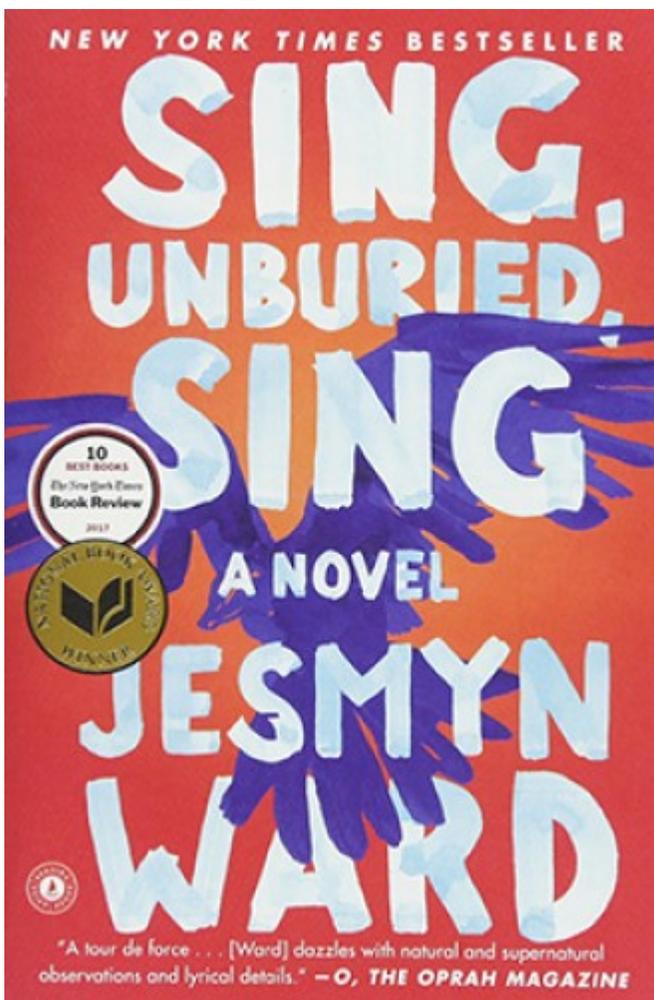


The ghosts and the not-yet-dead

Jesmyn Ward's novel is a descent into hell on earth. I couldn't put it down.

by [David Crowe](#) in the [October 10, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Sing, Unburied, Sing

A novel

By Jesmyn Ward

Scribner

MacArthur “genius grant” winner Jesmyn Ward seems incapable of writing a boring scene—or if she ever wrote one, she had the good sense not to put it in front of her readers. I read *Sing, Unburied, Sing* with uninterrupted fascination and emotional investment, with that elevated heartbeat we feel when we know we’ve found an author really worth our time. This in spite of the fact that the novel is an unrelenting record of sufferings, one child abuse or lynching or torturing by butchery or prison rape or bad trip or cancer death after another. It’s a descent into a hell on earth, but one that deserves our attention because these sufferings are real in our America.

At the heart of the novel is one of the most beautiful relationships I can recall encountering in a recent literary work. Jojo, the 13-year-old son of a white imprisoned father and an African American drug-addicted mother, must take round-the-clock care of his three-year-old sister, Kayla, for the pathetically sad reason that their mother does not care much about them. Jojo is a naturally loving, patient parent figure. Again and again, he cleans up his sister’s vomit, comforts her in her febrile crying, rocks her to sleep, and connives to find food for her when she wakes. He carries her out of the reach of their abusing father. Loving his sister continually is Jojo’s calling and his gift. For Kayla’s part, she humanizes her big brother by giving him this work of love to perform and by loving him back.

Love is complicated and unsentimental in this novel. Jojo calls his mother by her given name “Leonie” because he will not admit that she has ever behaved toward him as a mother should. Leonie’s mother, Mam, admits on her deathbed that she realized Leonie “ain’t got the mothering instinct” when they were out shopping together and Leonie ate a snack in front of baby Jojo, who sat there unfed and “crying hungry.” “I knew then,” says Mam.

What she knew was that, although she was a loving parent herself, she had produced a daughter who had no compassion, no love, and no ability to sense another’s pain, not even her own crying child. This condition seems to have preceded Leonie’s abuse of methamphetamines, opioids, and other drugs, so she is morally responsible for her coldness. Jojo is able to be a warmly loving parent to little Kayla only because Leonie’s parents, Pop and Mam, have shown him a patient and selfless love—Pop because he is a disciplined man and Mam because she prays to the Mother Mary and an African water deity named Mami Wata.

Jojo proves his love and his courage during a trip he takes with his sister, mother, and the mother's coworker Misty in an old, cluttered car carefully redesigned to hide the drugs they are transporting. The four of them travel to Parchman prison in Mississippi, where Leonie's husband, Michael, is about to be released from his term of incarceration. Along the way, the young women use drugs, sell drugs, and give drugs away. Michael, eventually welcomed into the car for the trip home, proves to be no better a parent than Leonie.

The setting of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is the same town as in Ward's second novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011)—Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, which is still dotted with FEMA housing and other signs of post-Katrina recovery. Both novels are meditations on America's racial pathologies. Both won the National Book Award for Fiction.

In one chilling scene in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*—perhaps Ward's best—an unlikely intervention prevents a white police officer from shooting Jojo for utterly absurd reasons. The scene recalls the deaths of Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and many others at the hands of fearful and perhaps hateful officers of the law. The book's genius, however, is not that it documents racial outrages. Its genius is in asking what love can and must do when racism is converted, as it so often is, to violent and cruel action.

Further, Ward is careful to blend white and black parents and grandparents in the extended family at the heart of the story. She seems determined to show that pathologies some associate with African Americans are almost always caused by poverty and other aspects of class—not to mention by cultural training and existential fear.

The title seems to refer to two different kinds of “unburied” souls whom we wish would sing. There are ghosts in the story, specifically, murdered black men who hover around living people, only some of whom can see or hear them. Jojo is one of those who can see and hear spirits, and so is Kayla, though she is too young to understand who or what she is seeing. Perhaps surprisingly, given her lack of sensitivity in other matters, their mother, Leonie, sees and hears the unburied too. She is visited regularly by her dead brother, a star high school athlete murdered by his own white teammates. Pop and Jojo are visited by a boy who didn't make it out of Parchman a generation earlier.

These ghosts, still suffering the scars of their murders, haunt the living characters, seeking some kind of consolation or redress. The question is how such ghosts, which seem to represent unwelcome memory, may be exorcised. There is a shocking confession involved in these exorcisms, an admission by Pop about a terrible responsibility he had to perform in the interest of compassion.

The living people in this novel, like all of us, are also “unburied”—that is, moving inexorably toward our deaths. Ward suggests that we too must find or make peace. Otherwise, like Leonie and Michael, we will be despairing, deadened, drugged, and little good to others.