

Biography of Jesmyn Ward



Born in DeLisle, Mississippi in 1977

Her Works:

Where the Line Bleeds, 2008

Salvage the Bones, 2011 – National Book Award

The Men We Reaped, 2013 (memoir)

Sing, Unburied, Sing, 2017 – National Book Award

Her life experiences inspired her works:

- Her father once bred pit bulls for fighting like Skeetah in *Salvage the Bones*.
- Her brother was killed by drunk driver, which inspired *Where the Line Bleeds* (“Jesmyn Ward”). Leonie’s brother, Given, also died an early and violent death in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.
- Ward’s hometown of DeLisle suffered massive damage during Hurricane Katrina, the event that inspired *Salvage the Bones*.
- *Men We Reaped*, a memoir, chronicles the deaths of five young African-American men from Ward’s own community.

Further life events:

- Ward’s father left the family at an early age and she was raised by her mother and grandmother.
- Her mother’s employer paid for Ward to attend a private school where she faced racism and economic discrimination
- She won a full scholarship to Stanford University, where she received both a bachelor’s degree in English in 1999 and a master’s in media studies and communication in 2000.
- She has served as a fellow at Stanford, a writer-in-residence at the Univ of Mississippi, an associate professor at the Univ of South Alabama, and is currently an associate professor at Tulane.

What Is Magical Realism?

Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory, p 313

- “A style of literature which integrates a realist mode of writing with fantastical or marvelous events treated as perfectly ordinary occurrences.”
- Often “there is a distinct political purpose behind introducing the marvelous.”
- “The device of magical realism... enables the writer to critique belief, memory, and the imagination as historical forces.”

The Encyclopedia of World Literature in the Twentieth Century

- A “fusion of the beliefs and superstitions of different cultural groups that included Hispanic... creole... the native peoples, and the African slaves.”

The Concise Dictionary of Oxford Terms

- Magical realism “draw[s] upon the energies of fable, folk tale, and myth while maintaining a strong contemporary social relevance.”

These definitions establish magical realism as drawing upon **folk and myth origins** of native people, including African slaves, to present fantastical elements as ordinary occurrences. These fantasy aspects within the narrative **represent history or memory** and serve a social or political purpose.

