

PROLOGUE

The Difficult Question of What Family Is About

Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* is a story about two sisters, Ruth and Lucille, who from a young age experience a quite complex family life.¹ We become acquainted with them through the story Ruth narrates about their childhood. This is how the book opens:

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, Misses 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. (3)

Ruth, the main character of the novel and its first-person narrator, introduces herself to the reader by referring to family members of her own generation and previous ones and to the house she shared with them. She calls them by their names – in the case of the ladies accompanied by a formal title, Mrs or Ms – while the 'unlikely place' where the house is built is not named. This may give the impression that family ties with 'generations of elders' are the most obvious facts to refer to when you start telling others about yourself. It is clear, however, that these family members are not simply enumerated like the facts of life, without conscious thought. Ruth clearly makes a selection in the members she mentions and adds specific facts to the mentioning of the different members in their family positions.

The absence of many of the persons to whom Ruth refers to introduce herself is striking: they have 'died', 'fled' or 'escaped this world'. The most obvious family members she refers to, however, are even more fundamentally absent: Ruth does not say anything at all about her parents in these first lines. They are absent from this first enumeration of relevant family

¹ Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (1980; republ. London: Faber & Faber, 2005). The following numbers in the main text refer to pages in this edition of the book.

members. It may be because she, apparently, did not grow up with them. They are not mentioned in the second place either. Ruth first focusses on a family member who was also absent as he died long before she was born: her grandfather Edmund Foster. He had worked his whole life for the railroad. The railroad was also the cause of his untimely death. In a 'spectacular derailment' (5) on a moonless night, the train he was travelling on slid off the rails. It was spectacular because the train ran on the very long bridge over the lake bordering Fingerbone, where Foster lived.

It is not just the spectacular character of the derailment that makes Ruth imagine her grandfather in such a forceful way. It is the impact his untimely death in the lake has had on the entire family. She introduces her grandmother from this perspective as 'a religious woman', 'though she never spoke of it, and no doubt seldom thought of it' (9). Ruth's grandmother regards life as an easy road to travel, with a destination where 'everything one had ever lost or put aside' (10) would be found again, including her husband. They would 'meet and take up their lives again, without the worry of money, in a milder climate' and hopefully 'a little more stability and common sense'.

Ruth's grandfather had periods of absent-mindedness and also unexpected literal absence. Her grandmother hoped that this would change when they reunited, but she 'did not set her heart on such a substantial change' and 'became as good a widow as she had been a wife'. For five 'serene, eventless years' (13), the three teenage daughters 'hover around' their mother, continuously touching, watching and following her graceful presence, until, suddenly, one after the other, they all leave home within six months. Molly goes to work for a missionary society and Helen and Sylvie marry men they did not even introduce to their mother first.

Ruth's introductory story is not just about the 'generation of elders' as such, however, in their presence and absence. The story is made concrete by focussing on how the fate of the Foster family is interwoven with the presence of the unnamed lake bordering Fingerbone. Helen, Ruth's mother, drowns in the same lake which had swallowed up the train in which her father was travelling. When Ruth and Lucille are still young children, Helen sails in a borrowed car 'from the top of a cliff named Whiskey Rock into the blackest depth of the lake' (22). A search is made for her body, but it is never found. Neither was Grandfather Foster's.

As a result, not just the lake but even water has become associated with the unnatural deaths within the family. Ruth explains: 'I cannot taste a cup of water but I recall that the eye of the lake is my grandfather's, and that the lake's heavy, blind, encumbering waters composed my mother's limbs and

weighed her garments and stopped her breath and stopped her sight' (193–4). The lake is omnipresent in the life of the people of Fingerbone as well. Every spring the town floods – although not up to the house built by Ruth's grandfather, which is in a higher part of the town. As a result of the flooding there is water everywhere, always.

