

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

Tue 2 Jul 2019 02.00 EDT

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.

Get unlimited access to The Cut and everything else New York.

LEARN MORE »

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.

RELATED

- › **The Music Teacher Who Travels the World As a Mystery Shopper**
- › **The Health Writer Who Moonlights As a Dominatrix**
- › **The One Time My Mom Won the Lottery**

TAGS: [GET THAT MONEY](#) [MONEY](#) [PERSONAL FINANCE](#) [OPRAH](#) [MORE](#)

■ 4 COMMENTS

The New York Times

FICTION

A Marriage Upended, a Life Destroyed

By Stephanie Powell Watts

Feb. 6, 2018

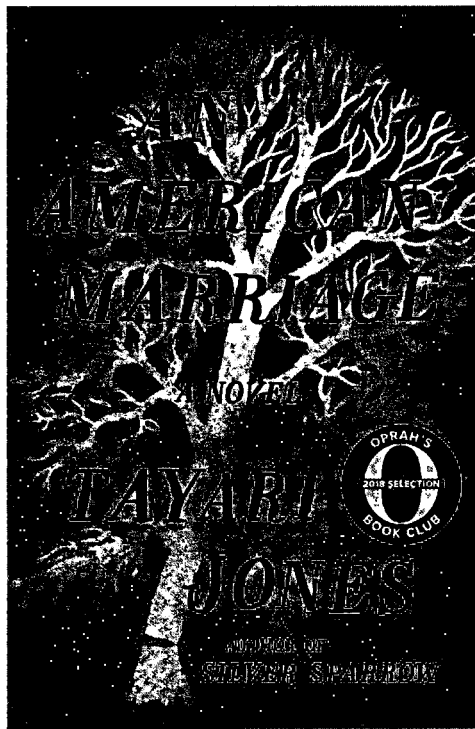
AN AMERICAN MARRIAGE

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.*

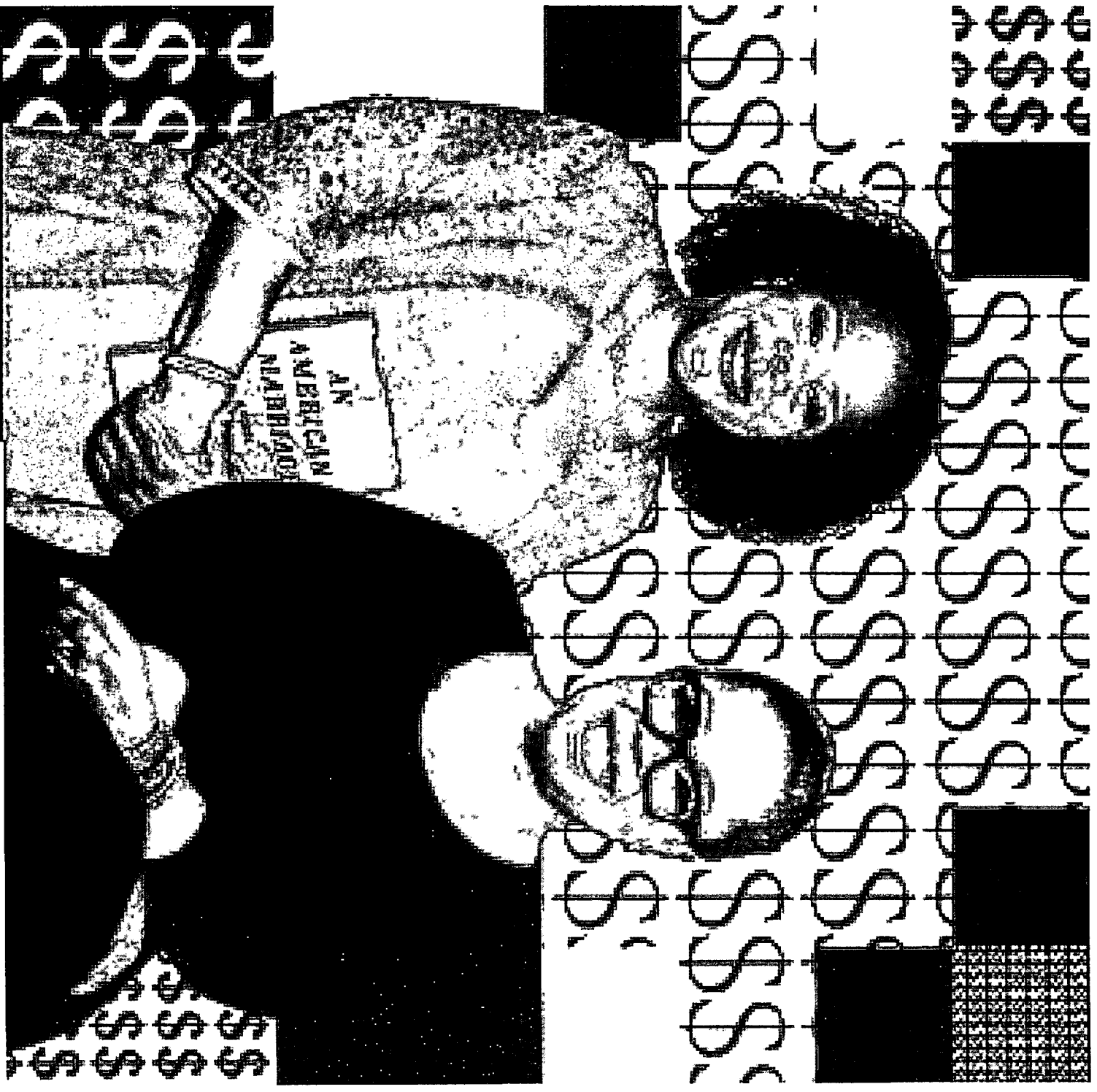
Stephanie Powell Watts is the author of the novel "No One Is Coming to Save Us."