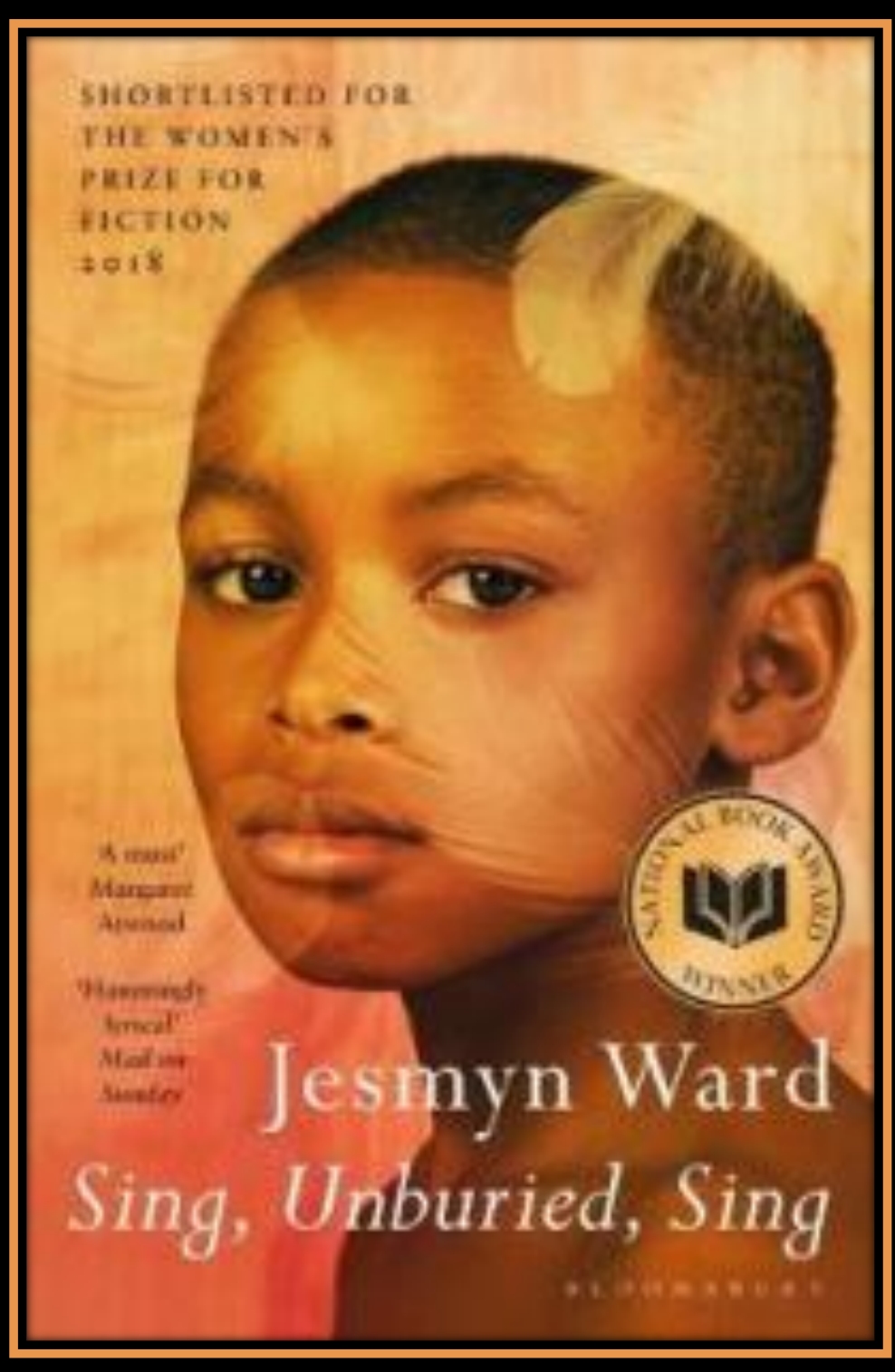
Magical Realism in Jesmyn Ward’s Sing, Unburied, Sing

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Fantastical Elements in the Novel

Ghost of Given: Leonie sees her brother Given’s ghost when she is high. Given, who died in a violent race-related shooting, haunts Leonie’s decisions and appears to judge her silently. **He represents all the wrongful deaths in the black community** and his visits Leonie to chastise her for not doing more with her life while simultaneously holding her back by refusing to leave. Mam calls out to the ghost of Given when she is dying. This ghost links Mam and Leonie in an intrinsic way that Leonie doesn’t realize. It grounds her as part of the family.

Animals: Jojo has a special connection to animals; he hears their voices in his head. Pop also has a connection with animals, mainly dogs. **Jojo’s ability to understand animals links him to Pop** genetically and in a powerful emotional way that Jojo needs to feel belonging.



Ghost of Richie: The ghost of Richie shows up when they pick Michael up from Parchman. Only Jojo and Kayla can see the ghost, but Pop knew Richie when he was sentenced to Parchman as a boy. This provides further connection between Pop and Jojo. Richie **represents the memory of the atrocities committed on young black men** at places like Parchman prison. The fact that only Jojo can see him seems to indicate that other young people, like Leonie, are unaware of their past and are losing touch with their history.

Healing: Mam has knowledge of herbs and traditional medicines, and she also knows French and speaks to the Yoruba spirits. **These practices connect Mam’s knowledge to the voodoo culture of New Orleans.** Mam tries to teach Leonie the skill, but Leonie does not pay enough attention to learn it properly. This represents a disconnect between Leonie and her heritage that she tries to repair several times during the novel. She fails to make a purgative for Kayla, but through Mam’s tutelage recites a litany to ease Mam’s death.