Lucille and Ruth spend a lot of their time together at the lakeside. So does their aunt, Sylvie Fisher, who eventually takes care of them after their grandmother has died. Sylvie's absent-mindedness and occasional disappearing recall her father's conduct. Given their mother's fate, Sylvie's presence at the lake is a sinister one for Ruth and Lucille with constant overtones of a threatening suicide.

The omnipresence of the lake means the omnipresence of the deceased family members. They are present not just in memories or histories but, through the water and the lake, in a physical kind of way as well. Ruth lives with them as if they are still there. The living presence of other family members also often reminds her of the deceased. She shares their thoughts and shares her thoughts with them. Several times, she imagines scenes of a complete, reunited family – which recalls her grandmother's religious views of being reunited with her husband. The scenes are narrated as if the deceased are just as realistically present as the living.

As her sister, Lucille seems the one most likely to be Ruth's fellow traveller for better or for worse. For a long time, they are 'together, always and everywhere' (109). After the death of their mother, the sisters are cared for by their grandmother. When she dies after five years because of old age, her two elderly unmarried sisters-in-law, Lily and Nona Foster, arrive. It is clear from the start, however, that they are unfit for housekeeping. Upon their arrival, they already think that Helen's sister, Sylvie, might make a better guardian. Sylvie, however, never again contacted any family member after she left home to marry. Her name was omitted from her mother's will, and she has not even heard about her mother's death. Then, unexpectedly, Sylvie herself sends a letter to Fingerbone giving her address. Lily and Nona get in touch with her and she arrives. She does not seem a reliable mother figure or capable of housekeeping, let alone raising two teenage girls; she looks more like a transient, a drifter. Everybody is relieved, though, and Sylvie stays.

Unfortunately, the ominous signs soon prove accurate. Sylvie is completely absent-minded and hardly speaks to her foster daughters. The house becomes a mess, full of empty cans and wastepaper. The lights are always turned off. Most of the time Sylvie is out and Ruth and Lucille are constantly aware of the threat of her leaving permanently. The girls start to

skip school and spend their days at the lake for months on end, without Sylvie noticing.

Then things start to change. Lucille becomes annoyed at the situation at home. She starts wearing better clothes and no longer wants to be seen with Ruth. Finally, she decides to leave home and live with one of her teachers. From this moment on, the relationship between Ruth and Sylvie changes. They talk more. Sylvie takes Ruth on a trip and shows her a personal secret, a deserted house in a valley on a nearby desert island where she has apparently spent much of her time.

In the meantime, Lucille's departure has further aroused the awareness of the citizens of Fingerbone and has alarmed them as to what is going on in the Fosters' house. The sheriff arrives and announces that a complaint has been lodged against Sylvie for turning Ruth into a transient. At this point, Ruth's way of narrating the story suddenly changes. She engages in several meta-reflections on the evil of broken families and, on the other hand, on the impossibility of truly breaking these relationships (e.g., 176, 185–6, 190, 194).

It gradually comes to light that Ruth and Sylvie belong together, although this is not stated explicitly. In a half-hearted attempt to clean the house as the start of a new life, they set it on fire and flee just before the hearing on Sylvie's custody of Ruth. At night, they walk across the long railroad bridge that spans the lake. 'The terrors of the crossing were considerable' (215). The walk takes the 'whole black night' (216). Ruth says the crossing changes her. Something happens during the crossing when the wind rises so much that they have to cling to the bridge. It seems they hear 'some sound too loud to be heard, some word so true we did not understand it, but merely felt it pour through our nerves like darkness or water' (215).

Sylvie and Ruth stay together, living as transients. The book does not end by painting their life together, however. We find Ruth again day-dreaming, imagining Lucille: Lucille living in the restored Foster house at Fingerbone; Lucille living elsewhere, making a favourable impression by her determinedness; Lucille married; again Lucille waiting in their family house 'in a fury of righteousness, cleansing and polishing, all these years', dreaming that Sylvie and Ruth return 'talking together in words she cannot understand' (217); Lucille living there with 'pretty daughters' and Sylvie and Ruth sneaking into the house, making it into the old mess and 'leaving behind a strong smell of lake water' (218); or, finally, well-dressed Lucille in Boston, waiting in a restaurant for a friend.

