-determined by society? Why is Lucille placed in a negative light when the choice that faces both sisters--whether to stick with family, the past, decay--presents so many difficulties? Perhaps I expected the wrong things from this book, and I would've been better off by just letting it float by without over-considering some of these themes and meanings. And yet, awards and reputation aside, *Housekeeping* often does 'ask' to be taken seriously within the text itself. I'm missing something.
