

## BOOK WARS

TWO MOVING TALES  
GO HEAD TO HEAD

## LILA VS NORA WEBSTER

*A pair of beautifully written, poignant novels about women coming to terms with their past*

## LILA

**Stylist's deputy production editor Amy Adams backs *Lila* by Marilynne Robinson**

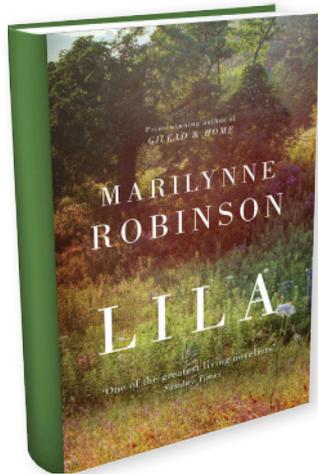
(Virago, £16.99), out now

"You are the only person in this world I want to have sitting here beside me. That isn't what I think. It's what I know. I guess it doesn't explain anything." This line, uttered by the elderly Reverend John Ames to his new, younger wife Lila says all you need to know about Robinson's style of imbuing the simplest sentence with so much meaning, so much understated tenderness.

*Lila* is the third in Marilynne Robinson's Gilead series set in the eponymous fictional town in Iowa, though each book can be read independently of the others. The first, Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gilead*, took the form of a letter from Ames to his young son.

Orange-prize winning *Home* told the story of family friends the Boughtons, and *Lila* follows Ames' wife – the mother of his son, who he married in his late 60s.

It begins when Lila is rescued from a neglectful home by a woman called Doll, and together they embark on an itinerant life, sleeping rough as America approaches the Depression. Flowing back and forth between Lila's old life and new, we learn how walking into church on a Sunday changed everything and how being loved by the kindly,

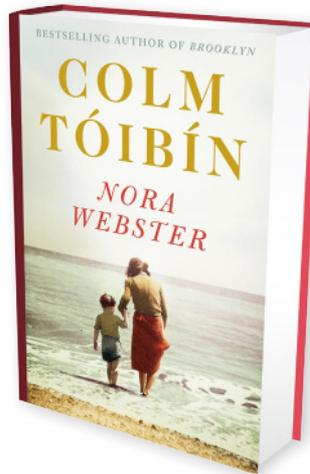


gentle Ames slowly heals the emotional scars of her childhood.

As with *Lila's* companion novels, the question of faith is woven throughout – Lila first approaches Ames to ask him "why things happen the way they do" – with the reverend at one end of the spectrum and ruthless, realist Doll at the other, both offering Lila a kind of redemption.

*Nora Webster* is another slow burner of a novel, this time about coming to terms with a husband's recent death. Like Robinson, Tóibín can plumb the depths of human emotion in a few deceptively simple sentences and Nora's journey through grief is moving and carefully observed. But it's the union of Lila and Ames that lingered in my thoughts, mismatched yet seemingly meant to be – the very opposite of star-crossed lovers.

★★★★☆



## NORA WEBSTER

**Stylist contributor Laura Price pitches for *Nora Webster***

by Colm Tóibín (Viking, £18.99), out now

When I heard I was going to be reviewing a novel by Irish author Colm Tóibín, I jumped at the chance to relive some of the memories I made living in Dublin a year or so ago. What I didn't expect, having not read Tóibín's bestselling novel *Brooklyn*, was to genuinely feel the warmth and personalities of the Irish people through his characters. Tóibín writes so movingly and in such depth that it's hard not to fall in love with Ireland through his writing.

Nora, the protagonist, is

a 40-something woman in Sixties Ireland who has just lost her husband and is trying to look after her four children as best she possibly can. Despite occasional criticism from her siblings and in-laws, Nora is a deeply loving mother who would do anything for her family and it's impossible not to warm to her immediately. Gradually, as music and friendships enter her life, she finds ways to move beyond her grief.

Tóibín really captures the essence of womanhood and the difficulties of becoming a widow, particularly in Sixties Ireland. With a similar undercurrent of sadness and set in Iowa, Marilynne Robinson's *Lila* deals with a number of the same themes: religion, family, loneliness and the struggles that women go through but seldom talk about. Both authors create highly likeable female protagonists, but I found it harder to relate to Lila, a troubled young woman so scarred by childhood abandonment that she trusts no one. Though beautifully written, *Lila* is heavily focused on religion, whereas *Nora Webster's* references to faith and the church are much more subtle.

Needless to say, I'm a Tóibín convert. I'll be reading the rest of his novels (he's written eight) and can't wait for the film adaptation of *Brooklyn* starring Saoirse Ronan due next year.

★★★★☆

## THE VERDICT: LILA HAS A POWER BEYOND WORDS

It could be said that attempting to translate the depths of our souls into words is near impossible. Which is why these novels – with their ability to conjure up such vivid emotion – excel. While we feel Nora's pain and loneliness in Tóibín's tale, it's the moving and unlikely unity of Lila and Ames that we find so difficult to explain yet so easy to believe, making Robinson's novel our winner this week.

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