

The Guardian



An American Marriage by Tayari Jones review – packed with ideas and emotion

The writer's engrossing fourth novel, the tale of a terrible miscarriage of justice, is a worthy award winner

Alex Clark

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This is the first of Tayari Jones's four novels to appear in the UK and her publisher's confidence has been rewarded; earlier this month, *An American Marriage* won the Women's prize for fiction, all but guaranteeing Jones a new readership. And one appreciates why the jury picked it from a strong shortlist that included Booker winners Pat Barker and Anna Burns – it is an immensely readable novel, packed with ideas and emotion.

It centres on an appalling miscarriage of justice. Recently wed Roy and Celestial are staying in a motel on a visit to Roy's parents in small-town Louisiana when they are suddenly ripped from their beds and thrown to the asphalt outside, lying in "parallel like burial plots". A woman whom Roy briefly met earlier in the evening while fetching ice has been raped and has identified – with certainty, but no apparent evidence – Roy as the perpetrator. Jones neither elaborates on the

Tayari Jones has been publishing novels since 2002, but it was her teaching jobs that always paid the bills. Then her fourth book, An American Marriage, was selected for Oprah's Book Club a year ago and became a runaway hit. In August, Barack Obama shared with his 54 million Facebook followers that Jones's book was one of his favorite summer reads. More recently, Oprah announced that she's adapting it for a movie. Here, Jones — who is also a professor at Emory University in Atlanta — talks about the struggle to get published, why she never thought her writing would pay the bills, and what she bought with her first big royalty check.

My mentor, the playwright Pearl Cleage, used to say to me, “You want to be paid for your writing, but you don’t want to have to write for money.” So I never planned for writing to be the way I support myself, because I didn’t want to put that pressure on it. My parents are professors, so going that route was not a huge leap for me.

In graduate school, I had a book agent, and I was so horrible around my classmates. I’d be dropping, “Oh, I have to call my agent. Oh, my agent this, my agent that.” Then that agent dumped me, so I learned a lesson that has carried me the rest of my life: I brag about nothing, ever, because anything could be taken away in an instant. I had to find another agent, which I did, and it took her a long time to sell my first book. I took up quilting and all these other things to pass the time while I waited for her phone call that I had a book deal. I didn’t want to call her, because I didn’t want to annoy her so much that she’d dump me, too.

After eight months, she called and said, “We’ve got a deal.” This was before cell phones, and I called everyone and no one was home. I couldn’t reach anyone. I was sitting in my apartment and I had this bottle of Champagne I had bought months before, and I was like, well, I guess I should open it. I drank some of it and I just sat there by myself.

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I never made much money from my first three books. The only book I ever got any royalties off of was Silver Sparrow, and it was enough to take a trip every year. I’d go somewhere and be like, *This is my book vacation*. It was always the highlight of my year.

Five months before my fourth book, *An American Marriage*, was published, I was driving in my car late in the evening and I got a call from Oprah. At first I thought it was the books editor at *O* magazine. I’ve written for them in the past, and she told me she had a little review

or something that needed to be done, so I was expecting her call. Oprah played a trick on me! I picked up the phone and she said, "Hey, girl. This is Oprah."


People ask, "How did you know it was really her?" But Oprah's voice is very distinct. She said she was choosing *An American Marriage* for her book club, and that she had read it with the girls at her school in South Africa. She told me she thought the book should have a wider readership. I was overwhelmed. I'm getting teary just thinking about it now.

I admire Oprah for all the reasons people admire Oprah. But it was especially validating for me to have Oprah, a fellow black woman from the south, endowing this upon me. To be in the Book Club means there's a sticker on the book, yeah, but there's a lot of other things that come with it. For instance, Holland America Cruise Line has my book stocked in their reading room, and I got to go on the cruise and have a Book Club conversation with those people. But really, it's Oprah associating her good name with your book. There's a lot of publicity. You sell a lot more copies when Oprah touches you.

At first, only a few people at my publisher could know about the Oprah's Book Club pick, because it's supposed to be under wraps. It felt like I had the biggest secret in the world for

k of a limo with my
just holding hands,

With My Oprah's Book Club Money

like, *I can't believe we made it.* 



After *An American Marriage* came out, I still had my normal life for a while, living in my apartment in New York at the top of an owner-occupied brownstone. If I fell out of my bed, I'd land in the bathtub — that's how I lived! Authors don't see royalty money for months and months and months. Some writers monitor their sales obsessively, but I'm not such a person. I've always looked at royalties checks as kind of a sweepstakes, or like a scratch-off lottery ticket. You don't know what it'll be!

My book came out in February, but I didn't get paid until October. When I got the check, I tried to deposit it at an ATM and it was like, "No, ma'am. Not gonna work." I had to go inside the branch. The bank teller looked at the check and then looked at me kinda funny, and I said to her, "I wrote a book, and it's in Oprah's Book Club." I felt shy about it, like I had to explain myself. She said, "Congratulations!" And she told the other tellers and they clapped.

Once I did get the money, though, I promptly bought a house in my hometown of Atlanta. Thank you, Oprah Winfrey, for sending me home! I had to buy all new furniture, because

previously all my furniture could fit in one room. I've always been a person to buy things piece by piece, because I had to, and it was actually very stressful to spend like that. I thought it would be so fun, like someone on a game show, on a shopping spree. But it shook me. I couldn't talk to people about it, because what a high-class problem, right? Every time I would buy something, I'd think of someone in my life, my family, who could use it more. I thought that maybe I should buy things more slowly, but then, what's the point of doing that? It still has to be bought.

