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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

A primordial landscape of mountains and cold, glacial waters made an indelible impression on Marilynne Robinson, who grew up in Sandpoint, Idaho, in the 1940s. Sandpoint's large and majestic Lake Pend Oreille was a source of childhood fascination and family tragedy for Robinson, whose maternal uncle drowned in its waters before she was born. As an undergraduate she studied American literature and religion at Pembroke College (Brown University). On a dare from her roommate, Robinson took a writing workshop with the postmodernist writer John Hawkes, who encouraged her to have confidence in the ornate language, complex sentences, and extended metaphors that characterize her writing style. She has often said that *Housekeeping* (1980) began as a collection of metaphors. Eventually, the lake of her childhood became a powerful central image in the novel.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD. Read the Reader's Guide biography of Robinson (pp. 5–6) and the interview excerpt (pp. 10–11). Students should take notes. Collectively review the key points of Robinson's biography. Ask students to share any questions or thoughts they will carry with them as they begin to read.

Writing Exercise

In the Reader's Guide interview, Robinson explains that many of the dramatic moments of her childhood involved the Idaho landscape, particularly the lake. "It's like the local spirit of the place," she explains, "and we spent a lot of time just hovering on the edges of it, looking at it and dipping into it." Ask the students to recall a place of discovery, experimentation, mystery, or wonder from their own childhoods, and to write a short essay describing this place and the thoughts and feelings it evokes. Some useful prompts might include: What drew you to this place? What about it intrigued, scared, or thrilled you? What did you learn there, and what remains a mystery?

Homework

Read Chapter 1 (pp. 3–28). Students should list the characters they encounter, and return to class prepared to discuss the key events of Ruth's family history, described in Chapter 1.