

Author Spotlight

JESMYN WARD



Jesmyn Ward was born in 1977 in Berkley, California. She moved to DeLisle, Mississippi with her family at age 3. The first in her family to attend college, she earned a B.A. in English (1999), and an M.A. in Media Studies and Communication (2000), both at Stanford University. Ward chose to become a writer to honor the memory of her younger brother, who was killed by a drunk driver in October 2000, just after she had completed her master's degree. She received her MFA from the University of Michigan and has received the MacArthur Genius Grant, a Stegner Fellowship, a John and Renee Grisham Writers Residency, and the Strauss Living Prize. She is the winner of two National Book Awards for Fiction for *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and *Salvage the Bones* (2011). She is also the author of the novel *Where the Line Bleeds* and the memoir *Men We Reaped*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize and the Media for a Just Society Award. She is currently an associate professor of creative writing at Tulane University and lives in Mississippi.

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Ward brings the archetypal road novel into rural twenty-first-century America. Drawing on Toni Morrison and William 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.

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, 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 work that belongs in the canon of American literature.

Prepared by Maureen Socha

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Discussion Questions for *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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 70-71). 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 72-73)? 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?

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Discussion Questions for *Sing, Unburied, Sing* continued

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?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Read William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*. Compare Ward’s Delta to Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County.
2. Read Ward’s novels *Where the Line Bleeds* and *Salvage the Bones*. How do these works form a trilogy with *Sing, Unburied, Sing*?
3. Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm, is still in use today and the only maximum security prison for men in the state of Mississippi. Pick up Bruce Jackson’s *Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings, 1947–1959* to see and hear what Parchman might have been like in Pop’s time.

And for further reading on labor camps and prison farms, read Douglas A. Blackmon’s *Slavery by Another Name*.

