

# Sing, Unburied, Sing by Jesmyn Ward

## Author Bio:

Birth—1977

- Where—DeLisle, Mississippi, USA
- Education—B.A., Stanford University; M.F.A., University of Michigan
- Awards—2 National Book Awards (*others below*)
- Currently—lives in Mississippi; commutes to Mobile, Alabama

Jesmyn Ward is an American novelist and two-time National Book Award winner for fiction. *Salvage the Bones* won in 2011 (it also won a 2012 Alex Award), and *Sing, the Unburied, Sing*, won in 2017. Her other two books include her first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008) and a memoir, *The Men We Reaped* (2013), about the deaths of her brother and other young male friends.

### Early years

Jesmyn Ward grew up in DeLisle, a small rural community in Mississippi. She developed a love-hate relationship with her hometown after having been bullied at public school by black classmates and, subsequently, by white students while attending a private school paid for by her mother's employer.

Ward received her undergraduate degree from Stanford University, choosing to become a writer upon graduation in order to honor the memory of her younger brother killed by a drunk driver earlier that year. Ward went on to earn an M.F.A. from the University of Michigan in 2005. At U of M she won five Hopwood Awards for essays, drama, and fiction.

Shortly afterwards, she and her family became victims of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina. With their house in De Lisle flooding rapidly, the Ward family set out in their car to get to a local church, but ended up stranded in a field full of tractors. When the white owners of the land eventually checked on their possessions, they refused to invite the Wards into their home, claiming they were overcrowded. Tired and traumatized, the refugees were eventually given shelter by another white family down the road.

Ward went on to work at the University of New Orleans, where her daily commute took her through neighborhoods ravaged by the hurricane. Empathizing with the struggle of the survivors and coming to terms with her own experience during the storm, Ward was unable to write creatively for three years—the time it took her to find a publisher for her first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds*.

In 2008 she returned to Stanford as a Stegner Fellow—one of the most prestigious awards available to emerging American writers.

### Literary career

Earlier in 2008, just as Ward was deciding to give up writing and enroll in a nursing program, *Where the Line Bleeds* was accepted by Doug Seibold at Agate Publishing. Starting on the day twin protagonists Joshua and Christophe DeLisle graduate from high school, *Where the Line Bleeds* follows the brothers as their choices pull them in opposite directions. Unwilling to leave the small rural town on the Gulf Coast where they were raised by their loving grandmother, the twins struggle to find work, with Joshua eventually becoming a dock hand and Christophe joining his drug-dealing cousin.

In a starred review, *Publishers Weekly* called Ward "a fresh new voice in American literature" who

"unflinchingly describes a world full of despair but not devoid of hope." The novel was picked as a Book Club Selection by *Essence* and received a Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) Honor Award in 2009. It was shortlisted for the Virginia Commonwealth University Cabell First Novelist Award and the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award.

Her second novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) homes in once more on the visceral bond between poor black siblings growing up on the Gulf Coast. Chronicling the lives of pregnant teenager Esch Batiste, her three brothers, and their father during the 10 days leading up to Hurricane Katrina, the day of the cyclone, and the day after, Ward uses a vibrant language steeped in metaphors to illuminate the fundamental aspects of love, friendship, passion, and tenderness.

Explaining her main character's fascination with the Greek mythological figure of Medea, Ward told Elizabeth Hoover of the *Paris Review*

*It infuriates me that the work of white American writers can be universal and lay claim to classic texts, while black and female authors are ghettoized as "other." I wanted to align Esch with that classic text, with the universal figure of Medea, the antihero, to claim that tradition as part of my Western literary heritage. The stories I write are particular to my community and my people, which means the details are particular to our circumstances, but the larger story of the survivor, the savage, is essentially a universal, human one.*

In 2011, Ward won the National Book Award in the Fiction category for *Salvage the Bones*. Interviewed by CNN's Ed Lavandra, she said that both her nomination and her victory had come as a surprise, given that the novel had been largely ignored by mainstream reviewers. In a television interview with Anna Bressanin of BBC News on (December 22, 2011), Ward said...

