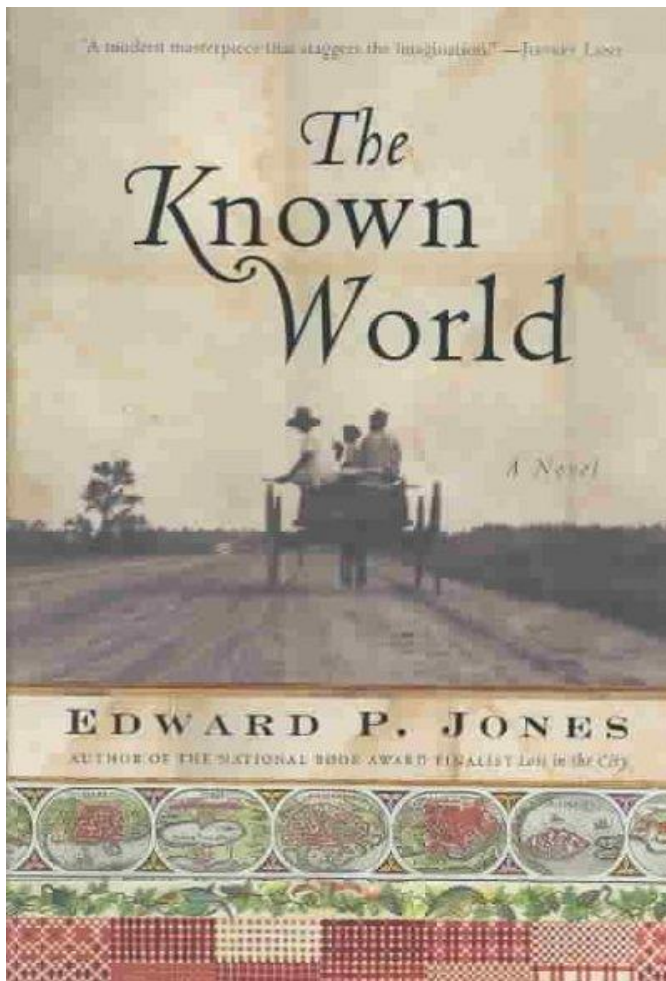


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308902>

About the Book



Henry Townsend, a black farmer, bootmaker, and former slave, has a fondness for *Paradise Lost* and an unusual mentor -- William Robbins, perhaps the most powerful man in antebellum Virginia's Manchester County. Under Robbins's tutelage, Henry becomes proprietor of his own plantation -- as well as of his own slaves. When he dies, his widow, Caldonia, succumbs to profound grief, and things begin to fall apart at their plantation: slaves take to escaping under the cover of night, and families who had once found love beneath the weight of slavery begin to betray one another. Beyond the Townsend estate, the known world also unravels: low-paid white patrollers stand watch as slave "speculators" sell free black people into slavery, and rumors of slave rebellions set white families against slaves who have served them for years.

An ambitious, luminously written novel that ranges seamlessly between the past and future and back again to the present, *The Known World* weaves together the lives of freed and enslaved blacks, whites, and Indians -- and allows all of us a deeper understanding of the enduring multidimensional world created by the institution of slavery.

About the Author



Edward P. Jones was born and raised in Washington, D.C. A recipient of the PEN/Hemingway Award, a Lannan Foundation Grant, and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, Jones was educated at Holy Cross College and earned his MFA at the University of Virginia. He has taught fiction at Princeton University, George Mason University, and the University of Maryland. His first book, *Lost in the City*, was short-listed for the National Book Award. Jones's work has appeared in numerous journals and magazines, including *The Paris Review*, *Essence*, and *Ploughshares*. He lives in Arlington, Virginia.

Awards

In 2004, *The Known World* won the National Book Critics Circle Award (<http://www.nationalbook.org/>) and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (<http://www.pulitzer.org/>). In 2005 it won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (<http://www.impactdublinaward.ie/>).

