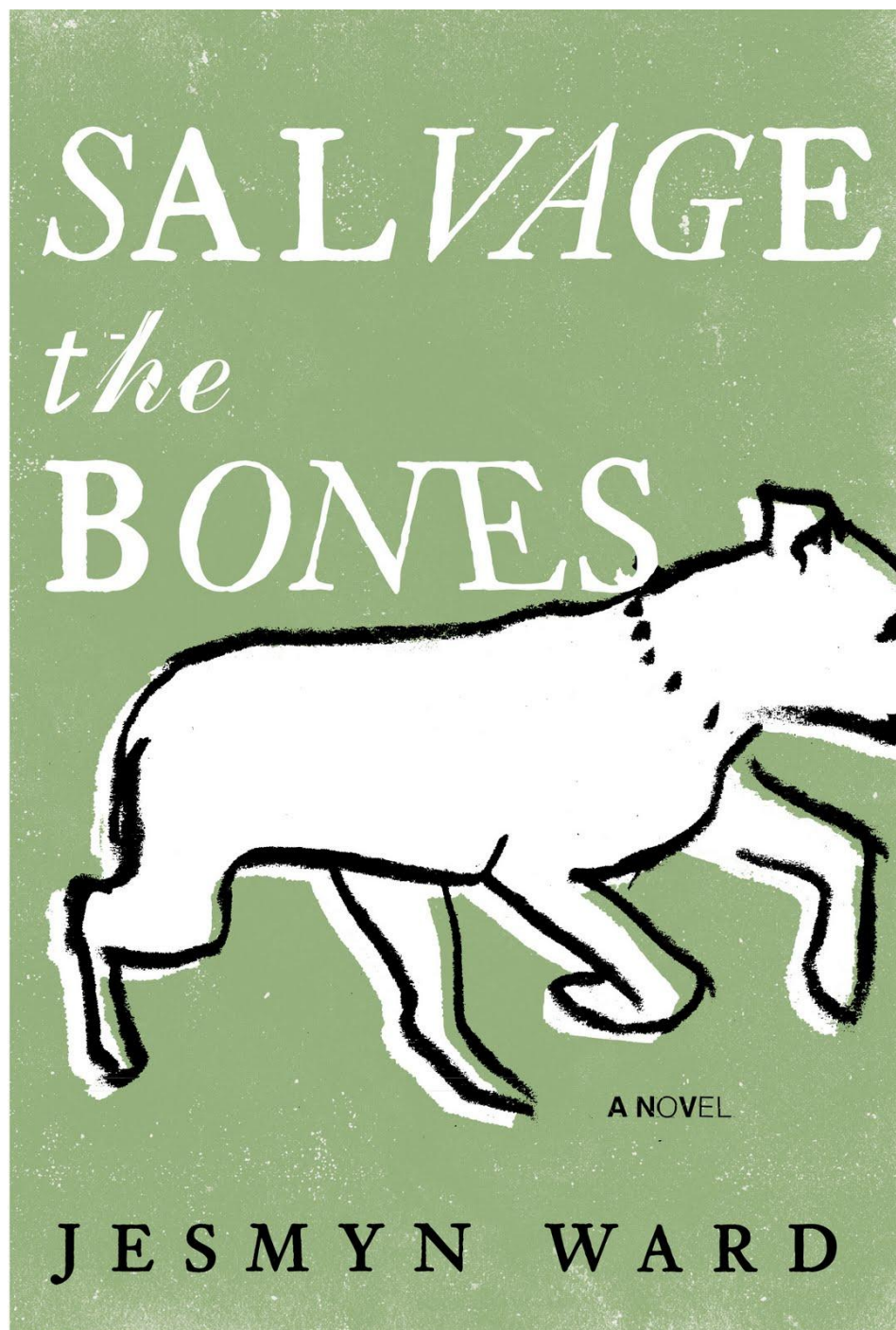


**About the Book...**



A hurricane is building over the Gulf of Mexico, threatening the coastal town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, and Esch's father is growing concerned. A hard drinker, largely absent, he doesn't show concern for much else. Esch and her three brothers are stocking food, but there isn't much to save. Lately, Esch can't keep down what food she gets; she's fourteen and pregnant. Her brother Skeetah is sneaking scraps for his prized pitbull's new litter, dying one by one in the dirt. Meanwhile, brothers Randall and Junior try to stake their claim in a family long on child's play and short on parenting.

