

# Mudbound

by Hillary Jordan

1. The setting of the Mississippi Delta is intrinsic to **Mudbound**. Discuss the ways in which the land functions as a character in the novel and how each of the other characters relates to it.
2. **Mudbound** is a chorus, told in six different voices. How do the changes in perspective affect your understanding of the story? Are all six voices equally sympathetic? Reliable? Pappy is the only main character who has no narrative voice. Why do you think the author chose not to let him speak?
3. Who gets to speak and who is silent or silenced is a central theme, the silencing of Ronsel being the most literal and brutal example. Discuss the ways in which this theme plays out for the other characters. For instance, how does Laura's silence about her unhappiness on the farm affect her and her marriage? What are the consequences of Jamie's inability to speak to his family about the horrors he experienced in the war? How does speaking or not speaking confer power or take it away?
4. The story is narrated by two farmers, two wives and mothers, and two soldiers. Compare and contrast the ways in which these parallel characters, black and white, view and experience the world.
5. What is the significance of the title? In what ways are each of the characters bound -- by the land, by circumstance, by tradition, by the law, by their own limitations? How much of this binding is inescapable and how much is self-imposed? Which characters are most successful in freeing themselves from what binds them?
6. All the characters are products of their time and place, and instances of racism in the book run from Pappy's outright bigotry to Laura's more subtle prejudice. Would Laura have thought of herself as racist, and if not, why not? How do the racial views of Laura, Jamie, Henry, and Pappy affect your sympathy for them?
7. The novel deals with many thorny issues: racism, sexual politics, infidelity, war. The characters weigh in on these issues, but what about the author? Does she have a discernable perspective, and if so, how does she convey it?
8. We know very early in the book that something terrible is going to befall Ronsel. How does this sense of inevitability affect the story? Jamie makes Ronsel responsible for his own fate, saying "Maybe that's cowardly of me, making Ronsel's the trigger finger." Is it just cowardice, or is there some truth to what Jamie says? Where would you place the turning point for Ronsel? Who else is complicit in what happens to him, and why?
9. In reflecting on some of the more difficult moral choices made by the characters --- Laura's decision to sleep with Jamie, Ronsel's decision to abandon Resl and return to America, Jamie's choice during the lynching scene, Florence's and Jamie's separate

decisions to murder Pappy --- what would you have done in those same situations? Is it even possible to know? Are there some moral positions that are absolute, or should we take into account things like time and place when making judgments?

10. How is the last chapter of **Mudbound** different from all the others? Why do you think the author chose to have Ronsel address you, the reader, directly? Do you believe he overcomes the formidable obstacles facing him and finds "something like happiness"? If so, why doesn't the author just say so explicitly? Would a less ambiguous ending have been more or less satisfying?

- Transcript



**hide caption** Hillary Jordan won the Bellwether Prize for her first novel, *Mudbound*.

William Coupon

Hillary Jordan's first novel, *Mudbound*, is a story of racism and well-kept secrets. Set on a desolate farm in the Mississippi Delta at the end of World War II, the novel explores the complex relations between two families: the owners of the land, and the sharecroppers who live and work on it.

The novel earned Jordan the Bellwether Prize for fiction, an award founded by author Barbara Kingsolver to promote literature of social responsibility. The cash prize and publishing contract is awarded bi-annually to an unpublished author.

Kingsolver says *Mudbound* is a beautifully written novel that examines the roots of racism through the distinct voices of its characters.

"I love that you understand everybody, even though everyone isn't right, and in the long run some people are very wrong," she says. "But you begin by feeling their own perspective, and you have some sympathy for every character."

Jordan says *Mudbound* was inspired by her mother's family stories of the year they spent on an isolated farm without running water or electricity.

Eventually, it grew into a larger story with darker themes. But the first character she wrote about, Laura, was based on her own grandmother.

"I started out writing what I thought was going to be a short story in the voice of Laura," Jordan says, "and as the story grew, I just found myself wanting to hear from other people. As the story got larger, as it embraced these other themes, these larger themes about war and about Jim Crow, I wanted to hear from those people."

There is no omniscient narrator in this story. Instead, it is told from the perspective of six characters — black and white, male and female. Finding the voices and making them sound authentic was difficult, Jordan says.

"I had a number of well-meaning friends say things to me like, 'even Faulkner did not write about black people in the first person,'" she says. "But ultimately I just decided that it was so important to let my black characters address the ugliness of Jim Crow themselves, in their own voices."