Reviews

Booklist *Starred Review*

Henry Townsend, born a slave, is purchased and freed by his father, yet he remains attached to his former owner, even taking lessons in slave owning when he eventually buys his own slaves. Townsend is part of a small enclave of free blacks who own slaves, thus offering another angle on the complexities of slavery and social relations in a Virginia town just before the Civil War. His widow, Caldonia, grief-stricken and more conflicted about slavery than Henry was, fails to maintain the social order. Also caught in the miasma of slavery is Sheriff John Skiffington, an honorable man who, when presented with a slave as a marriage gift, spends the remainder of his marriage, along with his wife, dithering about how to deal with the girl and ends up treating her like a daughter. These are only a few of the deftly portrayed characters in this elegantly written novel that explores the interweaving of sex, race, and class. Jones moves back and forth in time, making the reader omniscient, knowing what will eventually befall the characters despite their best and worst efforts, their aspirations and their moral failings. This is a profoundly beautiful and insightful look at American slavery and human nature.

Publishers Weekly

In a crabbled, powerful follow-up to his National Book Award–nominated short story collection (*Lost in the City*), Jones explores an oft-neglected chapter of American history, the world of blacks who owned blacks in the antebellum South. His fictional examination of this unusual phenomenon starts with the dying 31-year-old Henry Townsend, a former slave—now master of 33 slaves of his own and more than 50 acres of land in Manchester County, Va.—worried about the fate of his holdings upon his early death. As a slave in his youth, Henry makes himself indispensable to his master, William Robbins. Even after Henry's parents purchase the family's freedom, Henry retains his allegiance to Robbins, who patronizes him when he sets up shop as a shoemaker and helps him buy his first slaves and his plantation. Jones's thorough knowledge of the legal and social intricacies of slaveholding allows him to paint a complex, often startling picture of life in the region. His richest characterizations—of Robbins and Henry—are particularly revealing. Though he is a cruel master to his slaves, Robbins is desperately in love with a black woman and feels as much fondness for Henry as for his own children; Henry, meanwhile, reads Milton, but beats his slaves as readily as Robbins does. Henry's wife, Caldonia, is not as disciplined as her husband, and when he dies, his worst fears are realized: the plantation falls into chaos. Jones's prose can be rather static and his phrasings ponderous, but his narrative achieves crushing momentum through sheer accumulation of detail, unusual historical insight and generous character writing.

Library Journal * Starred Review *

This ambitious first novel by National Book Award nominee Jones (*Lost in the City: Stories*) looks at slavery from an unusual angle. Henry Townsend is a former slave who was purchased and freed by his own father. Through hard work, he has acquired 50 acres of farmland in Virginia. Given the slave-based agricultural economy, Townsend believes that the logical (and legal) way to work the land is with slaves, and, eventually, he owns more than 30. Although he is less brutal than his neighbors, most of his slaves dream of escaping north. When they try, Townsend must pay the white patrollers to return them or be seen as irresponsible. But as rumors of bloody slave rebellions spread through the South, unscrupulous bounty hunters begin to round up free blacks, Native Americans, and white orphans along with the escapees. By focusing on an African American slaveholder, Jones forcefully demonstrates how institutionalized slavery jeopardized all levels of civilized society so that no one was really free. A fascinating look at a painful theme, this book is an ideal choice for book clubs. Highly recommended.