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 25, 2018, on Page 12 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: From This Day Forward


PAYDAY | MAR. 4, 2019

What I Bought With My Oprah's Book Club Money

As told to Kaitlin Menza



GET THAT MONEY

Brought to you by:  turbo.

Tayari Jones and Oprah Winfrey. Photo-illustration: by
Stevie Remsburg; Photos Getty

***Get That Money** is an exploration of the many ways we think about our finances — what we earn, what we have, and what we want. In **Payday**, we talk to notable women about making it big for the first time.*

An American Marriage (Jones)

[Summary](#) | [Author Bio](#) | [Book Reviews](#) | [Discussion Questions](#) | [Full Version](#) | [Print](#)

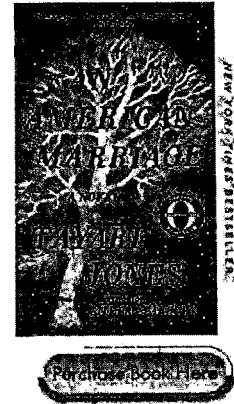
An American Marriage

Tayari Jones, 2018

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

320 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781616208776



Summary

Newlyweds Celestial and Roy are the embodiment of both the American Dream and the New South. He is a young executive, and she is an artist on the brink of an exciting career.

But as they settle into the routine of their life together, they are ripped apart by circumstances neither could have imagined.

Roy is arrested and sentenced to twelve years for a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit. Though fiercely independent, Celestial finds herself bereft and unmoored, taking comfort in Andre, her childhood friend, and best man at their wedding.

As Roy's time in prison passes, she is unable to hold on to the love that has been her center. After five years, Roy's conviction is suddenly overturned, and he returns to Atlanta ready to resume their life together.

This stirring love story is a profoundly insightful look into the hearts and minds of three people who are at once bound and separated by forces beyond their control. *An American Marriage* is a masterpiece of storytelling, an intimate look deep into the souls of people who must reckon with the past while moving forward—with hope and pain—into the future. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth— November 30, 1970
- Where—Atlanta, Georgia, USA
- Education—Spelman College; Arizona State University; University of Iowa
- Awards—Hurston/Wright Legacy Award (twice); Lillian C. Smith Award
- Currently—lives in Booklyn, New York City

Tayari Jones is the author of four novels, including *An American Marriage* (2018, an Oprah Book Club pick), *Silver Sparrow* (2011), *The Untelling* (2005), and *Leaving*

Atlanta (2002). Jones holds degrees from Spelman College, Arizona State University, and the University of Iowa. She lives in Brooklyn.

