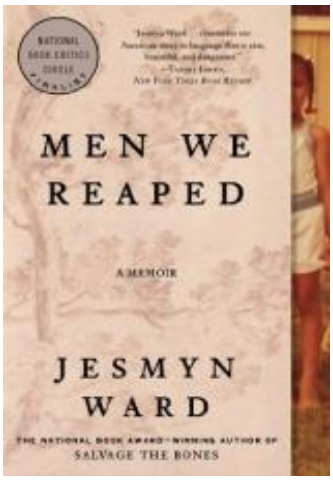
Men We Reaped: A Memoir

by Jesmyn Ward



About the Book

In five years, Jesmyn Ward lost five young men in her life --- to drugs, accidents, suicide, and the bad luck that can follow people who live in poverty, particularly black men. Dealing with these losses, one after another, made Jesmyn ask the question: Why? And as she began to write about the experience of living through all the dying, she realized the truth --- and it took her breath away. Her brother and her friends all died because of who they were and where they were from, because they lived with a history of racism and economic struggle that fostered drug addiction and the dissolution of family and relationships. Jesmyn says the answer was so obvious she felt stupid for not seeing it. But it nagged at her until she knew she had to write about her community, to write their stories and her own.

Jesmyn grew up in poverty in rural Mississippi. She writes powerfully about the pressures this brings, on the men who can do no right and the women who stand in for family in a society where the men are often absent. She bravely tells her story, revisiting the agonizing losses of her only brother and her friends. As the sole member of her family to leave home and pursue higher education, she writes about this parallel American universe with the objectivity distance provides and the intimacy of utter familiarity.

A brutal world rendered beautifully, Jesmyn Ward?s memoir will sit comfortably alongside Edwidge Danticat?s BROTHER, I'M DYING, Tobias Wolff's THIS BOY'S LIFE, and Maya Angelou?s I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS.

Discussion Guide

1. The title Men We Reaped comes from a Harriet Tubman quote, which opens the book. Revisit the quote and discuss its relevance to Ward?s memoir. How does the title convey the themes of loss, inequality, and community in the book?

2. The memoir chronicles five deaths: Roger, Demond, C. J., Ronald, and Joshua. What do these five tragedies have in common? What are the differences among them? What do these deaths say about the experience of black masculinity today?

3. Consider the intricate structure of MEN WE REAPED, which narrates the men?s deaths in reverse order, from 2004 to 2000, and also relates the story of the author?s upbringing. What happens when ?the past and the future meet? in Ward?s final chapter (213)? What is the effect of delaying this initial experience of loss until the end of the memoir?

4. Discuss the setting of DeLisle, Mississippi, originally named ?Wolf Town? by its early settlers. What wolf-like wildness persists in DeLisle, even today? How does Ward bring the sights, sounds, smells, and despairs of DeLisle to life?

5. After Roger?s death, Ward?s ex-boyfriend Brandon declared, ?They picking us off, one by one? (38). Does Ward ever ?figure out who the they that wrote our story might be? (38)? Who is responsible for the tragedies of this community?

6. Discuss the gender roles that men and women play in Ward?s family and community. What are some of the freedoms --- and risks --- of being a black man in Mississippi? What are the unique challenges of being a girl, a woman, a wife, and a mother in this community? How do the men and women in Ward?s life fight and succumb to these gender roles?

7. ?Here, family has always been a mutable concept? (110). Consider the flexible bonds of kinship in DeLisle. What makes each of the men memorialized in MEN WE REAPED --- Joshua, Ronald, C. J., Demond, and Roger --- ?family,? in Ward?s eyes?

8. ?My entire community suffered from a lack of trust,? Ward writes (169). Why do members of the community distrust society at large, as well as one another? What are the consequences of this epidemic of distrust in Ward?s community?

9. Just before the family moved from Gulfport to DeLisle, Joshua discovered a hidden cellar in the woods behind their house. Why did the cellar scare Ward as a child? What fears and uncertainties did the cellar symbolize?

10. Discuss the influence of Ward?s father upon the author and her siblings. How was their father a positive as well as negative role model for his children?

11. Ward asks, ?How could I know then that this would be my life: yearning to leave the South and doing so again and again, but perpetually called back to home by a love so thick it choked me?? (195) Consider the hold that the South has on Ward during her adult life. Why has she left and returned home, again and again?

12. Although Ward confronted overt racism at school every day, ?Joshua faced a different kind of racism, a systemic kind? (208). Compare these two siblings? experiences of discrimination during their school years. What survival mechanisms did each child develop in order to ward off these types of racism?

13. Revisit the story of Joshua?s death in 2000. What regrets does Ward still have about her final conversations with

her brother? What injustices followed Joshua?s death, and how did Ward?s family and community cope with their grief and anger?

14. Ward writes, ?I thought being unwanted and abandoned and persecuted was the legacy of a poor southern Black woman. But as an adult, I see my mother?s legacy anew? (250). Compare both ways of evaluating Ward?s mother?s life: as a series of burdens, and as a series of victories over those burdens. How has Ward made peace with her mother?s legacy? What maternal lessons does Ward hope to pass along to her own young daughter?

15. Ruminating on what Joshua?s life is worth, Ward writes, ?It is worth more than I can say. And there?s my dilemma, because all I can do in the end is say? (243). Discuss the conflict between silence and speech in Men We Reaped. When have words failed Ward? In what ways are words inadequate in measuring her losses? How might writing this memoir have helped Ward combat feelings of inadequacy in the face of loss?

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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