

# **Men We Reaped Study Guide**

## **Men We Reaped by Jesmyn Ward**

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## Summary

The Men We Reaped, by Jesmyn Ward, is the story of her life as well as the lives of five young Black men in her community who die early deaths. In her memoir, Ward seeks answers for the causes of these frequent early deaths as well as to give voice to the story of life as a Black person in the South. The Men We Reaped falls within the memoir genre. Like most memoirs, the book is written entirely in the past tense as the author reflects on her past as a child and as a young adult experiencing the deaths of her brother and friends.

Ward describes the small towns of DeLisle and Pass Christian where she grew up. She remembers riding with her siblings to visit her father and telling ghost stories. She is driven to write her memoir when she realizes that she can no longer stay silent about the deaths that have occurred in her community.

Ward's family history is full of violence, substance abuse, early deaths, racism, and women raising children on their own. Both of Ward's parents come from broken homes. Ward's father moves to California as a young man and her mother follows. The two marry.

Roger is the last of the five men to die. Ward gets to know him through Charine. Rog is a cocaine user and dies from a combination of cocaine and pills that causes him to have a heart attack.

Ward is born a sickly child in California. She survives despite being given poor odds and her parents are convinced she is a fighter. Ward's father becomes homesick and wants to move back to Mississippi. Ward's mother doesn't want to go, but agrees to because she loves her husband and is pregnant with Joshua.

Joshua and Ward learn lessons about violence when Ward is attacked by a pit bull and Joshua is involved in a moped accident.

Nerissa is born and Ward's parents begin fighting. Ward's mother realizes that her husband will never be faithful.

Ward meets Demond at Nerissa's apartment. He's different from other boys because he was raised in a stable, two parent home. He takes his responsibilities seriously and testifies in trials against a murderer and a drug dealer. He is shot as he comes home from work one night.

Ward's father uses money being saved to buy land for a home to buy a motorcycle. The family moves in with Ward's grandmother Dorothy.

Ward turns to books to escape her chaotic world in which her parents fight and her father leaves for weeks at a time.



While living with her extended family, Ward learns that life is easier for boys. Her cousin Aldon is not punished for smoking, but she is. She also sees the way her father gets to ride away on his motorcycle. She seeks to gain her father's approval by eating a raw oyster and climbing her rope swing.

Ward hears her grandmother worrying about her father and uncle being arrested just because they are black and she has nightmares about her father being taken away by the police.

C.J. is Ward's cousin whom she first got to know when he was six. C.J. is extraordinarily athletic and likes to show off. He dates Charine and is loyal and protective, but his behavior is sometimes erratic. C.J. snorts cocaine. He often tells people he feels like he won't be around for long. C.J. dies when the car he is in is struck by a train as they cross the tracks where the signal lights are broken and there is no reflective arm.

Ward's father has left and Ward's mother moves them to Orange Grove. Ward's mother begins working as a housekeeper for a rich White family. Ward begins to hate herself and becomes depressed. Ward's mother gives Ward the responsibility of helping to care for her younger siblings and take care of the house. Ward's grades decline and a boy tries to force himself on her, which she believes she deserves. The children miss living in DeLisle so Ward's mother buys some land there and they move back.

Ward meets Ronald when she is a counselor at a day camp and he is a camper. He's funny and confident. As an adult he seems happy to Ward who later learns that he suffers from depression and drug abuse. Ronald commits suicide.

Ward's mother's employer offers to pay her tuition to attend a private school because she is being bullied. She is the only Black girl there and has several experiences of racism.

Her father is living in New Orleans. She and her siblings visit him there sometimes. Her mother sends them with bags of groceries because she doesn't trust their father to feed them.

Ward asks her mother to allow her to go to boarding school in California to escape the racism at her school. Her mother refuses. Ward makes herself a promise that she will go to college out of state.

Ward begins to explore literature written by Black authors because she is sometimes appalled at the way Black people are written about in other books.

She gets drunk for the first time at the age of sixteen and has a hangover the next day. Joshua advises her to try marijuana because it doesn't cause hangovers.

Ward learns that Joshua is selling crack to earn money to help his father pay the bills.

Joshua is the first of the young men to die. Ward moves home after completing her master's degree. She and Joshua both try to find jobs. Joshua takes a job as a valet at



a casino. Ward is unable to find work, so she goes to New York for interviews. While she is there, Joshua is hit by a drunk driver and he dies. The man, who is White, receives a very light sentence.