*When I hear people talking about the fact that they think we live in a post-racial America, ... it blows my mind, because I don't know that place. I've never lived there. ... If one day, ... they're able to pick up my work and read it and see ... the characters in my books as human beings and feel for them, then I think that that is a political act.*

Jesmyn Ward received an Alex Award for *Salvage the Bones* in 2012. The Alex Awards are given out each year by the Young Adult Library Services Association to ten books written for adults that resonate strongly with young people aged 12 through 18. Commenting on the winning books in *School Library Journal*, former Alex Award committee chair, Angela Carstensen described *Salvage the Bones* as a novel with "a small but intense following—each reader has passed the book to a friend."

In 2013, Ward published her memoir *Men We Reaped*. She announced on her blog two years earlier that she had finished the book's first draft, calling it the hardest thing she had ever written. The memoir explores the lives of her brother and four other young black men who lost their lives in her hometown. (*Adapted from the publisher and Wikipedia. Retrieved 9/28/2013.*)

## Discussion Questions:

1. The novel begins with Jojo's thoughts, "I like to think I know what death is" and "I want Pop to know I can get bloody" (page 1). How do these thoughts set the stage for Jojo's birthday and what follows?
2. How does Given's death shape Leonie, Pop, and Mam? How does it change how they relate to each other?
3. Why does Given begin appearing to Leonie after Michael goes to jail, whenever she gets high? Why doesn't Leonie tell anyone about seeing Given?
4. Leonie says from the first moment she saw Michael, he "saw me.... Saw the walking wound I was and came to be my balm" (page 54). Discuss how guilt, desire, taboo, defiance, and grief are at work in Michael and Leonie's connection to each other.
5. What does Leonie get out of her friendship with Misty? What does Jojo see in the dynamics at play between Misty and Leonie?
6. Discuss the gris-gris bag from Pop that Jojo finds hidden in his clothes (page 63). What does each item signify? Why must Jojo hide it from Leonie?
7. Why can Pop only tell Richie's story to Jojo in pieces (page 70)? What do you think Pop wants or needs Jojo to understand?
8. As Leonie looks at Jojo and Kayla in the back seat on their way to pick up Michael, she thinks, "Sometimes, when Jojo's playing with Kayla or sitting in Mama's room rubbing her hands or helping her turn over in the bed, I look at him and see a hungry girl" (page 95). Why does Leonie see this "hungry girl" in Jojo?
9. Why is Jojo convinced that "Leonie kill things" (page 108)? Why are Leonie and Jojo always in conflict, especially concerning how to take care of Kayla?
10. When Richie joins Jojo at Parchman, is it a surprise? Why is Richie tied to Parchman? And to River?
11. Why does Michael brawl with Big Joseph and ultimately choose to leave with Leonie rather than stay with his parents (page 208)?
12. When Mam insists that Leonie help her die, to "Let me leave with something of myself" (page 216), what makes Leonie hesitate? Why does she wish for Given to be there in that moment?
13. What does Richie mean when he tells Jojo, "I can't. Come inside. I tried. Yesterday. There has to be some need, some lack. Like a keyhole. Makes it so I can come in. But after all that — your mam, your uncle. Your mama. I can't. You've...changed. Ain't no need. Or at least, ain't no need big enough for a key"? (page 281)
14. Water plays an important role throughout the novel. Pop's name is River. Mam is known as the "saltwater woman." The town and prison where Pop and Michael are incarcerated are named for the "parched man." Jojo wonders who the parched man is, if he looked like Pop, Jojo, or Michael. Which characters seem to need water? Which are of the water?
15. Kayla is central to the final scene of the novel, with the "tree of ghosts." Jojo describes her: "Her eyes Michael's, her nose Leonie's, the set of her shoulders Pop's, and the way she looks upward, like she is measuring the tree, all Mam. But something about the way she stands, the way she takes all the pieces of everybody and holds them together, is all her. Kayla" (page 284). How is

it fitting that Kayla closes the story, telling the ghosts to "Go home" and singing to them and to Jojo?  
(Questions issued by the publisher.)