Ruth then enumerates all family members as 'not there': Sylvie and herself, her mother, her grandmother and grandfather. 'We are nowhere in Boston. However Lucille may look, she will never find us there, or any trace or sign' (218–19). The final line is also for Lucille. Nobody will notice that her thoughts are 'thronged by our absence'; 'she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie'.

Housekeeping may be characterised as a book about family, but not in the sense that family is a topic the characters often explicitly refer to or reflect upon. Neither is it clear what family should mean or be. What it might mean is revealed not so much in Ruth's reflections on family at a metalevel but in the ways these family members act towards each other, share their lives, figure in each other's thoughts or daydreams. The theme of family forces itself most emphatically on the reader in the striking self-evidence with which the characters act upon family ties. Family means something for them, is central to their feeling, acting, and thinking. The ways in which they shape their togetherness differ in crucial ways and are anything but unproblematic, however. Thus, the novel rather gives rise to the open question of what family may be or should be than answers it.

When one starts pondering this open question, the story does give challenging suggestions for an answer. The first lines of the book, as we saw, in which Ruth self-evidently refers to family members to introduce herself, may illustrate the obviousness that family seems to evince. In their brevity, moreover, these lines point out that family is about relationships that are somehow given and imply dependence. Here, the relationships are about care for children. The call to care is not heard explicitly in the story, however, nor are the thoughts on whether one should respond. The relation of dependence is somehow obvious; the care it implies seems a given. When your daughter commits suicide, you raise her children. When you die, your sisters-in-law are appointed as guardians. When they flee, another daughter is pressed to assume custody.

This is particularly striking in the case of the custody after their grandmother's death. Ruth and Lucille do not seem to have any living relationship with their caretakers Lily and Nona Foster when they become their guardians. Nevertheless, these elderly women, who do not have any children themselves, apparently experience as self-evident the call to care for their nieces, the grandchildren of their deceased brother, and answer it. So does Aunt Sylvie, who is equally unfamiliar with children in general and with her nieces in particular.

The apparent self-evidence of taking on these caring relations on the basis of family ties contrasts, however, with the actual shape this care takes.

The great-aunts Lily and Nona Foster accept custody over Ruth and Lucille hesitantly and leave after some time. Aunt Sylvie, however, who has never had any contact with her family since she left home to get married, does stay with the girls. Her staying, however, is characterised by her absence, and Lucille leaves as a result. Does Lucille then break the family tie like her mother did? Ruth does not think about it in those terms. She continues to relate to her sister in her imagination, even after she has practically lost all contact with her.

Even from this short impression, it is clear Ruth's story is told in a way that somehow highlights the family tie. The relationships that matter are all family relations. The only important tie with an outsider, the teacher with whom Lucille eventually chooses to live, is not given clear shape. Thus, the story makes one think about what a family is. Family is depicted as lives that are interwoven. Often, this intertwinement does not come to light or is not given any attention until it is under pressure. This is the pressure of a mother who commits suicide, a grandmother who takes her place and is herself a widow and so on. Family may suddenly become visible as a given tie that implies certain responsibilities and actions, even a change in one's life as in the case of the guardianship of the aunts.

What is the nature of this family tie that it becomes the basis for such radical decisions? What is the rationale behind granting the custody of two teenage sisters to two elderly women who are perfect strangers to them or to a middle-aged woman who has never lived a life like that, not even lived in a house? And – to point to a different aspect – why is the intertwinement of family members' lives of such a kind that it shapes who you are even if you have never met these persons, like Ruth and her grandfather? The story of the Foster family is anything but a success story. It makes one wonder whether this somehow given, self-evident responsibility for family members is a good thing or just an idealistic misconception. Are family members related for better or for worse? What is the value of family if it is marked so emphatically by death, absence, abandonment and neglect? In brief, *Housekeeping* confronts its readers with the question of what family might and should mean in a moral sense.