Objectives

Does the lens of magical realism illuminate or limit the text of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*?

Is magical realism strictly a Latin American genre, or can it be expanded to include other cultures?

The Genre Limits the Novel

- **African magic is different:** Lydie Moudileno, writing about the genre of the African novel as a whole, cautions against designating them as magical realism. She maintains that the African novel derives from African sources. Toni Morrison, as quoted in A. Lobodzic’s article, agreed that the magic practiced by African-Americans is inherently different than that practiced by Latin American people. She explained that while Latin American people were still connected with their cultural and magical traditions, African-American slaves had to create their own traditions.
- **African sources should be acknowledged:** James Mellis advocates for a new genre called African-based spiritual fiction. He specifically sees West African Yoruba and Haitian-derived voodoo at work in Ward’s novel. Moudileno agrees that the African elements are more important to acknowledge because linking it to magical realism mutes the culturally unique origins.
- **Magical Realism does not fit it all:** Lobodzic points out that not all of the magic in these texts can be explained by magical realism, which presents magic as an “unremarkable occurrence.” Lobodzic uses examples from *Beloved*, but this applies to the culminating scene in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* as well. When Mam is dying, the veil is pulled back so that she sees Richie and Given, and as she cries out to them; Leonie is also affected by their presence which creates a “shouting [that] fill[s] the room like a flood” (Ward 267). The event is far from “unremarkable” for Leonie and the whole family.

The Genre Illuminates the Novel

- **Postcolonial Fiction:** The strongest argument for including this novel under the genre of magical realism is that it carries a message of protest against Western structures of power associated with colonial rule. This definition of magical realism, supported by Wendy Faris and Stephen Slemon, shows how the use of folk tale and native myths destabilize traditional narrative forms and empower native traditions. Although this has most often been applied to Latin American cultures, Faris argues that it applies to African-American traditions that were formed from enslaved people.
- **Magic as Shared History:** Mehri Razmi and Leyli Jamali show how the ghosts in *Beloved* and other similar novels create a connection to a shared cultural history. They call this “remembered history” rather than “taught history.” P. G. Foreman further supports that magical realism can provide a “bridge to tradition” through storytelling and reclaiming folklore. Toni Morrison feared that *Beloved* would be unpopular because “black people don’t want to remember” and her novel brought memories of slavery viscerally to the surface. Ward uses her ghosts in the same way; Richie will not let Pap forget about Parchman, and Given will not let Leonie forget about racial violence.
- **African Magical Realism:** Ato Quayson advocates for an expansion of the genre to include African origins and explains some of the distinctions between Latin American and African magical realism. African magical realism sometimes creates a separate realm for the fantastical but blurs the boundary between this and the real world. This is true in Ward’s novel, particularly at the end when Jojo finds the tree full of ghosts and Kayla tries to “soothe” them to “go home” (Ward 284).

Conclusions

The term “magical realism,” on its own, cannot convey the power or impact of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. However, it is an accurate assessment of one of the narrative devices Jesmyn Ward uses in her National Book Award winning work.

While magical realism is not the only device used in the book, it is a prominent element, and describing the novel this way helps readers and critics know what to expect as they read. The ghosts, in particular, are presented as being just as real and present as the living characters; one even narrates a couple of chapters. However, this is not the only tradition present in the novel. There are some elements of the fantastical that do not align with the genre. The voodoo practices of the gris gris bag and the litany are cultural religious practices of Yoruba-derived Vodun, and to consider these to be elements of magical realism would be to devalue the voodoo tradition.

The genre of magical realism should ultimately be understood as broader than the Latin American tradition alone, and many critics advocate for this.

A complex novel such as this cannot be limited to one genre, and to do so would be an incomplete analysis. This is true of either magical realism or James Mellis’s concept of the African-based spiritual fiction genre. Therefore, it is most accurate to see the presence of both traditions in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and to acknowledge the genius of Jesmyn Ward in utilizing the full array of tools and traditions available to her.

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