

“I’ll See If I Can Salvage Anything!”:

A Look at Jesmyn Ward and *Salvage the Bones*

By Sydney Brangenberg

Jesmyn Ward’s novel, *Salvage the Bones*, was the 2011 National Book Award winner. Her overall intention of the novel, as she said in her acceptance speech, was 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” (Kellogg). She wanted the world to know that this story is not just a story of fiction, but that many people go through life like the characters in this story, especially in rural Southern towns. Jesmyn Ward’s childhood and upbringing not only shaped the type of person that she is but majorly influenced her writing as well. She gives us the wonderful opportunity to see how the “other half” lives and to learn and grow from that experience.

Jesmyn Ward has also published a memoir, *Men We Reaped: a memoir*. In the memoir she tells us of her childhood, growing up, and mainly focusing the deaths of five men with whom she was very close. Ward was born 3 months premature on April Fools’ Day in 1977. Her mother was only 18 and her father 20 when she was born. She was so tiny that the doctors believed that she would die, but she was a fighter and survived. She lived her first three years in California before her parents decided to move back home to DeLisle, Mississippi. They moved into a small 3-bedroom house on her great-grandmother Ellen’s land after her brother Joshua was born. In the backyard her father kept his two pit bulls, Homeboy and Mr. Cool. He taught his pit bulls to fight using a deflated bike tire, but he also treated them like one of his own children, coddling them.

When Ward was 5 her father got a new dog, Chief, who attacked her, trying to kill her and would have killed her if she had not fought back. At age 7 her parents finally decided to split up, her father already having his first child out of wedlock.

In *Salvage the Bones*, it takes place in Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, a very poor rural town, which is similar to the small town where Jesmyn Ward grew up. In an interview with Ward she said that she “is from the South and considers her town of DeLisle, Miss[issippi], her inspiration” for the setting in her novel (Kellogg). The characters in the story – Daddy, Skeetah, Randall, Esch, and Junior Batiste – refer to the location of their home as “the pit,” where they do not have any close neighbors, and could possibly be described as living in the country, surrounded by woods. The closer they get to the center of town, “the houses appear gradually, hidden behind trees, closer to one another until there are only ragged lots of woods separating them” (Ward, “Salvage the Bones” p 116). It seems like the Batiste family are in their own little world in the pit, only leaving it to go to school or if they need something from town. The reader is not even fully aware of the fact that they live in poverty in this rural Mississippi town. Ward’s eloquent writing skills weave a beautiful tale from Esch’s point of view that their home is perfect the way it is, that they have become so accustomed to their life in poverty that it is not noticeable to them anymore, let alone to the reader at first.

Ward wrote her first two novels revolving around Hurricane Katrina. For her, this was a very real experience, having actually been in her hometown of DeLisle, Mississippi when Katrina hit. She has stated in countless interviews, as well as her acceptance speech for the National Book Award, how it is very important to her “to write about the experiences of the poor and the black and the rural people of the South” (Brookes). What

most people remember about Hurricane Katrina was what happened in New Orleans and how bad things were there. People know of this because it was the main city that the media were focusing on. What many did not realize was that countless other cities and towns along the Gulf of Mexico were hit as well, but because those towns were not as publicized, people did not realize how bad things were there. Ward wanted to get her story, similar to so many others, out there to the public, to show them the lives of groups of people that rest of the world know nothing about; the lives of the African American families who live in poverty in the rural South. They were also affected, just as badly as the people of New Orleans, and she wanted to shed some light on their side of the story, their experiences.