Discussion questions Source:

<http://www.harpercollins.com/author/authorExtra.aspx?authorID=5002&isbn13=9780060557546&displayType=readingGuide>

1. Why is the character of Moses significant to the novel? How would you characterize his relationship with Henry and Caldonia Townsend? What about with his wife and child?
2. What is the significance of the title, *The Known World*? What "known world" is charted in John Skiffington's map in the jail? What world is charted in The Creation described by Calvin in his letter to his sister Caldonia? What role does the land and its borders play in this book?
3. Who is William Robbins and how does he impact the lives of blacks on neighboring plantations? Did you find his relationships with Henry, Augustus, and Mildred Townsend, and Philomena, Dora, and Louis compelling?
4. What is the significance of the Augustus Townsend character? In what ways is Augustus a victim of attitudes about slavery in the South? In what ways is he a victor? How did you respond to his captivity and its outcome?
5. How would you characterize Jebediah Dickinson? What explains his sudden appearance at the Elston farm? When Fern says of Jebediah: "With him there ... I feel as if I belong to him, that I am his property," what does she mean?
6. Were relationships between parents and children notably different during the era of slavery than in the present day? Consider Caldonia, Calvin, and Maude; William Robbins, Patience, and Dora; and Augustus, Mildred, and Henry in your evaluations.

Multimedia

***The Known World* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1476600>

Prior to the Civil War, some free black people owned slaves. Author Edward P. Jones picked up on that little-known fact and has written a vivid first novel that looks at slavery through a different lens. On *Morning Edition*, hear an interview with Jones and a review of *The Known World*.

Edward P. Jones, Author of "The Known World" Appears on the College of Charleston Campus (Video Clip)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEsNsHPG0OI&noredirect=1>

The College of Charleston selected "*The Known World*" by Edward P. Jones as its 2011 The College Reads! book selection. Jones was on campus for a public reading week and book talk on November 1, 2011.

Further Reading

All Aunt Hagar's Children by Edward P. Jones

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1271116>

(Call number: Fiction Jones)

All Aunt Hagar's Children turns an unflinching eye to the men, women, and children caught between the old ways of the South and the temptations that await them further north, people who in Jones's masterful hands, emerge as fully human and morally complex, whether they are country folk used to getting up with the chickens or people with centuries of education behind them.

Lost in the City: Stories by Edward P. Jones

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1036826>

(Call number: Fiction Jones)

From "The Girl Who Raised Pigeons" to the well-to-do career woman awakened in the night by a phone call that will take her on a journey back to the past, the characters in these stories forge bonds of community as they struggle against the limits of their city to stave off the loss of family, friends, memories, and, ultimately, themselves.

Author's official website

<http://www.edwardpjonesbooks.com/>

Information and resources about the author.

Read-Alikes

March by Geraldine Brooks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1235833>

(Call number: Fiction Brooks)

Brooks follows March as he leaves behind his family to aid the Union cause in the Civil War. His experiences will utterly change his marriage and challenge his most ardently held beliefs. A lushly written, wholly original tale steeped in the details of another time, *March* secures Geraldine Brooks' place as a renowned author of historical fiction.

Beloved by Toni Morrison

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1048772>

(Call number: Fiction Morrison)

Set in rural Ohio several years after the Civil War, this haunting chronicle of slavery and its aftermath traces the life of a young woman, Sethe, who has kept a terrible memory at bay only by shutting down part of her mind. Juxtaposed with

searing descriptions of brutality, gradually revealed in flashbacks, are equally harrowing scenes in which fantasy takes flesh, a device Morrison handles with consummate skill.

Gilead: a novel by Marilyn Robinson

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1230086>

(Call number: Fiction Robinson)

In 1956, toward the end of Reverend John Ames's life, he begins a letter to his young son, an account of himself and his forebears. Ames is the son of an Iowan preacher and the grandson of a minister who, as a young man in Maine, saw a vision of Christ bound in chains and came west to Kansas to fight for abolition: He "preached men into the Civil War," then, at age fifty, became a chaplain in the Union Army, losing his right eye in battle.

A Summons to Memphis by Peter Taylor

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1065841>

(Call number: Fiction Taylor)

When Phillip Carver is asked by his sisters to help avert their widower father's impending marriage to a younger woman, he is forced to confront his domineering siblings, a controlling patriarch, and a flood of memories from his deeply troubled past.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