Currently, she serves on the MFA faculty at Rutgers-Newark. She has also been the recipient of the Shearing Fellow for Distinguished Writers at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. (*Adapted from the publisher and Wikipedia. Retrieved 2/6/2018.*)

Visit the author's blog (<http://www.tayarijones.com/blog>). .

Book Reviews

Jones maintains a brisk pace.... The dialogue ...[is] sometimes too heavily weighted by exposition, and the language slides toward melodrama. But the central conflict is masterfully executed: Jones ... explore[s] simmering class tensions and ...racial injustice,

Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review.*) Jones's writing is engagingly layered with letters between the main characters integrated through the narrative. Her personal letter to readers demonstrates how writing this novel changed her. —Ashanti White, *Fayetteville, NC Library Journal*

Jones crafts an affecting tale that explores marriage, family, regret, and other feelings made all the more resonant by her well-drawn characters and their intricate conflicts of heart and mind.

Booklist

(*Starred review.*) Subtle, well-crafted, and powerful.... This is, at its heart, a love story, but a love story warped by racial injustice. And, in it, Jones suggests that racial injustice haunts the African-American story.

Kirkus Reviews

(*Starred review.*) [A]n enchanting novel.... [It] explores philosophical and political quandaries, including generational expectations of men and women, the place of marriage in society, systemic racism, toxic masculinity ... [while] avoiding didacticism.... [G]ripping, and the characters are unforgettable.

Forward Reviews

Discussion Questions

- ✓ 1) The title of this novel is "An American Marriage." Do you feel this title accurately represents the novel? Why or why not? And if you do find the title appropriate, what about the story makes it particularly "American"?

- ✓ 2) When Celestial asks Roy if he would have waited for her for more than five years, he doesn't answer her question but reminds her that, as a woman, she would not have been imprisoned in the first place. Do you feel that his response is valid, and do you think it justifies his infidelity? Do you believe that he would have remained faithful if Celestial had been the one incarcerated? Does this really matter, and if so, why?
- ✓ 3) In her "Dear John" letter to Roy, Celestial says, "I will continue to support you, but not as your wife." What do you think she means by this statement? Do you feel that Roy is wrong to reject her offer?
- ✓ 4) You may not have noticed that Tayari Jones does not specify the race of the woman who accuses Roy of rape. How did you picture this woman? What difference does the race of this woman make in the way you understand the novel's storyline?
- ✓ 5) Andre insists that he doesn't owe Roy an apology for the way his relationship with Celestial changed. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 6) There are two father figures in Roy's life: Big Roy is the one who shepherded him into adulthood and helped him grow into a responsible, capable person, but Walter is the one who taught Roy how to survive. Do you feel these men deserve equal credit? If not, which was the more important figure in Roy's life and why?
- ✓ 7) Big Roy explains that he and Olive never had children of their own because Olive feared that he would not love Roy as much if he had his "own" children. Do you feel she had the authority to make that decision? And do you feel she was right in making that decision?
- 8) When Roy is released from prison, he first goes to his childhood home and almost immediately makes a connection with Davina. Do you feel that given the tenuous relationship he has with Celestial—who is still legally his wife—he is cheating? Why or why not? And when Roy announces to Davina his intention to return to his wife, do you feel that her anger is justified?
- 9) Roy is hurt when Celestial, in discussing her career as an artist, doesn't mention him or the role he played in giving her the encouragement and freedom to follow her dreams, but Walter argues that she is justified in her silence. Do you agree? Do you think her silence is due to shame, or is she just being practical in how she presents herself to advance her career?
- 10) It is obvious that Andre is different from Roy in many ways. Do you feel that ultimately he is a better match for Celestial? If so, why? Also, why do you think Celestial and Andre decide against formally marrying? Do you think that as a couple they will be good and nurturing parents? Do you feel that as a couple, they will be better at parenting than Celestial and Roy would have been? If so, why?

11) Do you think that Andre strategized to get Celestial to fall in love with him, or did it happen naturally? Do you feel that it was a surprise to them that it happened after all those years? Do you predict that Celestial's parents will come to accept Andre as her life partner?

12) Toward the end of the novel, Celestial does a complete about-face and returns to Roy. What do you think her emotions were in coming to that decision? Do you feel that it was the right decision?

(Questions issued by the publishers.)

top of page (summary)

Site by **BOOM** (<http://www.boomsuper.com>)  (<http://www.boomsuper.com>)