As the twelve days that make up the novel's framework yield to their dramatic conclusion, this unforgettable family-motherless children sacrificing for one another as they can, protecting and nurturing where love is scarce-pulls itself up to face another day. A big-hearted novel about familial love and community against all odds, and a wrenching look at the lonesome, brutal, and restrictive realities of rural poverty, [\*Salvage the Bones\*](#) is muscled with poetry, revelatory, and real.

## About the Author...



**Jesmyn Ward** grew up in DeLisle, Mississippi. She received her MFA from the University of Michigan, where she won five Hopwood Awards for essays, drama, and fiction. She has been a Stegner Fellow at Stanford and a Grisham Visiting Writer in Residence at the University of Mississippi. She is currently an assistant professor of

creative writing at the University of South Alabama. Her debut novel, [\*Where the Line Bleeds\*](#), was an *Essence* Book Club selection, a Black Caucus of the ALA Honor Award recipient, and a finalist for both the Virginia Commonwealth University Cabell First Novelist Award and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award.

### **Awards:**

National Book Award for fiction, 2011

Alex Award, American Library Association, 2012

Wallace Stegner Fellowship, Stanford University, 2008-10.

### **Sidelights:**

Mississippi native Jesmyn Ward is a graduate of Stanford University. After earning her undergraduate

degree, she worked in publishing for a time, taking a job at Random House in New York City before she continued her education at the University of Michigan with a master of fine arts degree. Her writing later earned her a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University. Her debut novel, *Where the Line Bleeds*, was released in 2008.

Ward began to write *Where the Line Bleeds* after the death of her brother. She had always intended to write a novel, but the story was still coalescing in her mind, and her brother's death somehow served as the impetus she needed to start. At the time she was working in New York in the publishing industry, but she ended up completing the novel while working toward her graduate degree in Michigan. Ward credits her relationship with her brother and with male friends growing up for her accurate portrayal of the twin boys who serve as the novel's focal point. A Southerner to the core, Ward also feels her writing is influenced by classic Southern writers. Brad Hooper, interviewing Ward for *Booklist*, remarked that "when asked whom she includes among her literary masters, Ward unhesitatingly answered, 'William Faulkner, particularly his novel *As I Lay Dying*.' She admits that 'it made my head explode' upon her first reading of it.' Ward cited Toni Morrison and poetry as a genre as additional influences on her style of writing.

Where the Line Bleeds takes place in the small rural town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, situated on the Gulf Coast. The residents are primarily black, and economically speaking, the town is at a stand-still, with little to encourage young people to stay on and make their lives there after they have grown old enough to leave. The protagonists of the book are twins Christophe and Joshua. After graduating from high school, they set out to make their mark on the world, intent on leaving both their small town and parents of somewhat questionable morals far behind them. Unfortunately, neither twin gets very far. Joshua ends up working the docks, but when Christophe is unable to find a job, he begins to sell drugs with their cousin. There is little hope of them escaping the dead-end life ahead--no money for college, a father who is a junkie, and a mother who took off for Atlanta years earlier, leaving them behind. The boys strive to please their beloved grandmother, who virtually raised them and encouraged them to stay on the right path, but events conspire against all their efforts.

Critics praised Ward's debut effort as a strong and illuminating look at the rural South. A contributor to Kirkus Reviews remarked that Ward describes a place that has been little seen before in novels: "the rural African American South, a place of grinding poverty but enduring loyalties, tragic but somehow noble." Brad Hooper, in his Booklist review, declared

that she "successfully escapes first-novel awkwardness, obviously knowledgeable of and comfortable with the milieu in which she sets her narrative." In a review for the Dallas Morning News Web site, William J. Cobb concluded of the boys' story that "the ending that eventually unfolds does not perhaps change their destiny as much as confirm it. This vision of the real America is not a pretty picture, but it's a powerful, realistic story." Elizabeth Jackson, writing for the Austin Chronicle Online, commented that "Ward is an author to watch, to be sure, as one readily anticipates her sense of proportion and emphasis will gain subtlety."

