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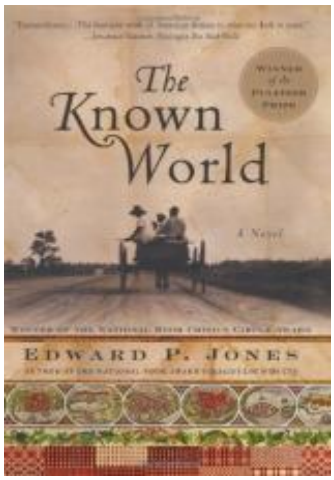
The Known World: A Novel

by Edward P. Jones



About the Book

Henry Townsend, a black farmer, bootmaker, and former slave, has a fondness for **Paradise Lost** and an unusual mentor -- William Robbins, perhaps the most powerful man in antebellum Virginia's Manchester County. Under Robbins's tutelage, Henry becomes proprietor of his own plantation -- as well as of his own slaves. When he dies, his widow, Caldonia, succumbs to profound grief, and things begin to fall apart at their plantation: slaves take to escaping under the cover of night, and families who had once found love beneath the weight of slavery begin to betray one another. Beyond the Townsend estate, the known world also unravels: low-paid white patrollers stand watch as slave "speculators" sell free black people into slavery, and rumors of slave rebellions set white families against slaves who have served them for years.

An ambitious, luminously written novel that ranges seamlessly between the past and future and back again to the present, **The Known World** weaves together the lives of freed and enslaved blacks, whites, and Indians -- and allows all of us a deeper understanding of the enduring multidimensional world created by the institution of slavery.

Discussion Guide

1. Why is the character of Moses significant to the novel? How would you characterize his relationship with Henry and Caldonia Townsend? What about with his wife and child?

2. What is the significance of the title, **The Known World**? What "known world" is charted in John Skiffington's map in the jail? What world is charted in The Creation described by Calvin in his letter to his sister Caldonia? What role does the land and its borders play in this book?

3. Who is William Robbins and how does he impact the lives of blacks on neighboring plantations? Did you find his

relationships with Henry, Augustus, and Mildred Townsend, and Philomena, Dora, and Louis compelling?

4. What is the significance of the Augustus Townsend character? In what ways is Augustus a victim of attitudes about slavery in the South? In what ways is he a victor? How did you respond to his captivity and its outcome?

5. How would you characterize Jebediah Dickinson? What explains his sudden appearance at the Elston farm? When Fern says of Jebediah: "With him there ... I feel as if I belong to him, that I am his property," what does she mean?

6. Were relationships between parents and children notably different during the era of slavery than in the present day? Consider Caldonia, Calvin, and Maude; William Robbins, Patience, and Dora; and Augustus, Mildred, and Henry in your evaluations.

Author Bio

Edward P. Jones was born and raised in Washington, D.C. Winner of the Pen/Hemingway Award and recipient of the Lannan Foundation Grant, Jones was educated at Holy Cross College and the University of Virginia. His first book, **Lost in the City** was originally published by William Morrow in 1992 and shortlisted for the National Book Award. Mr. Jones was named a National Book Award finalist for a second time with the publication of his debut novel **The Known World** (Amistad 2003). He lives in Arlington, Virginia.

Critical Praise

"Beautifully written . . .[it] ought to enjoy the massive readership that Charles Frazier?s runaway hit, **Cold Mountain** did."

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