The story also reveals the difficulty of speaking in general about what family means. The book is all about women, women who are members of a family. What is it that they share? This question cannot be answered in general because they all give their own interpretations of it, give shape to the family in completely different ways. One may say that they share a past marked by the deadly accidents in the lake. They share a community. Ruth speaks about her mother with Sylvie and Lucille. They share memories, like

those of the months spent by the sisters at the lake. They share special moments like visiting the island. They share daily life in all its ordinariness. Ruth remarks about this sharing:

Sylvie did not want to lose me . . . She did not wish to remember me. She much preferred my simple, ordinary presence, silent and ungainly though I might be. For she could regard me without strong emotion – a familiar shape, a familiar fact, a familiar silence. She could forget I was in the room. She could speak to herself, or to someone in her thought . . . even while I sat beside her – this was the measure of our intimacy, that she gave almost no thought at all. But if she lost me, I would become extraordinary by my vanishing. (195)

The connection between Ruth and Sylvie finally turns out to be one they do not want to lose. They give shape to it by their ordinary presence to each other, act as they are in each other's daily presence. Again, it is a largely absent presence. This is precisely the presence Lucille cannot stand.

Presenting *Housekeeping* as a book that gives rise to the question of what family is about does not mean claiming that this is the best perspective to understand it. Rather, as soon as one starts viewing the story from this perspective, one starts thinking about alternative perspectives that seem just as appropriate, like the spatial notions of the house and the lake or the existential ones of coping with death, absence or loneliness, of mourning and remembering, or about the fact that all the characters are women.

Robinson herself says in a 1994 interview about the book and its reception that she did not write it with the intention to publish it but was just 'trying to write a book that I would want to read'.² The things she was aware of when writing it were that the story was situated in her home county in the Northwest and was related to her own family in which women were 'enormously important' and 'powerful figures' (233). In another, earlier interview she describes it as a discovery ('My goodness sakes!') which occurred soon after she started writing the novel, that it was a novel with only female characters.³

The grandfather had died in the first scene with the train falling from the bridge. As for other male characters she had tried out in the novel, she 'didn't feel they were especially *doing* anything for the novel'. In this interview Robinson doesn't explicitly mention 'family' as the big theme.

² Thomas Schaub and Marilynne Robinson, 'An Interview with Marilynne Robinson', *Contemporary Literature* 35/2 (1994): 231–51, at 232.

³ Sanford Pinsker, 'Marilynne Robinson', in *Conversations with Contemporary American Writers*, Costerus, New Series, Vol. 50 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), 118–27, at 121–2.

She does refer to nurturing, indecipherable ‘clustering together’ and ‘mysterious manifestations’ of ordered connections:

What I’m interested in is the tendency of people, on the one hand, to nurture one another and, on the other, an understanding of how complex that idea is. I think of families, or even towns, as things that cluster together for reasons we don’t know and by methods we can’t judge. In the same way that things in the physical world are essentially mysterious manifestations of the tendency of things to come together and be orderly, our lives operate on similar principles. (121)

In reaction to a question on whether she is influenced by nineteenth-century American fiction in her depiction of ‘the rare kind of nurturing’ between the main characters Robinson admits her indebtedness to this literature, which, in her view, is ‘pretty obsessed with bonds’, mostly male ones. These bonds are ‘something that is elevated above the ordinary experience of life and that justifies everything. Perhaps that same kind of thing, in my version, is something I find very lovely and persuasive. No doubt I’ve been partly formed by it. I like especially the unspoken quality you get from these companion relationships’ (123).