The stories Jordan heard about the family farm when she was growing up were mostly charming and funny. It was only in researching the book that she came to understand they were also stories of survival — and that the lessons to be learned about the consequences of racism deserve to be told again and again.

## Hillary Jordan discusses her debut novel, *Mudbound*

What inspired you to write *Mudbound*?

I grew up hearing stories about my grandparents' farm in Lake Village, Arkansas. It was a primitive place, an unpainted shotgun shack with no electricity, no running water and no telephone. They named it "Mudbound" because whenever it rained, the roads would flood and they'd be stranded for days.

Though they'd only lived there for a year, my mother, aunt and grandmother spoke of Mudbound often, laughing and shaking their heads by turns, depending on whether the story in question was funny or horrifying. Often they were both, as Southern stories tend to be. I loved listening to them, even the ones I'd heard dozens of times before. They were a peephole into a strange and marvelous world; a world full of contradictions, of terrible beauty. The stories revealed things about my family, especially about my grandmother, who was the heroine of most of them for the simple reason that when calamity struck, my grandfather was invariably elsewhere.

To my mother and aunt, their year on the farm was a grand adventure; and indeed, that was how all their stories, even my grandmother's, portrayed it. It was not until much later that I realized what an ordeal that year must have been for her - a city-bred woman with two young children - and that, in fact, these were stories of survival.

I began the novel (without knowing I was doing any such thing) in graduate school at Columbia. One of my teachers asked us to write a few pages in the voice of a family member, and I decided to write about the farm from my grandmother's point of view. But what came out was not a merry adventure story, but something darker and more complex. What came out was, "When I think of the farm, I think of mud."

If *Mudbound* was indeed a true place, how much of the story is based on fact?

The basic premise is true: My grandfather decided to move the family from the city (Dallas, in reality) to the farm in 1946. Like Henry in the novel, he wanted to be near his recently widowed sister, whose husband had committed suicide. And too, my grandfather yearned to be a farmer. He was a native Mississippian; reverence for the land was bred into his bones.

My grandmother had never seen the property, and I can only imagine how she felt when she arrived to discover she would be living and rearing her two small children (my mother and aunt were three and six, respectively) in such a primitive place. But Nana was a woman of her time, obedient to her husband's wishes, and so she made the best of it. My grandfather's brother, Bobby, came to live with them, followed by her cantankerous father-in-law, and she cooked and cleaned uncomplainingly for all of them. Like Laura in the novel, my grandmother was a singer, and the songs she sang were indicative of her mood. "Rock of Ages" was a frequent refrain on the farm, and - when things got really bad - "Were You There When They Crucified Our Lord."

My grandparents also had black and white (as well as Mexican) sharecroppers on the farm, and a black maid who helped with the housework.

And there reality ends, and fiction begins. I started with actual people and events, but the more I wrote, the more the characters insisted on being themselves, and the more trouble they got themselves into. Murder, lust, betrayal, forbidden love - with fiction, all these things were possible, and oh so beguiling to me as a writer.

**Why did you choose to tell this story through six first-person voices?**

Well, I wanted to make the process of writing my first novel as difficult for myself as I possibly could.

That aside, I began by writing a short story in Laura's (my grandmother's) voice and ended up with the Cliff Notes of a novel, squeezed into 35 pages. As I thought about how I would unpack the story, I started experimenting with other voices. Jamie's came first. I woke up in the wee hours, typed five pages about the flood and went back to bed. It wasn't until I turned on the computer the next morning and saw the pages on the screen that I remembered having written them. Florence's voice was next. She poured out of me, though it took me a while to get the dialect right. Then Henry, who was stubborn and difficult, and Hap, who was a talker from the beginning. Ronsel didn't even exist until I saw a PBS documentary called *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. There was a segment about the 761st Tank Battalion - their heroism and the discrimination they endured. I knew right then that Florence and Hap had a son and that he was in that battalion, though I had no idea how central he would become to the story.

**Was it difficult for you to write in the voices of African American characters?**

Yes, but no more difficult than it was to write in the voices of men, of soldiers, of farmers, of mothers, of devout Christians, of desperately poor people with little education, of bigots or of an alcoholic - none of which I am, and all of which I had to embody convincingly.

**How would you answer those who might say that's not something a white writer has any business doing?**

In the stories I grew up hearing, black people were always in the background - where African-Americans in the Jim Crow South were thought to belong. I decided to put my black characters front and center, and to let them answer the ugliness of Jim Crow in their own voices. Still, I was a little afraid. I knew I would be excoriated (and rightly so) if I got it wrong. A number of well-meaning colleagues said things to me like, "You know, even Faulkner didn't write about black people in the first person." But ultimately, I decided that letting my African-American characters speak was the only way to give them a small measure of justice.