Ward returns to New York and considers cutting her wrists. She tattoos one wrist with Joshua's name and the other with the signature he used on letters to her to prevent herself from committing suicide.

Ward leaves New York and learns that her grief will never leave her, only change over time. Ward's father stops working after Joshua's death and her mother spends every anniversary of his death locked in her room. Ward also locks herself in her room to cry on his death anniversary.

Ward remembers how special it made her feel when Joshua would ask her to ride with him in her car. She imagines that when her life is over, Joshua will ride up and ask her to go for a ride one more time.



# Prologue

## Summary

The Men We Reaped, by Jesmyn Ward, is a memoir about Ward's life growing up as a Black female amongst poverty, violence, and substance abuse in Mississippi. While telling the story of her life, Ward also examines the lives of five Black men who died violent deaths at a young age, including her brother. Ward takes an honest look at the factors that affect her community and how they play into these early deaths while giving voice to the under-told story of the lives of Black people in the South.

In the Prologue, Ward and her siblings ride with their mother from their home in DeLisle, Mississippi to their father's house in Shrewsbury, a Black neighborhood in New Orleans. Her brother, Joshua, tells Ward and her two sisters, Nerissa and Charine, that there is a ghost in the house. Ward doesn't believe him. She is in junior high and attends a primarily white private school where the students talk about New Orleans as the "murder capital" and tell stories about White people being shot by Black gangs. Her classmates always look at her when they talk about this kind of violence.

Ward has uncles who live in New Orleans. Her favorite is Uncle Bookie who would take them to buy ice pops and play games with them. Uncle Bookie and Ward's father also takes them to watch dog fights in the park where Ward and her siblings cling to Uncle Bookie until the fights are over.

Ward doesn't understand how the New Orleans she sees can be the same New Orleans she hears about from her classmates. Her parents also talk about the violence there, but she never sees it.

When Ward's mother takes them back to DeLisle, they are all always sad to be leaving. Ward doesn't like the idea of returning to school where her classmates look at her after talking about Black people.

DeLisle and Pass Christian are the towns that Ward's family is from. They are small, sleepy towns where many of the families have lived for generations. The people there are poor and working-class and live in small, modest houses. Both towns were devastated by Hurricane Katrina and are being rebuilt by developers, which makes it harder for Ward to return home as an adult. She is reminded of Joshua saying that "somebody died here."

Between the years of 2000 and 2004, five young men that Ward grew up with died violently. Her brother was the first. Now, when she walks through DeLisle, she cannot forget that the ghosts that haunt her were people once. The streets seem empty and the only sound is her cousin's parrot screaming. She has been silent about the deaths, but now feels she must tell the story.



## Analysis

The *Men We Reaped* falls within the memoir genre. Ward has chosen to write the entire memoir in past tense. This is typical of most memoirs since the author is telling about events that have happened in her past as well as the past of her family and the town.

The Prologue section of Ward's memoir introduces the reader to the subject matter of the book while also drawing the reader into some of the personal details of Ward's life. Readers are given a brief glimpse of what Ward and her siblings were like as children and how they lived their lives. Ward indicates that she grew up in a single parent home since her mother is taking her and her siblings to their father's house. There is an obvious bond between the siblings as they whisper to one another about the house their father lives in and the way that Ward pulls her sisters closer when she is frightened. While there is apparent warmth and love in her story, Ward also makes it clear that there is also much darkness and death, and this is the true subject matter of the memoir.

Ward uses the section to explain her need to tell the story not only of her own life, but also of the lives of the young men who died. She believes people like her have been silent for too long or have been kept silent and she can no longer allow the silence to continue. Ward uses the image of a screaming parrot as a symbol of her own need to "scream" the truth about the prevalence of death in young Black men from the South. She talks about the silence of the streets of DeLisle post Hurricane Katrina and how the scream of the parrot is the only sound she hears. Now, Ward feels the need to make her own voice heard amidst the silence.

Ward includes a vignette about her brother telling her and her younger sister a ghost story as they travel to their father's house in New Orleans. This story is a metaphor for the ghosts that she and her family and friends live with as people who witness early deaths far too often. Ward cannot help but remember Joshua's statement about someone dying as she thinks back to his death and the deaths of her four friends.

Three of the major themes of the memoir are introduced in the Prologue: home, violence, and racism. Ward speaks to the theme of home when she talks about how she is drawn back home time and time again, though the journey is often difficult, especially since Hurricane Katrina has devastated her hometown and displaced many of the people she grew up with. DeLisle and Pass Christian, the towns Ward and many of her family members call home, are introduced as sleepy small towns where the people all know one another and many of the families have lived there for several generations. Throughout the book, Ward will speak of the pull that home has on people, regardless of the tragic events that may have happened there. She will forever be drawn back to the South as were her own parents.