Although *Housekeeping* cannot necessarily be called a book about family, it is noteworthy that this issue is emphatically discussed in the large field of secondary literature. It is said that ‘understanding the causes and effects of families shattered by the loss of parents or children is a major theme’ in the book which is elaborated by interweaving the family narrative with ‘allusions to myths, fairy tales, songs and poems’.⁴ Ruth is said to intuit at the end of the book when she visits Sylvie’s secret desert island that ‘family structures are as impermanent as any post and beam construction’.⁵ The final flight from Fingerbone is also interpreted as ‘risking everything for the sake of preserving’ what is of ‘higher priority’, that is, their ‘kinship with one another’.⁶

The book has been claimed by feminists because of the tension between conventions and alternative ways of living.⁷ It has been read as presenting a view of family as rooted in feelings and emotions and as such, a critique of

⁴ Julianne Fowler, *Family Narrative and Marilynne Robinson’s ‘Housekeeping’: Reading and Writing beyond Boundaries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 21–2.

⁵ Matthew Potts, ‘“The World Will Be Made Whole”: Love, Loss, and the Sacramental Imagination in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*’, *Christianity & Literature* 66/3 (2017): 482–99, at 486.

⁶ Martha Ravits, ‘Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*’, *American Literature* 61/4 (1989): 644–66, at 663.

⁷ Karen Kaivola, ‘The Pleasures and Perils of Merging: Female Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*’, *Contemporary Literature* 34/4 (1993): 670–90.

middle-class conventions. It has just as well been claimed by advocates of family values as propagating a view of family as rooted in blood ties secured by a legal system (673).

The latter debate does not just reveal the variety of interpretations of *Housekeeping* but reminds one of the delicate nature of discussing the subject of family as such. Family is a controversial topic via which the boundaries between conservative and progressive are drawn. The dominant perception is that family is a conservative topic; open-minded, non-bourgeois people do not seem eager to bring it up. It speaks for *Housekeeping* that the story resists too easy an appropriation by any of these camps. It is not a success story about familial resilience nor a plea for opening up traditional views on family or anything like that, but it does give rise to reflection on what family is about.

The question whether 'family' is a good perspective from which to interpret a literary work is not controversial just in the case of Robinson's *Housekeeping*. At present, 'family' is not exactly widely recognised as a relevant topic for high-quality literature. It is striking that 'family' is not an entry in most contemporary encyclopaedias, companions to or handbooks on literary fiction.⁸ The genre of the 'family novel' has the connotation of home-loving domesticity and therefore trivialness. Scholars who study it as a genre point out that their interest is all but shared and often explicitly renounced.⁹

The history of the genre is said to be of no interest anymore in English literature scholarship. There are hardly any studies on it. When the family novel is discussed as a genre it is often described in a pejorative sense as 'boring, predictable, lacking in depth, conservative, necessarily written in a realist style, portraying only stereotypical figures and roles, and merely good at depicting local color'.¹⁰ Its low standing is in part explained by its association in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with female authorship and by the confusion with family romances and so-called domestic literature.¹¹

It is often assumed that the genre is conservative in the sense that it seeks to present an ideal nuclear family life threatened by the decline of

⁸ For example, literature encyclopaedias by Cambridge and Oxford University Presses. Anna Berman makes the same observation as regards the entry 'family novel' ('The Family Novel (and Its Curious Disappearance)'), *Comparative Literature* 72/1 (2020): 1–18, at 1).

⁹ Berman, 'Family Novel', 1; Kerstin Dell. *The Family Novel in North America from Post-War to Post-Millennium: A Study in Genre*. Universität Trier (2005), <https://doi.org/10.25353/ubtr-xxxx-15a1-c8a9>.

