

Discussion questions for 'Sing, Unburied, Sing'

By Jesmyn Ward's

Jesmyn Ward's novel "Sing, Unburied, Sing" is our first pick for the new PBS NewsHour-New York Times book club, "Now Read This." Become a member of the book club by joining our Facebook group, or by signing up to our newsletter.

Below are questions to help guide your discussions as you read the book over the next month. The questions are broken down by week, or divided into four parts to match your reading speed. You can also submit your own questions for Ward about the book here.

1. The first line comes from the point of view of Jojo, who says, "I like to think I know what death is. I like to think it's something I could look at straight." Why are these two things important to Jojo, and why do you think Ward chose to start the book this way?

2. Tracy K. Smith, in a New York Times review of the novel, says of the fictional town Bois Sauvage, Mississippi: It "is as mired in its own history as, frankly, most real places in America." It's a history that includes violence and ever-present racism. What do you think Ward wants us to understand about that history? How much has changed, or how little?

3. Early on in the book, Leonie insists on taking her children on a road trip to pick up their father Michael from Parchman prison. Why must she bring her children? What is it that you think brought Michael and Leonie together initially, and what is it that pulls them apart?

4. Leonie's neglect and indifference of her children is present throughout the novel. Why does she treat them so poorly? Is it simply

that her love for herself gets in the way, as Mam says, or is it more complicated than that? What role does her grief play in how she parents?

5. In October, Ward told the NewsHour's Jeffrey Brown that the use of the supernatural in a novel "has to make sense. It has to be believable." Did you find the ghosts believable? And why do you think they play such prominent characters in the novel?

6. Pop's stories often involve the ghost of the young boy, Richie, but he rarely speaks about his own deceased son. Is the fixation with one related to the other? What does it tell us about Pop and his own grief?

7. Leonie describes her friend Misty, who is white, this way: "Her freckles, her thin pink lips, her blond hair, the stubborn milkiness of her skin; how easy had it been for her, her whole life, to make the world a friend to her?" What do you make of how Leonie perceives Misty?

Week Three

8. At one point in the novel the ghost of Richie says he assumes Parchman prison, which long operated like a plantation, must have changed over time. But when he returns, he describes the "new" Parchman as a place where men sit "for hours in small, windowless rooms staring at big black boxes that streamed dreams." Is it significant that Parchman has not changed for the better?

9. The book follows three generations: Mam and Pop, Leonie and Michael, and Jojo and Kayla. Which generation do you find yourself understanding and empathizing with the most? Which characters did you find it harder to connect with and why?

10. The novel is told from multiple characters' points of view: Jojo, Leonie, Richie. Why do you think Ward chose to tell the story from these voices, and why do you think the other characters don't serve as narrators: Mam, Pop and Michael, for example?

Week Four

11. As you near the end of the book, why do you think Ward chose the title "Sing, Unburied, Sing"?

12. One of the epigraphs of the book is this line from Southern Gothic writer Eudora Welty: "Memory is a living thing," she writes, and that "all that is remembered joins, and lives — the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead." How did this statement on memory echo throughout the novel?

13. Why do you think Ward chose to end the book with the tree of ghosts and young Kayla telling the ghosts to "go home"?

**Jesmyn Ward's Haunted Novel of the Gulf Coast
"Sing, Unburied, Sing" is shadowed by the long aftermath of
Hurricane Katrina.**

By Vinson Cunningham

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All Ward's novels are set in a fictional Mississippi town and shadowed by the long aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

In the late summer of 2005, the novelist Jesmyn Ward, a native of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, lived through Hurricane Katrina. After fleeing her grandmother's flooding home, Ward and her family weathered the worst violence of the storm huddled in trucks spread across an otherwise empty field. "I saw an entire town demolished, people fighting over water, breaking open caskets searching for something that could help them survive," she said in a 2011 interview with *The Paris Review*.

Images like these, lately evoked again by the flooding of Houston after Hurricane Harvey, altered the course of American politics. Katrina was the definitive display of the unaccountable incompetence of the Bush Administration—and a stroke of racial catastrophe visible enough to catalyze, however subtly, the election of the first black President. Much as the 2008 financial crisis scrambled our political economy—yielding the Zuccotti Park occupiers who went on to wave signs for Bernie Sanders, as well as the intractable Tea Partiers-turned-Freedom Caucusers—Katrina radically reconstituted our understanding of race, place, and inequality. Activists and theorists who, since the nineteen-sixties, had insisted that the legacy of slavery and white supremacy was the interpretive key to America's history now had a contemporary tragedy to point to as the proof of their case. As it does every

generation or so, the idea of America as a vast conspiracy gathered fresh plausibility, and began, gradually, to make its way into the mainstream. Nine years later, in 2014, the killing of Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, gave national prominence to the Black Lives Matter movement; the young activists who led the protests had been weaned, politically, on pictures of an avoidable flood. Katrina brought into being a generation of justified pessimists.

