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Marilynne Robinson: 02-23-1989

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My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother Mrs. Sylvia Foster and when she died, of her sisters in law Mrs Lily, and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter Mrs Sylvia Fisher. Through all these generations of elders we lived in one house, my grandmother's house, built for her by her husband Edmund Foster, an employee of the railroad, who escaped this world years before I entered it. It was he who put us down in this unlikely place he had grown up in the Middle West in a house dug out of the ground with windows just earth level and just at eye level so that from without the house was a mere mound. No more a human stronghold than a grave and from within the perfect horizontality of the world in that place foreshortened the view so severely that the horizon seemed to circumscribe the sod house and nothing more. So my grandfather began to read what he could find of travel literature journals of expeditions to the mountains of Africa to the Alps the Andes the Himalayas the Rockies. He bought a box of colors and copied a magazine lithograph of a Japanese painting of Fujiyama he painted many more mountains none of them identifiable if any of them were real. They were all suave cones or mounds single or in heaps or clusters green brown or white depending on the season but always snow capped these caps being pink white or gold depending on the time of day.

In one large painting he had put a bell shaped mountain in the very foreground and covered it with meticulously painted trees each of which stood out at right angles to the ground where it grew exactly as the nap stands out on a folded flesh Every tree a bore bright fruit and showy birds nested in the boughs and every fruit and bird was plumb with the warp in the earth. Oversized beasts spotted and striped could be seen running unimpeded up the right side and unhastened down the left. Whether the genius of this painting was ignorance or fancy I never could decide.

Brockport Writers Forum in its exclusive and continuing series of discussions with leading literary contemporaries presents the writing of Marilynne Robinson.

Now, for the Writer's Forum here is Stan Sanvel Rubin, director. Thank you and welcome to the Writer's Forum. Our guest today Marilynne Robinson is a fourth generation Idahoan who was educated at Brown University and lives in Northampton Massachusetts. Her extraordinary first novel Housekeeping was published in 1981 by Farrar Straus and Giroux and serialized in Harper's magazine that same year. The paperback edition from Bantam Books has gone through many editions, many printings and the novel has received extraordinary praise from critics and writers. Marilynne Robinson's second book, Mother Country, is forthcoming in June from Farrar Straus. Marilynne, it's a pleasure to have you here with us. Thank you.

I'm a great admirer of both the book and the Bill Forsyth feature film that was made from it last year which we've screened here on campus prior to your visit. I'd like to begin by going to back to the passage you read which is a very opening of Housekeeping and the narrator Ruth introduces herself to us. I wonder if you'd say something about how you came to this voice of Ruth. Is this the first discovery you made in creating the novel?

Did you know it was going to be narrated by one of the sisters?
Well when I- the novel actually was generated out of other kinds of writing that I did that. [The] writing that wasn't really undertaken with one novel in mind - one coherent work - in mind. I was interested in certain kinds of metaphors and I wrote passages that that are in the beginning of the book that were for me sort of like pieces of poetry and prose poems. One of them being the scene where the grandmother is hanging out laundry and the description of the different layers of the lake and so on. Things that were sort of recreations for me of things that I remembered from my childhood.

Then when I wrote those just because I was writing a dissertation at the time and I wanted to be sure that I could still create a metaphor if I really wanted to do it. When I finished the dissertation and I began looking at the things that I'd written and realized how coherent they seemed to me how much they seemed to imply a world you know. Then other things began to fall into place.

The reason for the narrator Ruth - I wanted to create a narrator that I considered to be totally compassionate. The name Ruth for me means compassion you know I mean so that when she identifies herself at the beginning she sort of declaring her vision. That sounds like a literary critic would say it. It's embarrassing, but it's true. I can't get past my training I suppose.

Do you identify, did you in the writing identify with her in some way more than that Lucille or Sylvie?

Well I identified with her in the sense that when you say “I”, when you create as a sort of a person who stands in for yourself, there's a certain kind of bond there that you don't have with any other kind of character.

I feel I felt close to them all. I really did and I wanted to create a kind of situation that was not resolvable into in terms of being understood as who's right, who's wrong, or who's the villain, who's insensitive and all that sort of thing. I wanted to create a situation where everyone was given the do of his, or her I should say, perspective.

The novel really focuses on this extraordinary non-conformist character Sylvie who ends up raising, sort of falls into, the attempt to raise her dead sister's two daughters Lucille and Ruth, the narrator. Ruth who narrates follows one path in the course of the novel, and her sister who has really constituted her whole world in a way to this point. Once Sylvie comes the sister Lucille or really reacts differently reacts against Sylvie while Ruth is drawn to Sylvie. I wonder if you could answer perhaps a difficult question to express, that is whether this is something you've found in the process of writing, or if you knew this is the way it was going to go, before you began the process?