The theme of violence is introduced in that Ward states that the five young men whose stories she tells died violent deaths. However, she also infuses the memoir with an undercurrent of violence in that she mentions watching dog fights in the park with her uncle and father as a child. Having been introduced to such a terrible and bloody



pastime at a young age, Ward makes it clear that violence is simply a part of life in her community. She also talks about her classmates referring to New Orleans as the “murder capital.” This detail also shows the great divide that exists between Ward and her White classmates since she sees New Orleans in a much different light since her father and uncles live there. She enjoys going to New Orleans and is always sad when she has to leave.

Racism is introduced as a theme when Ward talks about the way her White classmates often talk about Black people in a negative way and then look over at her. Ward does not like her school and is saddened at leaving her father’s house in part because she knows she must return to school where, the reader will later learn, she is the victim of bullying because of the color of her skin. Ward makes the conscious choice to capitalize “Black” and “White,” which are not typically capitalized. This is likely because these are the terms used to describe a person’s ethnicity where she comes from. She is aware that people are categorized and even judged by the color of their skin, making these descriptive terms of great importance. Capitalizing them shows the importance of skin colors in her community.

## Vocabulary

reconcile, proclivities, ramshackle, coaxed, engenders, infidelity, displaced, razed, subsumed



# We Are in Wolf Town

## Summary

This chapter begins by telling about some of the author's ancestors. Some of the people on both her mother's and father's sides look almost white in the old black and white photographs while some are very dark skinned.

Prior to being named DeLisle, the town was called Wolf Town. The Wolf river runs through town and empties into the DeLisle Bayou. The author tells people that the town was originally named after a wolf before it was tamed because she wants to call to mind the wildness of the town's past. She wants to tell people about a wild animal she once saw that was black and looked at her and her friends like they were intruding, but she says she doesn't because she's not eloquent.

Most of the people in DeLisle are related. Some of the White families and the Black families have the same last name, but they don't talk about being family. Ward shares the stories of her ancestors on both sides of her family. On her maternal grandmother's side, there is a couple with a husband who was black and a wife that was white. They had twelve children and had to be careful when visiting the wife's family due to the Klan being active in the area. On her mother's paternal grandfather's side of the family, her ancestors are White and Native American; the union of a White man and a Native American woman caused the White family to disown their son. Ward's mother's maternal great-grandfather was Native American and his wife was Haitian. He built a school so that their mixed-race children could be educated, but was later shot by Revenues when he was discovered making liquor during Prohibition. Ward's paternal grandparents owned a farm. Her great-grandmothers were both of olive-skinned and spoke with Creole French accents. Her great-grandmother Maman Vest told Ward stories of her dead husband and that he had once visited her after his death, but she never spoke about the son she lost in the Vietnam war. There are a number of men in Ward's ancestry who died at young ages and that makes her think sometimes that DeLisle is the wolf.

Ward imagines the way her parents might have met. Her mother is olive-skinned and her father is the color of pecans. When he was young, her father lost an eye when his cousin accidentally shot him with a BB gun, so her father wore a patch until he was older and could get a glass eye. Ward imagines that they would have known some of the same people since the town is small.

In 1969, Hurricane Camille hit Mississippi. Ward's father was 13 and her mother was 11. At about the same time, young Black men were dying in Vietnam, there were riots in the U.S., and crosses were being burned. When the hurricane devastated the area, Ward's father's family lived in a tent city. When the government offered victims of the hurricane a chance to relocate, her father's family moved to California. The author notes that the government again relocated people after Hurricane Katrina instead of giving them the



necessary tools and help to rebuild. Her father's family continued to visit Mississippi in the summers. Her father learned kung fu and was a natural at it. He became muscular and strong. He joined a gang and dated a lot of girls. Because his parents were divorced, he acted as the father-figure in the household.

Ward's mother was the oldest girl in her family, so she was the mother-figure since her parents were also divorced and her mother worked two jobs. She was responsible for cooking for her siblings and for disciplining them. Ward's mother felt confined by her gender and her responsibilities, which made her withdrawn. After high school, she moved to Los Angeles to go to college. After one semester, she moved to Oakland to live with Ward's father.