It also helped create Jesmyn Ward's art. Ward's vocabulary tends toward the epic; she alludes to the Old Testament and Greek mythology with equal frequency and intensity; for her, Katrina is comparable in significance to the Egyptian captivity or the aftermath of the Trojan War. Only one of her books, "Salvage the Bones" (Bloomsbury), which won the 2011 National Book Award for Fiction, takes Katrina as its primary subject, but the storm lingers, ghostlike, in the others, operating as a grand, whooshing metaphor for the vulnerability—physical, emotional, environmental—of the residents of rural Bois Sauvage, the fictional Mississippi-coast town in which all her novels are set. In "Salvage the Bones," a father struggles to fortify his home against the coming hurricane, but fails to notice the rise of quieter waters: his young daughter—the narrator, a bookish girl named Esch—is hiding a pregnancy; his son steals to feed the pit bull he is training to fight; his children are going hungry, foraging for eggs in the yard. The father's single-mindedness is a product of memory: he witnessed Hurricane Camille, which wrecked the coast in 1969, and therefore understands Katrina as part of a foreordained sequence. For this modern-day Noah, the radio spouts warnings like an oracle. Ward tells the story with a tense patience, marking day after day; when the storm comes, overturning everything, it feels like a fatal relief. At least the waiting's over.

"Salvage the Bones" expands our understanding of Katrina's devastation, beyond the pictures of choked rooftops in New Orleans

and toward the washed-out, feral landscapes elsewhere along the coast. Ward's regionalism, grounded in rurality and in poverty, gives us the images—often beautiful, always barely hiding danger—that recur throughout her books: shushing pines; skin and garments red with mud; animals wild, domestic, or waiting for the slaughter. Siblings stand at the end of a road after the storm and look at the coast. All the remembered details—"the gas station, the yacht club, and all the old white-columned homes that faced the beach, that made us feel small and dirty and poorer than ever when we came here with Daddy"—have been ripped away and washed into the sea. "Not ravaged," Esch thinks, "not rubble, but completely gone."

"Ain't nothing left," somebody says.

Ward's third novel, *"Sing, Unburied, Sing"* (Scribner), takes place after Katrina, and the storm is named only once, almost passingly: one character, white, lives in one of the famous post-disaster "Katrina cottages" conferred by the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency. But just as these pastel-hued structures—eventually found to contain harmful levels of formaldehyde—serve as semipermanent monuments to the storm, *"Sing, Unburied, Sing"* has the haunted quality of an afterlife; its characters seem stranded in an epilogue.

Jojo, thirteen, the most consistently perceptive of the novel's trio of first-person narrators—a group that also includes his mother and a child who died decades before—is, like Esch, a laconic, prematurely self-sufficient kid. Jojo's mother, Leonie, is indifferent, and his father, Michael, is serving out the final days of a prison sentence. Both tend more closely to their vices than to their son or their three-year-old daughter, Kayla. Like other neglected children, Jojo calls his parents by their first names. His filial respect goes, instead, to his grandfather, Pop, whose every mannerism he imitates. The book opens with blood: Pop is slaughtering and skinning a goat to barbecue for Jojo's birthday, and

Jojo insists on helping, “so Pop will know I’m ready to pull what needs to be pulled, separate innards from muscle, organs from cavities. I want Pop to know I can get bloody.” As he plays the butcher’s assistant, he watches, and so, Ward seems to say, must we:

Pop slits. The goat makes a sound of surprise, a bleat swallowed by a gurgle, and then there’s blood and mud everywhere. The goat’s legs go rubbery and loose, and Pop isn’t struggling anymore. All at once, he stands up and ties a rope around the goat’s ankles, lifting the body to a hook hanging from the rafters. That eye: still wet. Looking at me like I was the one who cut its neck, like I was the one bleeding it out, turning its whole face red with blood.

“Kid, you’re gonna have to make a choice.”

The episode is of a piece with Ward’s treatment of animals elsewhere. She is unsentimental, and sometimes brutal, about the necessity of their deaths, but also presents them as quasi-mystical portals between the world of human affairs and the indifference of nature. This sense is deepened in “Sing” by Jojo’s ability to divine the meanings of animal noises: it’s soon clear that his brief, telepathic connection with the goat is more than fancy. He remembers a day when, left at home by Leonie, he spent his time in the woods: “When the horse Pop keeps bowed his head and shimmied and bucked so that his sides gleamed like wet red Mississippi mud, I understood: I could leap over your head, boy, and oh I would run and run and you would never see anything more than that. I could make you shake. But it scared me to understand them, to hear them,” he says. By book’s end, he hears—and sees—much more, and much worse.