No, I always I try very hard not to bring any ideas to my writing from outside. I try to do all my thinking about my writing while I'm writing. I find that I'm much more tough minded and critical and so on if I actually have my pen in hand, if I'm actually trying to find the words to say what I'm thinking.

So the two sisters weren't in a sense, metaphors that you had thought out in advance but it was just the process of writing?

Exactly exactly.

Because it has that feel in reading it. I wonder if you could talk a little bit more specifically about the development, the actual writing of this book. How long did it take you, and when did you really, if not from
the first were you really fired with a sense that you had something really going?
Well I, from the time that I started writing on it full time and took fourteen or fifteen months to finish. It was that it was very quickly by my standards I mean I realize now that that's very fast writing for me to have been doing. It was written under sort of odd circumstances because after I finished writing my dissertation, my husband and I lived in France for a year, where we taught at a university. We were out in the countryside, the university was characteristically on strike that year so we had worlds of time. We were living in a house in the country and there were all sorts of little French children around who had never seen Americans before and thought we were fascinating. They would stand at the windows and knock on the windows to get our attention. The only way that I could have privacy to write in quiet was to close the shutters, which made the room that I worked in completely dark. I spent months in a very dark room with a lamp on in the middle of France reconstructing Idaho.
The flood actually was drawn on the flood of the Loire River where we went in the middle of the winter that year to see the chateau and I spent all my time mucking around looking at frozen water and floods and [laughter].
Water is a central image and theme and concern in the book. Sylvie appears to be of water she has the ability to float on the surface and to be aware of the depths. There is in the book an occurrence that an entire train has in the past of this town Fingerbone, gone into that frozen lake and everyone has perished. They're down there, the bodies of the past and Sylvie can quite literally float on the surface and dip her hand into that water knowing that the dead are there, and seem to take to comfort in it. She really is associated with water. Would you say something about your sense of the of the elements in the book, of this kind of imagery? There is such a consistent pattern, the flood, the lake, etc, etc.
Well I think I mean I think that I owe this to 19th century American writing which I think is the most interesting prose that's ever been written really. There's a relationship between metaphor, you know between the way that people see the world and the symbolic significance is that thing physical things in the world take on for them, that the act of doing that simulates somehow the actual place of consciousness in the world you know. The illusion of otherness is really very false. I mean that here is consciousness and here is the world. The idea that these things are separate from each other is false. It seems to me that when you're using metaphor ambitiously, aggressively like people like Hermann Melville did, that what you're doing is simply making very vivid the fact that the world and the mind of simultaneous things. I think that that Sylvie for me epitomizes that in a way, that the invasion of the world with the spiritual and of the spiritual with the world. And that death, submersion, loss and all that sort of thing seem to me in a way to function like the unarticulated aspects of consciousness and so on. Nothing really is lost it only passes into an inaccessible form that is relatively less inaccessible to some people than to others. She is accessible to Sylvie and becomes accessible to Ruthie. [Yes.] But Lucille turns away from it or just isn't capable of realizing it? She turns away from it and I think that that she realizes as many people do. Many people I think choose consciously not to understand, what they could understand, about the world because the implications of it are so
unsettling. They minimize the importance of the kinds of things that are tangible and manageable and so on you know. I think that's just true of lots of people that they know at a certain level that the world is much more numinous and suggestive than they are, than they want to really have to deal with. So they sort of huddle around the fire and it's not really a dishonest choice or an ill-considered choice or anything like that. It's more like a sort of emotional orientation toward what's visible and palpable and away from what one is not.

You feel it verges much more recognizably in some sense, as an adolescent, toward the conformity with the social order of Fingerbone, this little Idaho town. Dressing up, and doing her hair and finally moving out moving away from her sister and Sylvie. This obviously is the other half of the picture that conformity and the desire for security and Sylvie violates that. If she's going to violate that in a place like Fingerbone, I guess she can't live in any town, right, anywhere on the earth? What does it mean to drift, to do that kind of drifting that Sylvie does? She says to really near the end drifting isn't so bad, something to that effect, and you'll like it but Ruthie says near the end, we're not travelers. You're making a distinction between traveling and drifting. I wonder if you would discuss that a little? Well drifting is the choice not to have anything, basically. People like Ishmael, or the persona of it's assumed by Henry David Thoreau, evolving, and so on. Those are people who in a certain sense choose to have nothing as a form of liberation of themselves. Emily Dickinson did the same thing and so did Walt Whitman. People that chose to create themselves or understand themselves in terms that are not in any degree dependent on tangible status or success or anything. Things like that are supposedly characteristic of this culture. I think that's really an unfair characterization of it. The idea that we actually do attach such life and death significance to success - that's the term in which it's most ordinarily put. We have a huge actual sort of folk and literary mythology of people who really cut away from that altogether and are totally dependent on what they can generate out of themselves for their identities and I think that that's a very appealing idea to me. It is what Sylvie is to me. And granted, it makes a strange and tenuous personality but it's still a fully legitimate comment on [laughter].