In a few of Ward's interviews she is asked about why the Batiste family did not try to leave when they started finding out that Hurricane Katrina was going to be a big one. She answers that many people do not fully understand the reasons why these families did not leaving, thinking and assuming that they were just stupid. People did not understand that the families who lived in these places had such strong connections to their homes, these homes that had probably been in the family for several generations. They had survived through so many other hurricanes, including Hurricane Camille, that they believed they would survive this one as well with the right preparation (Courtright). Not only were these people wanting to stay with their land and homes that have been in their families for as long as they can remember, many of them could not afford to evacuate, so they did what they could to make the "final preparations" and just "wait it out" (Courtright). Ward clearly describes the reality of the hurricane season in the South in an interview with Rebecca Keith saying,

“Something that I was trying to make clearer in the book is that many people down here never evacuate for any storms. Generations of families have never evacuated. In my extended family, which consists of over 100 people, nobody ever evacuates. Some of it has to do with tradition, and of course that tradition is influenced by economics. Who has the money to pack up everything we hope to save and all family members, transport them four hours away from the coast, and pay for hotel rooms? Few people realize that hurricane season is six months long, and that the Gulf Coast is menaced by storms all the time. Evacuating is a costly proposition. Most people stay upcountry with relatives when they can, and depend on the preparations Esch details in Chapter 10: this has enabled us to survive here for generations” (Keith).

Just as Ward states, while it is hard for others to understand why people did not evacuate before or during Hurricane Katrina, it did not seem necessary at the time, and even if it did end up that way later, how were all of the poor families that lived in those areas supposed to afford the travels to a safer area? She also talks about how she did not even know what was going on in other places when Hurricane Katrina hit because the “storm had been so bad [in DeLisle] that [she] had no idea what was going on” in any other places, not even New Orleans, which had gotten a majority of the coverage during this time (Murphy).

Just like Esch's parents, Ward's parents also lived through Hurricane Camille, a Category 5 storm, that killed hundreds. After Hurricane Camille hit, the government offered the survivors the option to relocate, which Ward's father's family took, moving to Oakland, California (Ward, "Men we Reaped" 16-17). Not everyone took up that offer, like Ward's mother's family, who decided to stay in the Pass Christian, DeLisle area. Esch's character also accounts her memories of her mother telling her about living through "the legend: Camille" (Ward, "Salvage the Bones" 218). Esch's mother describes the smells, sights, and feelings during and after the storm. The one thing that Esch and Skeetah talk about remembering was the description their mother gave about how the wind sounded when Hurricane Camille hit. The wind did not sound anything like what their Mama described when Hurricane Elaine hit, from what they remember, but Hurricane Katrina definitely did. Mama had said, "a train...Camille came, and the wind sounded like a train," which was exactly what the wind sounded like to Esch, warning them of how bad this hurricane was going to be (Ward, "Salvage the Bone" 219).

Ward has also talked about her experience during Hurricane Katrina about going to a neighboring white family when talking to Emma Brockes, saying,

And there we are," says Ward, trembling slightly at the memory. "Me, my mom, my mom's husband, my elderly grandmother, my grandfather and my pregnant sister, who at eight months was very big. We're soaking wet because we've had to scramble out of the house and swim part of the way. And they open up the door. And the wind is rocking the car and they're yelling at us and we're yelling back at them because it's the only way we

can be heard, and trees are flying through the air. They shout: 'Are y'all all right?' And we're like: 'Are you serious? We're sitting outside in a category-five hurricane. Do we look O-OK?'" She stutters. "And they said: 'Well, y'all can sit outside in this field, until the water goes down, but we don't have room for you in the house. We can't let you in.' And I thought: this is some bullshit (Brookes).

Ward talks about the discrimination that is still present in the South, even now, by describing this experience. She tells of how her family and herself sat in a truck in a field during Hurricane Katrina, a category 5 storm, because their white neighbors would not let them in the house, saying that they had no room. This experience, as well as Esch's experience with their white neighbors is subtle, or not so subtle, hints at what poor, black families go through in these rural Southern towns. Not only does Ward want her readers to know how poor black families live in the South, she wants people to understand that "Black people in this country are told all the time, from all aspects, that they're nothing, that they're less than" (Murphy). With this thought ingrained in one's head, it is easy to see why it would be so difficult to think anything else about the matter. With Ward's success and Esch growing up, learning more about herself, and ultimately believing in herself in those twelve days is an inspiration at what other can accomplish.