I don't really know what Oprah optioning the book for a movie will mean for me, financially, but the best part about it is the recognition. If I say my book is being made into a movie, everyone's, like, "Wow, really?" Whereas if I say, "Hey, I've been nominated for a PEN Award," people are like, "Good for you. It must be a very nice pen."

You can't live your life like you're always having a "moment," and that's why I'm keeping my day job forever. Forever! I'm going to die at my desk. I'm kidding; I think this money will actually allow me to retire earlier than I thought. Now I have the luxury of planning my future, instead of freewheeling into it.

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4 COMMENTS

The New York Times

FICTION

A Marriage Upended, a Life Destroyed

By Stephanie Powell Watts

Feb. 6, 2018

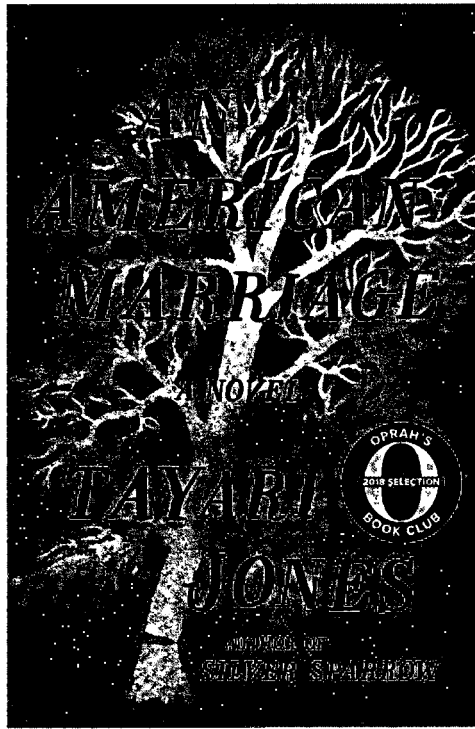
AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE

By Tayari Jones

306 pp. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. \$26.95.

Tayari Jones's wise and compassionate new novel, "An American Marriage," tells us a story we think we know. Roy, a young black man, is tried and wrongly convicted of rape while his wife, Celestial, waits for his return. But Jones's story isn't the one we are expecting, a courtroom drama or an examination of the prison-industrial complex; instead, it is a clear vision of the quiet devastation of a family. The novel focuses on the failed hopes of romantic love, disapproving in-laws, flawed families of origin, and the question of life with or without children that all married couples must negotiate. It is beautifully written, with many allusions to black music and culture — including the everyday poetry of the African-American community that begs to be heard.

Celestial and Roy — in love, educated, middle-class members of the post-integration African-American generation — are decidedly upwardly mobile and unconcerned about issues of racial uplift and representation, though they have been chaptered and versed by their parents in the language of oppression. With Roy's career "on the come-up," as he describes it, and Celestial building a portfolio as an artist, they see a trajectory to become black rich, maybe even white rich. But after only 18 months of marriage, Roy is sentenced to 12 years in prison. The horror of this story lies in its banality: An innocent man, happily married, who does all the right things to succeed, is nonetheless sidelined to a concrete cell. The unfairness of the years stolen from this couple because of someone else's mistake, the great cosmic error that derails Roy's life, is the novel's slow burn.



Much of this story is told through the letters that Roy and Celestial write each other during and after his incarceration. Jones recreates the couple's grief, despair and anger until they finally work their way to acceptance. This is complicated emotional territory navigated with succinctness and precision, making what isn't said as haunting as the letters themselves.

By design, we learn little about prison life or about the inmates except "Ghetto Yoda," an old head who gives Roy advice and guidance. What we know for sure is that Roy's life has disintegrated while Celestial finds financial and artistic success making dolls in Roy's likeness. Her act of creation results in lifeless cloth babies that cannot provide succor or even connection to their inspiration. Celestial must ultimately decide if her approximation of a life and family is all she deserves.

While Jones keeps her gaze on the personal, this intimate story of a relationship cannot be divorced from its racial context. The black body in America can't escape the scrutiny of the political lens, not entirely. The characters feel lucky that Roy is still alive — as Celestial says, there is "no appealing a cop's bullet." While not a polemic, the novel gives us a quiet, revolutionary statement about black innocence, which Celestial defines as "having no way to predict the pain of the future." The gains of younger generations of African-Americans have meant that middle-class lives are possible for some. However, as Roy discovers, his good parents, good choices and mostly good fortune do not shield him from the pain and caprice of the world. He becomes someone society dismisses, another down-and-out, snaggletoothed, unemployed ex-con. But Jones declares that maybe Roy doesn't have to

stay that way. Nearly every inmate now incarcerated in America will join us on the outside someday, and “An American Marriage” reminds us of this fact. It also warns us to awaken our compassion and empathy. *This can be you*, the story whispers. *Forget that at your peril.*

Stephanie Powell Watts is the author of the novel “No One Is Coming to Save Us.”

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What I Bought With My Oprah's Book Club Money

As told to Kaitlin Menza