## Reviews:

[Ward's] books reach for the sweep, force and sense of inevitability of the Greek myths, but as translated to the small, mostly poor, mostly black town in Mississippi where she grew up and where she still lives...[*Sing, Unburied, Sing*] is Ward's most unsparring book...With the supernatural cast to the story, everything feels heightened. The clearest influence is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*—the child returning from the dead, bitter and wronged and full of questions. The echoes in the language feel like deliberate homage.

**Parul Sehgal - New York Times Book Review**

The novel is built around an arduous car trip: A black woman and her two children drive to a prison to pick up their white father. Ward cleverly uses that itinerant structure to move this family across the land while keeping them pressed together, hot and irritated. As soon as they leave the relative safety of their backwoods farm, the snares and temptations of the outside world crowd in, threatening to derail their trip or cast them into some fresh ordeal.... The plight of this one family is now tied to intersecting crimes and failings that stretch over decades. Looking out to the yard, Jojo thinks, "The branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves." Such is the tree of liberty in this haunted nation.

**Washington Post**

Staggering...even more expansive and layered [than *Salvage the Bones*]. A furious brew with hints of Toni Morrison and Homer's *The Odyssey*, Ward's novel hits full stride when Leonie takes her children and a friend and hits the road to pick up her children's father, Michael, from prison. On a real and metaphorical road of secrets and sorrows, the story shifts narrators — from Jojo to Leonie to Richie, a doomed boy from his grandfather's fractured past — as they crash into both the ghosts that stalk them, as well as the disquieting ways these characters haunt themselves.

**Boston Globe**

As long as America has novelists such as Jesmyn Ward, it will not lose its soul. *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the story of a few days in the lives of a tumultuous Mississippi Gulf Coast family and the histories and ghosts that haunt it, is nothing short of magnificent. Combining stark circumstances with magical realism, it illuminates America's love-hate tug between the races in a way that we seem incapable of doing anywhere else but in occasional blessed works of art.

**Minneapolis Star Tribune**

Ward unearths layers of history in gorgeous textured language, ending with an unearthly chord.

**BBC**

Ward's execution is anything but [familiar]; her first foray into magical realism is downright luminous.

**Entertainment Weekly**

(*Starred review.*) [B]eautifully crafted.... When the dead...make their appearances...their stories are deeply affecting, in no small part because of Ward's brilliant writing and compassionate eye.

***Publishers Weekly***

(*Starred review.*) Lyrical yet tough, Ward's distilled language effectively captures the hard lives, fraught relationships, and spiritual depth of her characters.

***Library Journal***

In her first novel since the National Book Award–winning *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Ward renders richly drawn characters, a strong sense of place, and a distinctive style that is at once down-to-earth and magical.

***Booklist***

(*Starred review.*) [A] bold, bright, and sharp-eyed road novel.... As with the best and most meaningful American fiction these days, old truths are recast here in new realities rife with both peril and promise.

***Kirkus Reviews***

## Summary:

*Winner, 2017 National Book Award*

*Drawing on Morrison and Faulkner, The Odyssey and the Old Testament, Ward gives us an epochal story, a journey through Mississippi's past and present that is both an intimate portrait of a family and an epic tale of hope and struggle.*

*Ward is a major American writer, multiply awarded and universally lauded, and in Sing, Unburied, Sing she is at the height of her powers.*

---

Jojo and his toddler sister, Kayla, live with their grandparents, Mam and Pop, and the occasional presence of their drug-addicted mother, Leonie, on a farm on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi.

Leonie is simultaneously tormented and comforted by visions of her dead brother, which only come to her when she's high; Mam is dying of cancer; and quiet, steady Pop tries to run the household and teach Jojo how to be a man.

When the white father of Leonie's children is released from prison, she packs her kids and a friend into her car and sets out across the state for Parchman farm, the Mississippi State Penitentiary, on a journey rife with danger and promise.

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* grapples with the ugly truths at the heart of the American story and the power, and

limitations, of the bonds of family. Rich with Ward's distinctive, musical language, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a majestic new work and an essential contribution to American literature. (*From the publisher.*)