## Analysis

Ward focuses on the history of her family in this chapter, telling about some of her ancestors. This allows her to look at the history of racism that has plagued her family, adding to the theme of racism. There are a considerable number of interracial marriages in Ward's family, including the marriage of a Black man and White woman and a White man and Native American woman. These marriages lead to instances of racism. In the case of the Black man and White woman, the family must be extremely careful when visiting the woman's family because the Klan is active in the area and they fear for the lives of their children. Even though the children are half White, the Klan would see them as Black, which puts them in danger. The White man who marries the Native American woman is the victim of racism from his own family as he is disowned for falling in love with and marrying a woman of another race.

It's interesting to note that while Ward talks about the racism that has affected her family for generations, instead of using neutral or negative terms to describe the various skin colors present in her family tree, she uses positive terms that evoke warm feelings. For example, her mother is described as having olive skin and her father as having skin the color of pecans. She also refers to people of caramel-colored skin. Though skin-color has sometimes been the cause of hardship for Ward and her family, she has clearly come to embrace her heritage and sees her family as beautiful and worthy of such description.

Through the discussion of her family history, Ward also introduces another theme to the book, which is the theme of history repeating itself. In the prologue, Ward mentions the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and the displacement of people from her community due to the storm. In this chapter, Ward talks about the way her father's family was forced to move away after Hurricane Camille devastated the area. Instead of helping the people in her community to help themselves, the government simply offered them the chance to move away, just as they would do years later after Hurricane Katrina.

History also repeats itself through the generations of Ward's family. Both of Ward's parents come from broken families and they will be unable to keep their marriage together as well, leaving their children to be raised in a broken home. Ward's mother, as



the oldest girl in her family, was tasked with the responsibility of helping to raise her siblings. She cooked for them and took charge of disciplining them. Her increased responsibilities at a young age caused her to withdraw and later flee to Los Angeles to attend college. Ward will experience a similar childhood and desire to get away after her parents divorce and she takes care of her siblings while her mother works multiple jobs to provide for them. Ward has already mentioned that she leaves Mississippi to attend college in Michigan, just as her mother left Mississippi to go to college in California. And, like her mother, Ward will go through a time of feeling burdened by having to take on extra duties in the household.

When Ward talks about her parents meeting, her view of the past takes on a rosier hue. She envisions her father, who is quite handsome, as a beautiful young man and her mother as a lovely young woman, whom she compares to a doe. She imagines them meeting in the woods or maybe on a dirt road and smiling at one another shyly. The imagined scene is described in loving detail, with Ward talking about her father's beauty and her mother's strength, so that it is clear that she can see the good in both of her parents and what may have drawn them to one another regardless of their ultimately doomed relationship.

The theme of violence is also evident as Ward provides details of her family's history. One of her ancestors is shot for making liquor during prohibition and another dies in the Vietnam war. By including these details, Ward indicates that early deaths have always been a part of her family, so Joshua's death carries on that theme of violence.

Also of interest in this chapter is Ward's use of a wolf as a symbol for her town and what might be stalking the young people there and killing them at such a young age. The town's original name is actually "Wolf Town," but Ward takes the metaphor further when she speaks of the town as being a wild animal. She tells about seeing a black animal loping through the night, describing the animal as seeing them as intruders and being "darkness." When speaking of the number of young deaths in the history of her family, Ward says that she sometimes thinks that DeLisle is the wolf, meaning that somehow the town or community itself is the cause of the deaths.

When speaking of the wolf, Ward downplays her ability to use words to communicate her thoughts. She says that she wants to tell people about her town being the wolf and the town being the birthplace of her life and her family, but says she isn't eloquent enough to do so. This statement belies the feelings of inadequacy that Ward harbors and will return to discussing as she delves into her teen years and the way she often feels like she and other Black people are seen as "nothing."

## Vocabulary

muted, impart, eloquent, disowned, stoop, transcend, indomitable, staccato, relocation



# Roger Eric Daniels III

## Summary

This chapter begins in 2004 when Ward has just finished the first year of her graduate program in Michigan. Her cousin Aldon flies to Michigan to drive with her back to Mississippi. She and Aldon grew up together and are as close as siblings. In the past, Ward was always excited to go home because she was homesick, but since her brother's death in 2000, she now feels a sense of dread at going home.

Ward always goes home during her breaks from school. While there, she lives in her mother's house. Now that Joshua has died, his room is being used by Ward's nephew, De'Sean, who is Nerissa's son. She gave birth to De'Sean when she was 13 and does not live with him. Charine still lives at home.