Ward's second novel, [Salvage the Bones](#), was published in 2011 and won both a National Book Award for fiction and the American Library Association's Alex Award. Set in the fictionalized coastal town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, the novel chronicles the lives of pregnant teenager Esch Batiste, her three brothers, and their alcoholic and abusive father during the ten days leading up to Hurricane Katrina and the day after. The events in [Salvage the Bones](#) are partly inspired by what happened to Ward's own family in 2005 when Katrina impacted their community. [Salvage the Bones](#) "begins in disaster, and endures cataclysm. Early scenes--of pups arriving, some of them dying, of the shooting and gutting of a squirrel, of desperate, bloody dog fights and limb-risking efforts to steal

supplies, of friends and family striking out in crazed efforts to survive in sweat and dirt and steam-heat, of characters getting bitten and sliced and broken--are full-frontal, graphic. This novel's got no time for comfort," asserted San Francisco Chronicle contributor Joan Frank, who called the novel "strikingly beautiful, taut, relentless and, by its end, indelible."

"We are immersed in Esch's world, a world in which birth and death nestle close, where there is little safety except that which the siblings create for each other. That close-knit familial relationship is vivid and compelling, drawn with complexities and detail," observed Los Angeles Times contributor Carolyn Kellogg. "What makes the novel so powerful ... is the way Ward winds private passions with that menace gathering force out in the Gulf of Mexico. Without a hint of pretension, in the simple lives of these poor people living among chickens and abandoned cars, she evokes the tenacious love and desperation of classical tragedy," remarked Washington Post Book World reviewer Ron Charles. In an article about the author for the London Guardian Emma Brockes praised the novel, noting that Ward's "writing is lyrical; savage."

In an interview with Elizabeth Hoover for Paris Review Online, the author discussed how she came up with the title for [Salvage the Bones](#): "The word salvage is



phonetically close to savage. ... It says that come hell or high water, Katrina or oil spill, hunger or heat, you are strong, you are fierce, and you possess hope. When you stand on a beach after a hurricane, the asphalt ripped from the earth, gas stations and homes and grocery stores disappeared, oak trees uprooted, without any of the comforts of civilization--no electricity, no running water, no government safety net--and all you have are your hands, your feet, your head, and your resolve to fight, you do the only thing you can: you survive." She added: "Bones is meant to remind readers what this family, and people like this family, are left with after tragedy strikes."

## **Reviews**

### *Library Journal*

It's summer 2005 in Bois Sauvage, MS. Even as she watches her brother Skeetah's beloved pit bull, China, give birth, 15-year-old Esch realizes that she herself is pregnant. Like China in the dog ring, Esch's family is fighting daily just to survive, with her father mostly lost to drink after his wife died giving birth to Junior, and other brother Randall hoping he can win a place at basketball camp and eventually leave their thankless existence in the dust. Now a hurricane is coming,



which means boarding up windows as Daddy schemes to make money helping with the inevitable cleanup. But this hurricane is Katrina, and more than cleanup will be needed when it's over. Working through the 12 days building up to and encompassing the hurricane's arrival, Ward (*Where the Line Bleeds*) uses fearless, toughly lyrical language to convey this family's close-knit tenderness, the sheer bloody-minded difficulty of rural African American life, and what it's like when those hurricane winds sledge-hammer you and the water rises faster than you can stand up. It's an eye-opening heartbreaker that ends in hope. VERDICT Highly recommended; you owe it to yourself to read this book.

### *Booklist*

Esch, 14 and secretly pregnant, is frantic knowing she hasn't the money for either an abortion or for the baby-to-be. Meanwhile, after Mama's death, Daddy has taken to drink, but whenever he's sober and sometimes even when he's not he is struggling to prepare their rural Mississippi property for the ominous advent of Hurricane Katrina. Meanwhile Brother Skeetah's pit bull has had puppies, which the boy plans to raise and sell. Soaringly tall brother Randall hopes for a basketball scholarship, and Junior, the youngest, simply drives everyone crazy. Here is an impoverished African American family that, if it didn't have bad luck,

would have no luck at all. And yet the family endures despite privation, even despite the hurricane. Author Ward has an unfortunate tendency to overwrite, and this coming-of-age story tends at times to get lost in its style. In addition, Ward's surprising equation of Esch with the mythological Medea is less than completely successful. However, these problems are redeemed by the empathetic family she has created.

