Salvage the Bones by Jesmyn Ward

Enduring a hardscrabble existence as the children of alcoholic and absent parents, four siblings from a coastal Mississippi town prepare their meager stores for the arrival of Hurricane Katrina while struggling with such challenges as a teen pregnancy and a dying litter of prize pups.


About the Author: Jesmyn Ward is a former Stegner fellow at Stanford and Grisham Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of South Alabama.

Questions for discussion

1. How would you describe the Batiste family—first, as a family unit, then each of the members, Esch (our narrator), Claude (the father), Randall, Skeetah, and Junior? What motivates (or not) each of them? Which family member frustrates you most? Which do you admire most?

2. Talk about Bois Sauvage and its deprivations—the poverty, unemployment and housing. How does the area shape the people, especially young people, who live there? Or the reverse—do its residents shape Bois Sauvage?

3. The love affair Skeetah has with China is very much at the heart of this story. Is Skeetah right to rob neighbors to obtain medicine he needs for her?

4. Are you disturbed by the book’s concentration on dog fighting? How does the author portray the fighting? Does the love Skeetah has for China contradict your understanding of that culture?

5. What about Esch’s pregnancy? Why might the author have created a narrator, and central character, as a young pregnant teenager? What, overall, does the author of this book suggest about the nature of motherhood?

6. What is the symbolic meaning of Esch’s fascination with the myth of Medea? What does the author mean, in an interview with the Paris Review, when she says...

Medea is in Hurricane Katrina because her power to unmake worlds, to manipulate the elements, closely
aligns with the storm. And [Medea is] in Esch, too.*

7. Suspense is results from the fact that readers are anxious to learn what happens to characters. However, given that readers know the outcome of Katrina—that it will destroy almost everything in its path—how does Ward create suspense in this story?

8. In what way is Katrina both destructive and cleansing? What does Katrina represent symbolically?

9. In the book’s title, the word "salvage" is close to "savage." According to the author, the term savage has honor to it: meaning that, when all has been lost, "you are strong, you are fierce, and you possess hope."* Talk about the interplay between those two words—salvage and savage—in other words, the way the two come together in this book.

10. Were you disappointed in how the book ended? Ward, having experienced firsthand the horrors of Katrina, has said in the Paris Review...

I realized that if I was going to assume the responsibility of writing about my home, I needed narrative ruthlessness. I couldn’t dull the edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us.*

Do you agree with her? Or is her view of life too harsh? Isn't there also the possibility that life will spare us? What do you think?

(Questions by LitLovers.)

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