When Ward arrives at the house, she quietly enters and climbs into bed with Charine. She cries as she lays there.

Ward and Charine go for a car ride and Charine suggests they visit Rog. Rog lives with his mother, Phyllis. His father died of a heart attack at the age of 28. When Rog was younger, he and two other boys put firecrackers in a mailbox. Rog wasn't caught, but the other two boys were sent to a juvenile detention facility.

Rog had dated Nerissa when he was in seventh grade, but that was before Nerissa became pregnant. She is an attractive girl and her mother used to say that if she was going to become a young grandparent, it would be Nerissa that would have the baby. Nerissa and Rog remained friendly after they broke up.

Rog is a good artist and hangs his pictures on the walls of his rooms. He dropped out of school in the tenth grade, which isn't unusual for young Black men. Ward contends they are sometimes passively forced out of schools by people in authority who accuse them of offenses and push them to the back of the classroom. After dropping out, Rog had gone to Los Angeles to live with relatives and work in a garage. He returned to Mississippi for good in 2002. Ward believes he did so because he was homesick.

When Charine and Ward reach Rog's house, they hang around outside with several friends listening to music on their car stereos and drinking. Rog stays by them through the night and dances and laughs. Ward thinks he's gentle and good. She recalls that the first time he saw one of his cousins smoking pot, he'd confronted the boy and tried to stop him, but the boy was already high.

On another occasion, the group parties inside Rog's house. They are drinking and smoking. Charine decides to drink even though she normally only smokes. When Charine has drunk to excess, Rog escorts her and Ward to his mother's private bathroom. He checks in on them several times during the two hours they spend in the bathroom.



The next day Ward and Charine visit Rog again. They sit with him in the carport. Rog and Charine talk about how things have changed and it feels like they're being stalked by death. Rog talks about going back to California.

Rog has begun using drugs and alcohol more. He snorts cocaine. Ward talks about crack being an epidemic in the area. Because of crack, a close relative to cocaine, there is a stigma attached to cocaine among the young people in DeLisle. They all know someone who is addicted to crack. She knows now that alcohol had been her drug of choice at the time.

Ward last sees Rog before his death at a gas station. They hug briefly and then he gets back into the car with two other men. Years later, Charine tells Ward that she had tried to visit Rog between the time he died and when they found out he was dead. She knew that he was lying inside when she banged on his door. Nerissa tells her about a time when Rog had passed out from using cocaine and she'd thought he was going to die.

On the night of his death, Rog takes pills and does cocaine alone. Ward imagines he might have been thinking about how he should be somewhere else or perhaps of his family. Rog dies of a heart attack.

Tasha, Joshua's last girlfriend, calls Ward to tell her that Rog is dead. Ward leaves the house and drives through DeLisle. She sees her ex-boyfriend Brandon who is Rog's cousin. They talk about Rog's death. Ward goes to Rog's house and watches the hearse take Rog's body away. She remembers that Brandon had said "They picking us off, one by one" and she wonders who "they" are.

After the funeral, there is a gathering at Phyllis's house. The people in attendance eat and wear memorial t-shirts with Rog's face on them. The shirt reads "the same thing that make you laugh make you cry." Ward can't remember ever laughing, only loss and pain.

## Analysis

Roger's death takes place after the deaths of all of the other young men so that Ward works backward through the deaths of the five young men until she reaches that of her brother, Joshua, at the end of the book. At the same time, Ward also moves forward through history as she tells her own story. The juxtaposition of the two timelines allows Ward to bring the memoir to a conclusion in which she has fully examined the factors involved in the deaths of the men as well as her need to speak out about her life.

Ward describes Roger as kind and good. He has remained friends with Nerissa even though the two dated at one time and he's protective of Charine. When Charine drinks to much at a party, Roger takes her to his mother's private bathroom and then checks on her throughout the night. Ward also reveals that Roger once lectured a younger cousin when he found the boy smoking marijuana, indicating that he cared about the boy and knew of the dangers of substance abuse. Roger is a good artist and once spent



time working in a relative's garage, suggesting that he has great potential for leading a better life, though he never gets the chance.

Although Ward essentially paints a picture of Roger as a decent human being, she does not withhold his shortcomings. Roger is a drug user who snorts cocaine. He has a history of having used so much cocaine that he passed out and nearly died on at least one occasion before the night of his death. His cocaine use combined with taking pills is what leads to his death from a heart attack.