While the magical element is new in Ward’s fiction, her allusiveness, anchored in her interest in the politics of race, has been pointing in this direction all along. It takes a touch of the spiritual to speak across

chasms of age, class, and color. Further complicating communication in “Sing” is a set of intra-familial racial dynamics: Leonie is black and Michael is white, and her passionate attraction to him—forsaking all others, Jojo foremost—has much, it seems, to do with their racial difference. Leonie has mixed, almost tortured, feelings about whiteness. Her best friend, Misty, is white, and there are glimmers of jealousy about, for instance, her hair: “It was one of the things she did that she was never conscious of,” Leonie says, “playing with her hair, always unaware of the ease of it. The way it caught all the light. The self-satisfied beauty of it. I hated her hair.” Jojo has to drag his white father across species in order to understand him. “Michael is an animal,” he says. “I know what he is saying.”

Racial mixture is a preoccupation of Ward’s—perhaps inevitably, given the Spanish, French, and West African ethnic history of the Gulf. She often notes the tawny skin or yellowish hair of her black characters. Leonie and Michael’s relationship sharpens her focus on this subject; so does the novel’s portrayal of hybrid religious belief. Jojo’s “sight” is inherited from his grandmother, Mam, who, though dying, keeps her faith in “the Mothers”: the Virgin Mary and Mami Wata, a deity, customarily associated with water, venerated across many religious cultures of the African diaspora. Mam uses roots and leaves as medicine; when she was young, she could hear voices “humming” to her their applications. Pop, meanwhile, is a kind of pantheist, devoted above all to “balance”—between life and death, stillness and motion, and, one assumes, black and white. “Sing, Unburied, Sing” has a fairly straightforward plot. It is a novel of the road. Jojo, Leonie, Kayla, and Misty shuttle crookedly toward the prison from which Michael will be released, and where Pop, long before, lived out a nightmare. But its echoes of Pop and Mam’s values—synthesis, veiled things uncovered for good—make it rich, sometimes unbearably so.

The signal characteristic of Ward’s prose is its lyricism. “I’m a failed poet,” she has said. The length and music of Ward’s sentences owe

much to her love of catalogues, extended similes, imagistic fragments, and emphasis by way of repetition, as well as to her tendency to cluster conjunctions, especially “and.” The effect, intensified by use of the present tense, can be hypnotic. Some chapters sound like fairy tales. This, and her ease with vernacular language, puts Ward in fellowship with such forebears as Zora Neale Hurston and William Faulkner; *Bois Sauvage*, with its watchful children and desiccated vistas, is a kind of duskier Yoknapatawpha. The tone and atmosphere in “Sing, Unburied, Sing” call out, too, to Toni Morrison—particularly “Beloved,” whose most sorrowful revelations are echoed in the climax of “Sing.” As in Faulkner and Morrison, portentous sentence rhythms are the sign of the seriousness of Ward’s subject, and of the trauma through which her characters have passed and will, inevitably, pass again. There’s love here, but little laughter.

Some lines—like these, from Jojo’s memory of a story told by Pop—feel overworked: “The dream of her was the glow of a spent fire on a cold night: warm and welcoming. It was the only way I could untether my spirit from myself, let it fly high as a kite in them fields.” Because of their mutual musicality, the three narrators often sound quite alike. Still, Ward’s tone is darkly appropriate to its purposes, and its origins. Lyricism slips in and out of favor in American writing; the “plain style” of our Puritan past—with its insistence that quick comprehensibility is a pathway to democracy, and to the divine—is always with us. But there is a counter-tradition whose banner has often been carried by black women, including Morrison, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and, now, Ward.

Again, region and religion matter: the Catholicism of the Gulf, tinged with aspects of African-derived belief, acts in “Sing” as a refutation of Protestant clarity. Frankness, here, is a lie. There’s a quality of the gothic at work: the elements of the novel—sudden violence, black spectres, an interminable past—are reminiscent of Melville’s great

story “Benito Cereno,” in which Catholic mystery and African presence come together uncannily.

The criticisms that this sort of writing is open to—that it is overly emotional in its appeal, and too didactic—resemble many of the objections raised, by conservatives and liberals alike, to the tone of much post-Katrina activism, in Ferguson and beyond. Ward’s lyricism seems inextricable from the politics that emerged from the storm.

In 2013, Ward published a memoir, “Men We Reaped,” which details the deaths of five beloved young men, including her younger brother. She tells the story in reverse chronological order, boy after boy in bleak succession; it feels like a gruesome detective story: how did this happen, and who to blame? The losses are, on the surface, unconnected—car accidents, suicides, senseless murders—but each, under Ward’s grieving eye, seems to flow from the same wellspring. Nothing in the larger society is designed to protect these poor black Southern kids, and so, from the beginning, they are doomed.

In “Sing, Unburied, Sing,” Ward describes a chorus of the lost, “women and men and boys and girls,” perched in a tree, singing an awful song about their deaths. They won’t let go until something—but what?—gets solved. The book’s most moving illumination of danger and exposure is one of its least supernatural. Jojo, whom Ward clearly loves, is alone in the back yard, still hearing the animals. Nobody’s home; the structures that should make him safe have been washed away. “I didn’t see the jagged lid of the can rising from the earth,” he says. “It sank deep.” He bleeds. ♦