One of the things, again, in that opening passage you read was the grandfather starting this all, and the sense of generations that is in the book that a trait of say wanderlust or whatever from one generation will come out in another and the kind of way that roles are traded off from generation to generation. I wonder if you could discuss that for a moment?

Well I think it's a kind of thing that tends to self-perpetuate. When I was growing up, Idaho was very thinly populated. It still is, as a matter of fact. But, it was also much less integrated into the sort of main economy than it is now, even to the extent that it is now. But in those days, it looked often like an encampment. The people who came there didn't have a terrible attachment to houses and towns and things like that. Otherwise they would never have left. When they got where they were going, it was usually because they liked the look of the place. They liked the woods and all that sort of thing. They had very little interest in recreating towns like the ones they had left. So everything looked sort of temporary and absent minded and stuck together just to make it through the next winter.
And in that setting there's an enormous poignancy in the shelters that people do make for themselves. In the comforts they make for themselves, because you realize how fragile these things are over against wilderness. And at the same time, you feel always the world beyond it. You know the town just exists almost apologetically. It's only there because it has to be. You know in the real center of everything is the lake or the woods or whatever. And so you're always aware of them as larger personae, larger presences. So in a sense the people that were drifters in the first place did not create sheltered places when they when they ended up wherever they ended up. So they did not acculturate the people in other generations to that kind of attachment, either.

OK. The aunts are doomed in their attempt to raise the girls. Right! [laughter] You speak of Idaho from your obviously from your memory and personal experience. Is Fingerbone actually a place as it seems to be that you really know? You drew on a specific community? There's a lake and a bridge and mountains, people. There's a town called Sandpoint, which is where my family actually has usually lived. Though I myself didn't live there very much at all. It has a very long lake, very large it was only plumbed in the Second World War. You know it's very deep and glacial and cold. It has a railroad bridge that's gone across it for a long, long time. It's quite an accurate reconstruction of that particular place, physically. People who are from there, know they recognize that they know what places I'm talking that about. The town as much as is drawn in a way that emphasizes my impression of it as a tenuous thing.

Is there in fact a real legendary, the same type train wreck associated with the town or with your own past knowledge of Idaho or is there a character like Sylvie in your own past? Well, Sylvie, no. She's made of bits of people, bits of myself, no doubt - tendencies that I see in people, timbers that I sense in people. But the train wreck, that's one of those things that are very strange. There was a train wreck but I didn't know there was a train wreck. There was a flood and I didn't know there was a flood, either. I had none of these things would ever have come up except that when the film was being made they did research in the newspaper archives because they thought that I was also writing authentic local history. They found out all sorts of things that I didn't know about when I wrote it. One of the things that's very strange is that my brother told me that when he was home he was looking up the newspaper archives. I seem to have kind of set off a little enthusiasm for that. He looked at my great grandmother's obituary. It turned out that when she had settled there they were on one side of the lake and she felt that they should actually settle on the other side of the lake, that it was a better place to be. So she took my grandfather, who was an infant, and walked across the railroad bridge and claimed land on the other side of the lake. I had no idea. I never knew that until ten years after the book.

That is a central point in the novel, a kind of signal action was they walk across the bridge and they're gone. In fact, one of the themes in the novel, and I shouldn't say themes. But one of the recurring kinds of strands in the novel is the inability to differentiate sense from fact, from the imagination, dream from fact. And the woods for Sylvie are haunted. There are there are children out there somewhere there is a past. I wonder if you'd say something about this? Is this something you were conscious of at work in the novel?
Well in a way what I was interested in invoking the sense of being in the deep woods. One of the things that was a sort of privilege of my childhood is that often my brother and I, or I by myself, would go out in woods that were really virgin woods. My father's parents had a homestead that was just way out in the forest. When you're there, one of the strongest feeling I think of being in the woods like that is the feeling of the presences around you. I mean either the trees or some feeling of being surrounded or watched. It comes into your mind. Everyone who reads that, who has had that experience, recognizes what I'm talking about. In a way, I felt that I wasn't creating something, that I wasn't inventing something. I was actually reproducing a sort of function of consciousness that I felt very strongly was part of the experience that people had there. I mean in those funny little towns the people really went to them to be away from other people. They really sought out emptiness and wilderness. When they were there they lived in it to the extent that they could. So that the kind of emotional quality of life in that place is very much colored by those kinds of experiences. It's why people are there. Why they don't leave, why they can't imagine being anywhere else. One of the things I think that that was behind my writing the novel was that when I went East to college, I realized that for many people who had seen that part of the world at all, it just seemed like an empty inhuman landscape. Where for me it seemed just saturated with emotional coloration and so on. I wanted to evoke that you know.