### *Publisher's Weekly*

Ward's poetic second novel (after *Where the Line Bleeds*) covers the 12 days leading up to Hurricane Katrina via the rich, mournful voice of Esch Batiste, a pregnant 14-year-old black girl living with her three brothers and father in dire poverty on the edge of Bois Sauvage, Miss. Stricken with morning sickness and dogged by hunger, Esch helps her drunken father prepare their home for the gathering storm. She also looks after seven-year-old Junior while her oldest brother, Randall, trains to win a scholarship to basketball camp, and middle son Skeet devotes himself to delivering and raising his fighting bitch China's pit bull puppies. All the while, Esch ponders whether she will have the baby and yearns for its father to love her "once he learns [her] secret." Esch traces in the minutiae of every moment of every scene of her life the thin lines between passion and violence, love and hate, life and death, and though her voice

threatens to overpower the story, it does a far greater service to the book by giving its cast of small lives a huge resonance.

### **Discussion questions** ([www.litlovers.com/](http://www.litlovers.com/))

1. How would you describe the Batiste family—first, as a family unit, then each of the members, Esch (our narrator), Claude (the father), Randall, Skeetah, and Junior? What motivates (or not) each of them? Which family member frustrates you most? Which do you admire most?
2. Talk about Bois Sauvage and its deprivations—the poverty, unemployment and housing. How does the area shape the people, especially young people, who live there? Or the reverse—do its residents shape Bois Sauvage?
3. The love affair Skeetah has with China is very much at the heart of this story. Is Skeetah right to rob neighbors to obtain medicine he needs for her?
4. Are you disturbed by the book's concentration on dog fighting? How does the author portray the fighting? Does the love Skeetah has for China contradict your understanding of that culture?

5. What about Esch's pregnancy? Why might the author have created a narrator, and central character, as a young pregnant teenager? What, overall, does the author of this book suggest about the nature of motherhood?

6. What is the symbolic meaning of Esch's fascination with the myth of Medea? What does the author mean, in an interview with the Paris Review, when she says...Medea is in Hurricane Katrina because her power to unmake worlds, to manipulate the elements, closely aligns with the storm. And [Medea is] in Esch, too.\*

7. Suspense is results from the fact that readers are anxious to learn what happens to characters. However, given that readers know the outcome of Katrina—that it will destroy almost everything in its path—how does Ward create suspense in this story?

8. In what way is Katrina both destructive and cleansing? What does Katrina represent symbolically?

9. In the book's title, the word "salvage" is close to "savage." According to the author, the term salvage has honor to it: meaning that, when all has been lost, "you are strong, you are fierce, and you

possess hope."\* Talk about the interplay between those two words—salvage and savage—in other words, the way the two come together in this book.

10. Were you disappointed in how the book ended? Ward, having experienced firsthand the horrors of Katrina, has said in the *Paris Review* "...I realized that if I was going to assume the responsibility of writing about my home, I needed narrative ruthlessness. I couldn't dull the edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us." Do you agree with her? Or is her view of life too harsh? Isn't there also the possibility that life will spare us? What do you think?

## **Read-Alikes**

Philipp Meyer, [\*American Rust: A Novel\*](#) (2009)

*American Rust: A Novel* by Philipp Meyer, takes place in Buell, Pennsylvania, a once-thriving steel town that has since become dilapidated and impoverished. Best friends Billy Poe and Isaac English grew up in Buell together. They dream of escaping and plan to do just that after graduation. The two friends are going to move to California together, but their plans quickly

change one fateful night. When a strange man tries to attack Billy, Isaac defends his friend and accidentally kills the attacker in the process. The two boys attempt to cover up the crime. Things get worse when Isaac learns that Billy has secretly been seeing his sister. Isaac angrily leaves for California without Billy, leaving him to take the fall for the murder Isaac committed.

William Faulkner, [\*As I Lay Dying\*](#) (1930)

*As I Lay Dying* is one of William Faulkner's most famous novels. The book employs Faulkner's characteristic use of multiple narrators and stream-of-consciousness writing. In the novel, a family transports the body of family matriarch Addie Bundren, who passes away in the beginning of the book, to her burial site, and they experience several unexpected adventures on the way. Each chapter is narrated by a different Bundren family member, with each character revealing his or her inner thoughts regarding the family and the significance of this trip in particular. Stories unfold slowly, with characters touching on subjects that aren't fully realized until another character reveals another side of the event chapters later.

