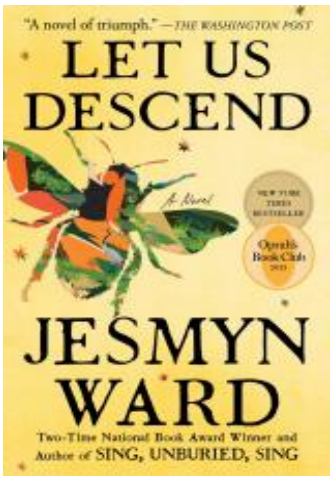
Let Us Descend

by Jesmyn Ward



About the Book

From Jesmyn Ward --- the two-time National Book Award winner, youngest winner of the Library of Congress Prize for Fiction, and MacArthur Fellow --- comes a haunting masterpiece, sure to be an instant classic, about an enslaved girl in the years before the Civil War.

LET US DESCEND is a reimagining of American slavery, as beautifully rendered as it is heart-wrenching. Searching, harrowing and replete with transcendent love, the novel is a journey from the rice fields of the Carolinas to the slave markets of New Orleans and into the fearsome heart of a Louisiana sugar plantation.

Annis, sold south by the white enslaver who fathered her, is the reader?s guide through this hellscape. As she struggles through the miles-long march, Annis turns inward, seeking comfort from memories of her mother and stories of her African warrior grandmother. Throughout, she opens herself to a world beyond this world, one teeming with spirits: of earth and water, of myth and history; spirits who nurture and give, and those who manipulate and take. While Ward leads readers through the descent, this, her fourth novel, is ultimately a story of rebirth and reclamation.

From one of the most singularly brilliant and beloved writers of her generation, this miracle of a novel inscribes Black American grief and joy into the very land --- the rich but unforgiving forests, swamps and rivers of the American South. LET US DESCEND is Jesmyn Ward?s most magnificent novel yet, a masterwork for the ages.

Discussion Guide

1. Annis describes her mother as ?a woman who hides a tender heart? (page 4). Name a few moments when Mama reveals her tenderness. How does she conceal her ?tender heart?? And, in your opinion, what is she protecting by hiding it?

2. Turn to page 6. Read from ?I take care to hide...? to the text break on page 9 (?*Queens.?*). Bees appear as a motif throughout the novel. According to this passage, what might bees symbolize in LET US DESCEND?

3. On page 33, Annis listens through the door as her half-sisters are taught a passage from Dante?s INFERNO. Dante?s INFERNO is a literary antecedent for this book --- just as Annis is accompanied on her walk south by Aza, Dante was led through the nine circles of Hell by the spirit of Virgil. Chart Annis? journey from the Carolinas to New Orleans. Can you identify any ?circles of Hell? she might have waded through? What distinguishes one from another? How did Ward?s allusions to INFERNO impact your reading of the novel?

4. Consider the role of spirits in LET US DESCEND. They can be sinister, with selfish needs and malicious plans, or angelic guides offering counsel and comfort, and everything in between. How would you characterize Aza when she first appears to Annis in Chapter 3?

5. When she arrives in New Orleans, Annis finds a new world she has never encountered --- many brown people, some even lighter than she is, are free, able to ?walk through the world as if every step they take is their own? (page 92). These women avert their eyes from Annis, Phyllis and the other enslaved people. Shortly after, a group of young boys stare at Annis, but their mother whisks them away. Why are the free people of New Orleans reluctant to look at the captives as they walk by? On the other hand, why is it so hard for Phyllis and Annis to look away from the free Black people?

6. Turn to page 113, where Annis narrates, ?New Orleans is a hive, and us the honey.? What do you think she means?

7. Discuss Annis? encounter with They Who Take and Give, the spirits of the ground, while she is confined to ?The Hole? on pages 158 to 164. How do you characterize her emotional journey across this encounter? Does this interaction alter her perception of the spirits? Did it alter yours?

8. By cutting her hair, Annis attempts to take control over one element of her life --- she severs an obvious connection to her complicated ancestry. What makes Annis? hair meaningful in this way? Why do you think she offers her hair to They Who Take and Give?

9. Consider Aza?s physical changes. For example, on page 184, she shrinks, changing form so that it almost looks to Annis that they ?could be sisters.? Note also how Aza takes on Mama Aza?s appearance throughout. Why does Aza shape shift in this way? What, if anything, is she hoping to get from Annis as a result?

10. Reflect on the events of Chapter 13. Annis, pregnant and alone in her new home, seems hopeful, healthy and strong. From where does she draw this strength? How do you envision her new life once her child is born?

11. By the end of the novel, it is clear that Aza is an imposter --- she has stolen Mama Aza?s name and hungers for Annis? love and devotion. Naming is one way to preserve history and culture, and Aza admits to taking Azagueni?s (Mama Aza?s) name so it would live. Consider the custom, practiced throughout antebellum American history, of renaming enslaved persons so that they shared a surname with their enslavers. In this historical context, what is the power of a name?

12. Discuss the roles the various spirits play in this novel. What is their fate? How do you imagine they might endure, or not, through history and into future generations?

Author Bio

Jesmyn Ward 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, the Strauss Living Prize, and the 2022 Library of Congress Prize for American Fiction. She is the winner of two National Book Awards for Fiction for SING, UNBURIED, SING and SALVAGE THE BONES. 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 a professor of creative writing at Tulane University and lives in Mississippi.

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Publication Date: September 3, 2024

Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Scribner

ISBN-10: 1982104503

ISBN-13: 9781982104504