¹⁰ Dell, *Family Novel*, 37. ¹¹ Dell, *Family Novel*, 7, 31; Berman, 'Family Novel', 9.

modernity. Literature that paints alternative forms of family life would thus not be associated so much with the term 'family'. Disputes about the idealised status of the nuclear family also find their ways to fiction literature – for example, in the way relationships between LGBTQ people are portrayed.¹² African-American novelists write on family to critique simple disqualifications of 'fatherless families'.¹³

What interests us about these different forms of family fiction and the debates among their interpreters is not so much a precise definition of this genre or its status, but rather the question that arose from our choice of starting with *Housekeeping*: Why call a story a narrative about family? In what sense may one say a story gives rise to the question what family might mean? In one of the rare articles that reflect on what a 'family novel' could mean, Robert Boyers, a scholar of English literature, tries to formulate an answer to this question:

In speaking of the family novel we speak not merely of a work the burden of which is to deal with the various members of some family. Such a work is likely to focus attention on one family member more or less at the expense of others, whether because the one character is superior by virtue of intelligence, capacity for self-conscious reflection, or flair for self-dramatization, or because the novelist wishes to make certain points about loneliness, the difficulty of achieving independence, or some such thing, which requires that he deliberately limit his focus. What I should like to examine is a literary phenomenon one of whose main objects is the illumination of social process, more specifically, the way certain novelists managed to show us how families grow, take shape, influence members, develop a momentum no one within that given family can control or even understand. That is to say, I am concerned with a novel for which the life of families is sufficiently interesting in itself not to be subsumed under some broader quest for the sources of alienation in society at large, for the key to the middle classes' loss of confidence, and so on.¹⁴

This formulation of what a family novel is about characterises it as focussed, not on the members, but on what they share. Family is not subsumed under some other theme like 'alienation' or 'loss of confidence', but addressed by taking its readers along in a process, a dynamic that is somehow specific to families. It is in the family that a 'momentum' develops beyond the control and understanding of the individual members.

¹² Kasia Boddy, 'Family', in *American Literature in Transition: 1990–2000*, ed. by Stephen J. Bur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 312–28, at 314–15.

¹³ Boddy, 'Family', 320; Dell, *Family Novel*, 210.

¹⁴ Robert Boyers, 'The Family Novel', *Salmagundi* 26 (1974): 3–25, at 3.

What is it that is specifically family-like in this momentum? Boyers' formulation reveals that it is hard to say in general what is specific about family, even when it characterises a literary genre. It is easier to say what it is not. Anyone who tries to indicate why a specific piece of fiction literature would count as 'family fiction' may have this experience. This is similar to the experience that resulted from becoming acquainted with the story of *Housekeeping* – that is, that of growing attentive to the question of what it is that connects family members – and to the difficulty of answering that question.

On the one hand, *Housekeeping* reveals family as a distinct sphere or aspect of life and, on the other, the novel makes one wonder what it is. Robinson seems to point to this ambiguity in the interview cited earlier when referring to the 'tendency of people to nurture one another' as both obvious and complex. Our 'clustering' together in some kind of order like that of family is 'for reasons we don't know and by methods we can't judge'. These are 'essentially mysterious manifestations' and of an 'unspoken quality'.¹⁵

We could have stated at the outset that this paradox of family means something while remaining difficult to say in general what it means. That may easily have been misunderstood as a trivial remark. For our study, it will turn out to be a crucial insight, however. This insight is better evoked indirectly, by first being confronted with the lived reality of family as expressed in literary or artistic works and then reflecting on it than by stating it directly on a metalevel of scholarly reflection. In Chapter 1, we will indicate how we think a constructive moral reflection on family can be elaborated starting from this paradoxical insight, and why such a reflection is urgent given current academic debates on family.

After formulating this outline, we will in each of the actual elaborations in the chapters start from a literary or artistic expression of what family might mean. By opening our study with *Housekeeping* we have thus, in a first, tentative mode, found answers to the question of what family is about, as well as, just as importantly, an awareness of how this question may arise and of the specific difficulty of giving shape to further analysis and understanding of being a family.

¹⁵ Pinsker, 'Marilynne Robinson', 121, 123.