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2014 Jesmyn Ward (fact sheet)

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Jesmyn Ward

Author | National Book Award Winner | Memoirist

Jesmyn Ward, whose novel *Salvage the Bones* won the 2011 National Book Award for Fiction, has been called “fearless and toughly lyrical” (*The Library Journal*). Her unflinching portrayals of young black men and women struggling to thrive in a South ravaged by poverty and natural disaster have been praised for their “graphic clarity” (*The Boston Globe*) and “hugeness of heart” (*O: The Oprah Magazine*). Ward’s precise and graceful narratives make her a fitting heir to the rich literary tradition of the American South.



For Ward, her prose is personal. All three of her books—two novels and a memoir—are set on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, where Ward grew up and still makes her home. Shortly after Ward received her MFA, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, and Ward and her family were forced to evacuate their rapidly-flooding home. Later, as a professor at the University of New Orleans, Ward drove to and from work through neighborhoods leveled by the storm. Her experiences in the communities most egregiously affected by the hurricane come through in her novels, which subtly blend the creative and the personal, the imagined and the remembered.

In *Salvage the Bones*, Ward gives us the Batiste family: Esch, a pregnant fourteen-year-old, her teenage brothers, and their alcoholic father, who are watching Hurricane Katrina brew over the Gulf. Set in the twelve days immediately surrounding the arrival of the hurricane, *Salvage the Bones* is at its heart the story of four motherless children, trying to protect their home and one another against unimaginable disruption. Drawing on her own experiences as a survivor of Katrina, Ward offers a troubling but ultimately empowering tale of familial bonds in the face of overwhelming circumstances.

Where the Line Bleeds, the novel that introduced Ward’s powerful poetic voice, is the story of twins Joshua and Christophe DeLisle (their surname is also the name of Ward’s hometown), recent high school graduates who have elected to stay in their tiny Gulf Coast town. In the wake of Katrina, however, jobs are few and far between; Joshua finds work on the docks, but Christophe begins selling drugs. Ward inhabits this world—Creole, desperately poor, riddled with frustrations and the drugs used to drown them—without a trace of irony or discomfort. Like *Salvage the Bones*, *Where the Line Bleeds* depicts “a world full of despair but not devoid of

In *Men We Reaped*, Jesmyn unburies her dead, that they may live again. And through this emotional excavation, she forces us to see the problems of place and race that led these men to their early graves. Full of beauty, love, and dignity, *Men We Reaped* is a haunting and essential read.

—Natasha Trethewey, *US Poet Laureate*

“[Ward] chronicles our American story in language that is raw, beautiful and dangerous... With loving and vivid recollection, she returns flesh to the bones of statistics and slows her ghosts to live again... [It’s a] complicated and courageous testimony.”

—Tayari Jones, *The New York Times Book Review*

Masterful... *Salvage the Bones* has the aura of a classic about it.

—Ron Charles, *Washington Post*

Ward uses fearless, toughly lyrical language to convey this family’s close-knit tenderness [and] the sheer bloody-minded difficulty of rural African American life... It’s an eye-opening heartbreaker that ends in hope... You owe it to yourself to read this book.

—*Library Journal*

The novel’s hugeness of heart and fierceness of family grip hold on like Skeetah’s pitbull.

—*O: The Oprah Magazine*

hope” (*Publishers Weekly*).

Jesmyn Ward received her MFA in creative writing from the University of Michigan, where she won five Hopwood Awards for her fiction, essays, and drama. She held a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University from 2008-2010, and served as the Grisham Writer in Residence at the University of Mississippi during the following year. Ward currently teaches creative writing at the University of Southern Alabama in Mobile. In addition to the National Book Award, *Salvage the Bones* was honored with the American Library Association’s Alex Award. Ward received the Virginia Commonwealth University Cabell First Novelist Award for *Where the Line Bleeds*, which was also a finalist for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. *Where the Line Bleeds* was also an Essence magazine Book Club Selection, and was honored by the Black Caucus of the National Book Award.

Ward’s latest book, *Men We Reaped*, is a memoir that confronts the five years of Ward’s life in which she lost five young men—to drugs, accidents, suicide, and the bad luck that can follow people who live in poverty, particularly black men. Lauded as a “modern rejoinder to *Black Like Me* [and] *Beloved*,” (*Kirkus Reviews*) *Men We Reaped* is a beautiful and painful homage to Ward’s past, her ghosts, and the haunted yet hopeful place she still calls home. A finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography, it has been named one of the Best Books of 2013 by *Publishers Weekly*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, NPR, *Kirkus Review*, *New York Magazine* and *Time Magazine*.

In her talks, Ward shares her writing process and how her experiences growing up poor and black in the South continue to influence her work. As Ward said in her acceptance speech at the National Book Awards, “I understood that I wanted to write about the experiences of the poor, and the black and the rural people of the South, so that the culture that marginalized us for so long would see that our stories were as universal, our lives as fraught and lovely and important, as theirs.”

Selected Topics

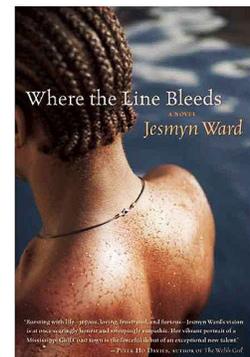
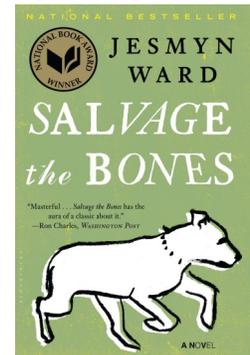
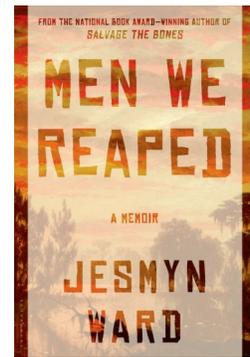
- Fiction and nonfiction writing process
- Contemporary Black experience and class disparity in the South

Selected Writings

- *Men We Reaped* (Bloomsbury USA, 2013)
- *Salvage the Bones* (Bloomsbury USA, 2011)
- *Where the Line Bleeds* (Agate Bolden, 2008)

Awards

- 2013 Finalist - National Book Critics Circle, Autobiography, *Men We Reaped*
- 2012 ALA Young Adult Library Services Association Alex Award for Young Adult Readers Winner, *Salvage the Bones*
- 2011 National Book Award, *Salvage the Bones*
- 2009 Black Caucus of the National Book Awards, *Where the Line Bleeds*
- 2009 Essence Book Club Selection, *Where the Line Bleeds*
- 2009 Finalist - Virginia Commonwealth University Cabell First Novelist Award, *Where the Line Bleeds*
- 2009 Finalist - Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, *Where the Line Bleeds*



A taut, wily novel, smartly plotted and voluptuously written. It feels fresh and urgent, but it’s an ancient, archetypal tale.

—Parul Sehgal, *The New York Times*

A fresh new voice in American literature, Ward unflinchingly describes a world full of despair but not devoid of hope.

—*Publishers Weekly*

For more information about Jesmyn Ward and her work, please visit www.lyceumagency.com.