Also, from an artistic point of view, I think it's nonsense to tell a writer, "You can't write about X because you're Y." If writers didn't make leaps into existences other than our own, we wouldn't have *Madame Bovary* or *Moll Flanders* or *Jane Eyre* or half of literature. Instead, we'd have a whole lot of tedious books about lonely, neurotic types with writer's block and knotted shoulder muscles. At the time I began *Mudbound*, I was a single woman dating and struggling to survive in New York City - and how many more novels do we need on that subject?

**Your manuscript won the prestigious Bellwether Prize, judged by Barbara Kingsolver. Tell us what it was like to get this news.**

I sent off the second draft of the book in September 2005 with the \$30 entry fee, thinking, *There goes thirty bucks*. Then I heard in January that I was one of a dozen semi-finalists, and I thought, *Well, I was in the top twelve anyway*. A couple of months later I found out I was one of three finalists, and I thought, *Hey, at least I got close*. Then, the night Barbara called, she didn't identify herself right away, and I thought she was a telemarketer. I was pretty un-cordial. I was about to hang up on her

when she said, "This is Barbara Kingsolver, and I'm calling to tell you that you've won the Bellwether Prize."

I responded with the immortal words of a beauty pageant contestant: "Oh my God!"

**Writers often say it took them many years and permutations to arrive at the final version of their first novel. How long have you been working on *Mudbound*?**

About seven years, or was it seventy? I was putting myself through graduate school, supporting myself in the city and frankly, doing a lot of dithering. My best friend, James Cañón, was also struggling to finish his first novel (he and I met at Columbia and were each other's primary readers while writing our books). So we made a bet: whoever didn't finish his/her first draft by April 1, 2005, would have to pay the other the unthinkable sum of \$1,000, plus endure a lifetime of daily taunting and shame. I cut back my freelance ad work and focused on my writing. I finished on time, and so did James.

*Et voilà* - two published novels!

**Is there a particular character in *Mudbound* that you side with the most or feel most sympathetic toward?**

I started by identifying the most with Laura, for obvious reasons. But as the others' voices developed, I became enamored with each of them in turn. Henry was the hardest to love (and to write), but he won me over in the end. Ronsel has the last word, so I suppose you could draw some conclusions from that.

**Without giving too much away, the conclusion of your novel is unforgettably powerful. Did you know how the book would end when you first began writing it?**

I never had an outline for the novel; I wrote it very much as it came to me, or it came to me as I wrote it - I'm not sure which. I struggled for months to come up with a conclusion I could write towards. And then one night, it was just there in my head. I called up James, and I said, "I know what happens in the last big scene." When I told him, all the hairs rose up on my arms, and I knew I really had something.

Writing the scene was wrenching. I had terrible nightmares for weeks. Enough said.



Hillary Jordan received her BA in English and Political Science from Wellesley College and spent fifteen years working as an advertising copywriter before starting to write fiction. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia University.

Her first novel, MUDBOUND, was published in 2008 by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, HarperCollins Canada and Random House UK. It won the 2006 Bellwether Prize, founded by Barbara Kingsolver and awarded biennially to an unpublished debut novel that addresses issues of social justice, and a 2009 Alex Award from the American Library Association. MUDBOUND was also the 2008 NAIBA Fiction Book of the Year and was longlisted for the 2010 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. It was one of 30 titles chosen for the 2013 World Book Night book giveaway. *Paste Magazine* named it one of the Top Ten Debut Novels of the Decade. It has been translated into French, Italian, Serbian, Swedish and Norwegian.

Her second novel, WHEN SHE WOKE, was published in 2011 by Algonquin and HarperCollins Canada and in 2012 by HarperCollins UK. It was long-listed for the 2013 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and was a 2012 Lamda Literary Award finalist. It has been translated into French, Spanish and Turkish. German, Chinese and Brazilian editions are forthcoming.

When she's not writing, Hillary gives talks at colleges, literary festivals and community libraries, and teaches the occasional workshop. In 2010, MUDBOUND was the Freshman Read at Salem College as well as Appalachian State University, where she delivered the convocation address. In 2011, it was the "One City, One Story" read for Pasadena, CA and the "Tale for Three Counties" community read in Western New York.

Hillary grew up in Dallas, TX and Muskogee, OK. She lives in Brooklyn.