

THE WORDY SHIPMATES

By Sarah Vowell
(Riverhead Books)
Reviewed by Wendy R. Walker

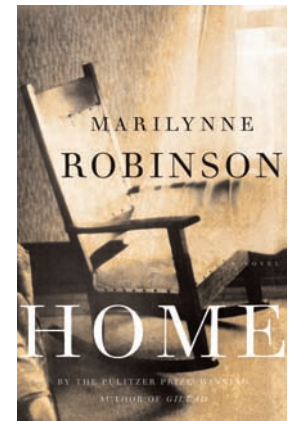
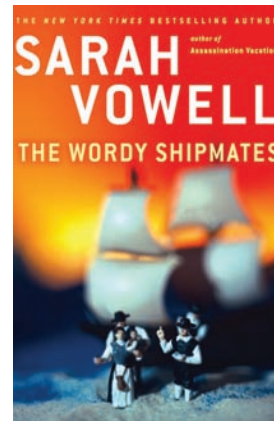
It's refreshing to see, in this current political climate, that there are still some Gen X-ers out there who are covertly patriotic. As many Americans prepare for the historic November election by tuning their TVs to Stephen Colbert or Jon Stewart (or CNN during commercials), one would be advised to take a look at what Sarah Vowell has to say. In her new book, *The Wordy Shipmates*, Vowell, who was deemed the "Madonna of Americana" by the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, confesses that her inspiration for writing this book in the first place came not just from her "fondness of sermons as literature," but because, in a post-9/11 New York, she found herself comforted by the words of John Winthrop.

And who, precisely, is John Winthrop? Rest assured, the erudite Ms. Vowell will enlighten you. In fact, she practically devotes this new book to him. Early on she explains that John Winthrop was the founder of a Puritan colony that sailed on the *Arabella* from England to Massachusetts in 1629, the year King Charles I dissolved the Puritan-friendly English Parliament. But unlike Nathaniel Philbrick's soporific account of the Mayflower Puritans, Vowell provides an inspirational account of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Specifically, she pulls from and dissects Winthrop's lesser-known sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," which was based on the biblical notion of "a city upon a hill" — as such, Winthrop's selling point to his followers was that the Native Americans were begging for the Puritans to come and save them. Vowell cleverly runs with this idea, pointing out that George W. Bush echoed this sentiment when he insisted that American forces would "free [Iraq's] people and defend the world from grave danger." And Dick Cheney, when speaking about the citizens of Baghdad on *Meet the Press*, declared, "I really do believe that we will be greeted as liberators."

So goes *The Wordy Shipmates*, a smart and funny book about the roots of the New World. Of course, what makes this book particularly worthwhile is Vowell's unrivaled sarcasm. For example, in pointing out just how little we Americans know about our own ancestors, she leans on the *Brady Bunch* episode where Greg Brady makes a film about the *Mayflower* Pilgrims and uses his family as actors. Vowell points out how many of us conjure up that episode upon hearing the word *Mayflower*.

You could (and most likely will) spend your autumn watching the debates and catching up on White House gossip. But when you tire of the pundits bantering on and on about Obama and McCain, turn no further than *The Wordy Shipmates*. After all, as Vowell clearly demonstrates, history does repeat itself. So why not return to early America in this passionate, brainy narrative that combines both popular culture and not so dreary colonial Puritans. I promise that you will laugh very hard — and learn a hell of a lot.

☺



HOME

By Marilynne Robinson
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
Reviewed by Michael Helke

The story of John Ames "Jack" Boughton, the wayward, dissolute son of a Presbyterian minister, figured strongly in *Gilead*, the novel that won Marilynne Robinson the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Jack Boughton appears again in *Home*, Robinson's latest. It is essentially the same story, only this time told from the perspective of family members. Those who are reading this story for the first time may be in a better position if they have not read *Gilead*, for the secrets disclosed in that book will hit the uninitiated with the full force of revelation this time around.

The book picks up with Jack's return, after 20 years away from home. Glory Boughton had herself returned some time ago to care for their father, the Reverend, now ancient, widowed and decrepit; his manner is one of forced ebullience, his speech so full of joy and exclamation points that his body can't match. Glory, ever the dutiful daughter, who "bites her tongue 20 times a day," wants to forgive but can't understand Jack. The Reverend, as ever, preaches forbearance, arguing that Glory has it backward: "We forgive so we can understand." But even he has resentments he must suppress, and may not live long enough to see resolved.

And so Robinson's narrative advances, through evasion, through feelings too painful to air, decorum kept for decorum's sake. Interspersed with the novel's sideways-forward momentum are Glory's memories of growing up an unacknowledged spectator of many episodes of quiet tumult, who thinks that if she runs the tape back enough times she might arrive at an understanding of why things turned out the way they did. Robinson foregrounds these scenes amid a bucolic setting, lovingly evoking a house suffused with family memories attendant in its many carefully arranged tchotchkes: a barn that once housed a mare and now shelters a neglected DeSoto, a garden ripe with fruit and vegetables that has been around for as long as any family member. *Gilead* doesn't seem that big a place to keep adding stories, but in Robinson's hands, this small town might at last stand as her very own Yoknapatawpha County.

☺