Dorothy Allison, [\*Bastard Out of Carolina\*](#) (1993)

Greenville County, South Carolina is home to the Boatwright family. The family consists of tough men who drink hard, work hard, play hard, and the women who marry them. At the heart of this family is Ruth Anne, a bastard daughter they refer to as Bone. As she explores her family in depth, Bone tests the loyalty of all involved, especially of her mother. Her stepfather, Glen, will not let Bone play him for a fool, as his gentleness towards her turns cold and their relationship reaches the point of no return.

Dave Eggers, [\*Zeitoun\*](#) (2009)

*Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers is an examination of the War on Terror as well as the United States government's response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, through a biographical account of the Zeitoun family. The Zeitouns were originally from Syria, but were living in New Orleans after Abdulrahman Zeitoun became a painting contractor. Abdulrahman stayed behind after the evacuation in order to protect his property. He went around the city in a canoe helping others until he was picked up and summarily arrested on suspicion of being a terrorist. Through this personal account, it becomes clear just how poor the government's response was to the people living in New Orleans, and the many injustices they were forced to endure.



Peter Mathiessen, [\*Shadow Country\*](#) (2008)

Shadow Country focuses on the life of Edgar J. Watson, a farmer at work in Florida around the dawn of the 20th century. Watson is a hard man, made even harder by legendary accounts of himself as an infamous murderer. The first part of the narrative, chronicles Watson's arrival in Florida, his years on the land, and the events leading up to his own violent death. The second part of the story focuses on Watson's son, Lucius, a WWI veteran who comes back to Florida to research the truth of his father's life. Lucius eventually finds his long-lost brother, who reveals a dark family secret. The final section of the work is Watson's memoir, where the larger-than-life figure tells his own story, revealing his experiences of childhood abuse, his fractured relationship with his children, and his deathbed feelings about his difficult life. Shadow Country is a collection of Peter Mathiessen's three novels --Mister Watson, Lost Man's River, and Bone by Bone.

## **Watch-Alikes**

[\*Trouble the Water\*](#), Zeitgeist Films (2008)

This astonishing powerful documentary takes you inside Hurricane Katrina in a way never seen on screen. Incorporating remarkable home footage shot by Kimberly Rivers Roberts-an aspiring rap artist trapped with her husband in the 9th ward-directors/producers Tia Lessin and Carl Deal weave this insider's view of Katrina with a devastating protrait of the hurricane's aftermath. Trouble the Water takes audiences on a journey that is by turns heart-stopping, infuriating, inspiring and empowering. It's not only about the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, but about the underlying issues that remained when the flood waters receded-failing public schools, record high levels of incarceration, poverty, structural racism and lack of government accountability.

[When the Levees Broke](#), Spike Lee (2006)

This intimate, heart-rending portrait of New Orleans in the wake of the destruction tells the heartbreaking personal stories of those who endured this harrowing ordeal and survived to tell the tale of misery, despair and triumph. The film also looks at a community that has been through hell and back, surviving death, devastation and disease at every turn. Yet, somehow, amidst the ruins, the people of New Orleans are finding new hope and strength as the city rises from the

ashes, buoyed by their own resilience and a rich cultural legacy.

[Treme](#), HBO (2010)

Treme is an American television drama series created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer that premiered on April 11, 2010 on HBO. It takes its name from Tremé, a neighborhood of New Orleans. The series begins three months after Hurricane Katrina as the residents of New Orleans, including musicians, chefs, Mardi Gras Indians, and other New Orleanians try to rebuild their lives, their homes and their unique culture in the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane.

[Big Easy to Big Empty: the Untold Story of the Drowning of New Orleans](#), Disinformation Company (2006)

A critical investigation of the government's management of the post-Katrina recovery efforts in New Orleans, focusing especially on unequal treatment based on race and socioeconomic status.

[Wade in the Water, Children](#), Indiepix Films (2010)

After moving to ravaged New Orleans to help with an art program for the kids who suffered from Hurricane Katrina, two filmmakers give each of the children their own video cameras to tell their stories in their own way.



Ann Arbor District Library