The character's experiences in *Salvage the Bones* are a portrayal of how people living and growing up in poverty is real and that many have probably had similar experiences as Esch and her family. Esch was only 15 in the book when she realized that she was pregnant. Ward's own sister got "pregnant when she was twelve years old and gave birth when she was thirteen" (Courtright). It is not an uncommon thing for young girls to get pregnant at young ages when they are from poverty stricken areas. As Esch talks about in the books, the other girls say that there are ways to getting rid of the baby if one cannot afford an abortion. While Esch thinks through them it leads her to "these are my options, and they narrow to none" (Ward, "Salvage the Bones" 102). She basically has only one option and that is to keep the baby.

There have been study's done on how African American women have been affected by sexual assault, poverty, and mental health problems where it has been found that "25.6% of African American women are living in poverty" and are affected by stress of race, class, and gender oppression (Bryant-Davis). Not only do women have a higher risk for victimization, but that risk is even high when "their income is below poverty level, and conversely, victimization increase women's likelihood of unemployment and reduced income (Bryant-Davis). There was literature that was used in this study that found that "African American women are even more vulnerable to persistent poverty and sexual assault" because their hometowns or communities that they live in probably have "high rates of violence and substance abuse, and abuse that ultimately increase their vulnerability to being sexually assaulted" (Bryant-Davis). While this study was mainly focused on black women who lived in poverty and were sexually assaulted, Esch's sexual experiences does not fully fit the definition of sexually assault but she was coerced.

While she ultimately did give her consent, she says in the book that she just kept her mouth shut and that she did not know what would happen if she did try to resist or to put up a fight. Who is to say that many other girls did not find themselves in the same situation as Esch? This experience may be relevant or sound familiar to some, but it is also an eye-opening experience for those who have not had something like this happen.

There have also been numerous studies done looking at people, children in particular, and how growing up and living in poverty affects them. Although this study was looking at low-income urban environments instead of rural, the traumatic stress reactions are similar in that children growing up in these types of environments are often exposed to ‘severe, ongoing trauma and develop traumatic stress disorders at disproportionate rates...[by their] exposure to community violence, victimization, and/or death of family members, and maltreatment’ (Kiser et al). This study was done with mostly all African American children ages 6 to 9 and it is easy to see and understand from this study that growing up in poverty would affect a person, and not positively. While they might not entirely realize it, the stress caused by growing up and living in poverty could be a reason why children start becoming sexually active at such young ages, like Esch and Ward’s sister. This would also play a huge role in how they deal with things, such as Esch finding out about being pregnant. She is extremely stressed about what everyone will think when they find out that she not only has been sexually active at such a young age but that she got herself pregnant as well. It is a lot to deal with at so young of an age and with no mother to talk to or to get advice from.

Another study was done on urban poverty but it focused more on how it may lead to children being depressed and again, while it is for urban areas not rural, the concepts

and points are still very similar. This study was showing how low-income minority youth have extremely high risk for psychological problems because of racism, discrimination, and poverty-related stressors. These stressors have been found to cause emotions like anger, cognitions that may be hostile, and possible aggressive behavior that are part of externalizing forms of stress as a part of depression (Taylor et al). The psychological problems that come from the conditions that youth in these areas experience make perfect sense in regards to Esch's feelings about herself. While growing up without a mother she has had to find out on her own what womanhood means and what kind of woman she wants to be. By women being looked down upon by the men in her life and the way they thought of women, their objectifications of women, had Esch feeling like she was nothing and how she just "let boys have it because they wanted it, and not because I wanted to give it" in reference to having sex with all of the boys (Ward "Salvage the Bones" 16). She was also depressed throughout most of the book because Manny, his views of the patriarchal system, how he would never look Esch in the eye and his nonchalant sexist comments and implications of women being weak and inferior to men. While it did make Esch think less of herself at first, it also made her stronger by the end of the book. I was as if those final comments were what set her over the edge to finally embrace and love herself for who she is and to not rely on a man that will just keep disappointing her and will never love her the way she deserves to be loved.