And you certainly have. One of the comments that runs through the praise that writers are given this book is that it's a dreamlike quality of the writing. It's really Ruthie's growing consciousness of these things. She even reflects on this fact that she can't tell the difference where dream ends and fact begins. The language of the book is extraordinary and it is part of this. It is really lyrical and beautiful it is praised as one of the most beautifully written novels, let alone first novels in many years. I think it certainly is. I wonder you have strong feelings about language and the way it can function and perhaps does function in concurrent fiction. But why don't you say something about your feeling for language as a fiction writer?

Language I think is just dazzling. It's the repository of the most amazing things and very beautiful. I think that the development of language is always channeled by very fine perceptions that people make on a sort of absent-minded daily basis about what a word sounds like. The amazing retentiveness of language with words that are so precise in their meaning that you might use them once every three years you know nevertheless remain in the language completely charged with the original meaning that they had. When I was teaching in France one of the things that's funny to teach is that the amazing precision of English verbs. You know wobble is different from bobble and that sort of thing you know. The fact that you can. Behaviors of light, we have many many words in English for how light acts, whereas French has only a couple. And the incredible precision with which you say that something glitters or it glimmers or it gleams or it shines, and all of these things mean different things. Language can just be charged with such incredible precision and such suggestiveness and retain these things over generations of time. There are not many things in the world that you can just say are brilliant in their workings and consistently brilliant. But language is somehow it's an incredibly efficient preserver of perception and aesthetic activeness and it's capable of anything.
It preserves the past, too and the [inaudible] for sure. I wanna ask you this. Do you think that the urge for simple language, perhaps sometimes simple-minded language, is also a part of American literature? The drive always to get away from the fancy word? I don't really think so. I really don't think so. When you look at people like Melville and so on. They used enormously elaborate sermon structures and highly developed theological philosophical styles of meditation. They characteristically used huge vocabularies. So did Walt Whitman. And they used self-consciously literary styles like Whitman's biblical style of writing which people completely misunderstand if they imagine that it's free verse in the sense of something he invented without literary precedence. It's a new thing and I think that it comes out of a misreading of Hemingway. God rest his soul. Hemingway, I think was a marvelous writer. I mean he's bad sometimes, but then so is everyone. But what he did was pare language down so that you became aware of the incredible potency of simple words, which is a perfectly fine thing to do. But that he makes simple language extremely resonant. That is a different thing from simply writing some kind of simple speak you know which was not his project at all. I think he would be very discouraged to realize that that's the effect that he seems to have had. I am very much in agreement with that and he has been misread. But that that reflects a current bias does it not, perhaps that our writing students are getting in terms of the way to write is a very simple and..? No question about it, no question about it. And I think it's sad that you can go anywhere on the planet and find people making complex use of language, but you have to come to an American writing class to find them [laughter] making simple use of language. Aborigines and Eskimos have thousands of moods and voices and verb forms and so on and use them fluently and without any apology whatever. Here we are, I don't know, but it seems like a foolish mistake. If what is lost is not simply the vocabulary of the language, which you are enriching, in terms of fiction. But it's maybe the capacity to perceive these things or to feel these things that the language contains that is really sad and perhaps something about our condition. We're very very close to the end of this unfortunately abbreviated interview. I must quickly ask you about the film. The Scottish director, Bill Forsyth made a really interesting cinematic version of your novel. He clearly seems to have loved the novel. Could you say something briefly about how the that came to be? Did he approach you? And also, what you thought of the film effort? Well I love the film. I think it's a wonderful film. I think I've been very fortunate. He did call me and approach me about making the film he does these things on his own you know, he decides what he wants to do and puts the projects together himself. This is the first film he made that he didn't actually write from the beginning, where he actually adapted somebody else's work. No one thought that this would be commercially viable as a project. He had incredible amount of difficulty financing the film at the beginning. He was hanging on by his fingernails clear into the beginning of the early filming. He spent an enormous amount of his own time putting it together and I've always felt very grateful that he felt it worth his time to make that kind of sacrifice, really when he could have been of doing other kinds of work but I'm sure he would have felt more.
He did a lovely job because it's almost impossible certainly to catch the images and nuance of such a beautifully written work of literature, and he did I think a very good job of rendering it visually. I think so too. And I'll commend that as well as this brilliant book to any viewers. Thank you. Thank you for talking with us I wish we had been able to discuss your forthcoming book which is about the really ecological and spiritual things in Britain from your year there. We'll look forward to it. Thank you Marilynne Robinson. Thank you.

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