There are many things that families in these rural towns do; a big pastime for them in the South is dog fighting. Skeetah and the other boys of Bois Sauvage in *Salvage the Bones* raise pit bulls and then they have the dogs fight each other. They do not do it for money, because they do not have much anyway, but they do it as entertainment and to

prove to the others that their dog is an extension of them and that they are fighters. This is common in the South here as well, not just in the story, because Ward talks about how her brother and dad also owned pit bulls as well as “half [of her] friends in the neighborhood,” where they got together and fought them (Courtright). Ward had a purpose in writing the dog fighting scene in *Salvage the Bones*, to show from their point of view what that sport means to those men that fight them, how it looks from their eyes, a very different perspective than what most are used to.

One of Ward’s main goals in writing her novels and memoir were to tell the lives of not only her childhood but how many families live in poor, rural, Southern towns. She has said that she was writing about “[her] reality” and that “this is the reality for so many people and it was the reality for [her] for a portion of [her] life” (Courtright, Martin). It is not uncommon for people that live in these places to have over 10 people living in one house. Ward even said in her memoir and several interviews that at one point in her childhood, her family of 6 moved in with her grandmother, aunts, and cousins, with a total of 13 people living under one roof (Ward, Martin). In an interview with Michel Martin, Ward states that,

I think, when I write, one of the things that I’m really attempting to do is I’m attempting to humanize my characters...

But I want to make us so human and make our stories so powerful and so touching so that the reader will empathize with those characters. That larger story in “Salvage the Bones” is just about survival and I think that,

in the end, there are things about the novel and about these characters' experiences that make their stories universal stories (Martin).

She wants the world to know, when reading her books, that the characters experiences are not just works of fiction but that real people have actually had experiences similar to these, and to inform her readers of these happenings.

While there have been attempts to help poverty stricken areas in the south, that was quite a few years ago, and not too many have been done since then, to the same capacity. There was an organization done in 1966 where a group started a "Child Development Group of Mississippi [CDGM]...organizing 84 centers in more than 50 urban and rural impoverished Negro communities in Mississippi" (Levin). This was started by Project Head Start where they created these centers to be run by a committee of the poor people from that area, where they were ultimately responsible for the success or failure of their center. While each center did have their ups and downs, most of them were a success and thrived in their perspective communities. This study, while being done almost 50 years ago, is a great start for doing something to help out our fellow human beings during their times of struggle now. We have found that stressors like racism, discrimination, and poverty lead poor black people in places like these towards depression and traumatic stress, so if we can just work more now to create places like these to help them out, we could be changing not only their lives and futures but the future of the world in general.

A very important part of *Salvage the Bones* is to inform and educate readers about the lives of African Americans living in poverty in the rural south. Jesmyn Ward says in

her acceptance speech for the 2011 National Book Award that, "I wanted to write about the experiences of the poor and the black and the rural people of the south" (Brookes). The story is through the eyes of Esch, a fifteen-year-old black girl who gets pregnant and tells how her and her family survive Hurricane Katrina. The story shows how Esch's character develops throughout the twelve days before, during, and after Katrina hit. Not only is this just a fantastically written story that draws the reader in, but it is not just a work of fiction. This is a story that many people in the rural south can relate to. When the reader reads this story, they feel like they are actually there experiencing everything that Esch is feeling and going through. It is very eye opening, especially to readers who have not known how the "other half" lives. This story makes the reader more aware of what is going on in our world that most have never known or noticed before. It is a wonderful start in broadening the majority of the world's perspectives on such matters and has hopefully made a start to change how things are, for the better.

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