In telling Roger's story, Ward touches on most of the major themes of the book. The theme of substance abuse is evident not only in Roger's own drug use, but also in the discussion of how crack has affected the community. Ward talks about crack as being an "epidemic," suggesting that it is like a contagious disease that has become widespread. In fact, she says that almost all of her friends know someone or have someone in their family that has become addicted to crack. Because of cocaine's close relationship to crack, the young people in the community have a negative view of cocaine as well so that there is a stigma against cocaine users. In spite of their views of crack and cocaine, clearly there are still young people taking up the habit as Ward gives no indication that usage has declined and Roger is himself a victim of cocaine.

In addition to Roger's experience with cocaine, Ward also explores the theme of substance abuse by telling of her own experiences with alcohol. She tells of the way she and Charine get together with Roger to party. They drink heavily and to the point where Charine becomes ill. At the time, Ward says, she doesn't see that she is using alcohol in much the same way that others use crack; she uses alcohol to escape from everything that is going on around her and out of a sense of despair.

The theme of violence is briefly touched on after Roger's death in a conversation between Rog's cousin Brandon and Ward. Brandon talks about feeling as though someone, an unidentified "they," are picking off people in the neighborhood one by one. The conversation brings to mind the image of a sniper targeting young Black men and bringing their lives to a violent close.

This conversation may well be the impetus for Ward's writing of this memoir. After the conversation she is left wondering who "they" are. She knows that Roger really died at his own hands, so she wonders if the "they" are really themselves. And, yet, she knows there is more to the story and that other factors are at work. At the time of the conversation she hasn't identified any of the factors and hasn't even decided if the "they" are even humans. Through the research and writing of the memoir, she clearly hopes to come to some conclusions about what is causing these deaths.

The theme of history repeating itself is evident in the way that Roger dies. At the beginning of the chapter, Ward shares information about Roger's parents, including the fact that his father died at the age of 28 from a heart attack. Roger, who is named after his father and grandfather, also dies of a heart attack in his twenties. Though Ward does not indicate what caused Roger's father's heart attack, the reader is left wondering if perhaps it was drug induced as well.



The theme of racism is presented in two events in Roger's life. The first occurs when Roger and his cousins play pranks on people in the neighborhood by using firecrackers to blow up their mailboxes. Roger isn't caught, but the boys who were caught were sent to a juvenile detention center. The punishment seems harsh for a prank in which no one was hurt, but Ward indicates there's an element of racism at work and that this is simply the way such incidences are handled by the police when it is Black kids playing the pranks.

The second incidence of racism occurs in the way that Roger drops out of school. Ward states that Roger was treated by the school's administration in the same way that all Black boys who don't excel at academics are treated. He was passively forced out of the school through their indifference. Ward says that Black boys are often placed at the back of the class, ignored, and offered no assistance to succeed until they drop out.

The theme of home is discussed in Roger's story in the way that he was drawn back home after going out to California to work in a garage. Though he loved his job, made good money, and liked the area, he still eventually moved back to Mississippi. Although Ward confesses that she doesn't know the reason for Roger's return, she believes that he was homesick.

This draw to home is also evident in Ward's life in that she says being away at college makes her homesick. She goes home on every break, even returning after Joshua's death when coming home is painful. The return is so painful that she cries when she arrives home and is only comforted by crawling into bed with Charine and holding her close.

In this chapter, Ward also introduces the memorial t-shirt that is common at the funerals of young Black people. The shirts generally display a picture of the deceased and a saying that is somehow relevant to the life of the deceased. Roger's shirt reads, "The same thing that make you laugh make you cry." This may refer to the cocaine that killed Roger since he snorted it to make himself feel better, and yet it caused his death in the end. Or, it may refer to Roger himself who made his friends and family happy by his presence, but made them cry by his death.

## Vocabulary

subsequent, razed, desultorily, privy, enclave, specter, maneuvering, repast, memorial

# We Are Born

## Summary

This chapter begins with the birth of the author. Ward is born when her parents are living in Oakland with her father's mother. She weighs only a little over two pounds at birth, develops blood tumors, and requires surgery for a growth in her abdomen. Doctors believe she will not survive or that she will have developmental problems.

After she is released from the hospital, Ward's parents move into an apartment. In pictures from this time period, Ward is almost always dressed in red.

When she is born, Ward's father wants to tell the doctors that she will make it because she is a fighter. Ward's family comes from a long line of people who fought for survival. Her maternal grandmother, Dorothy, raised seven children in a tiny house and saved money to expand the house to four bedrooms. She worked several different jobs, finally landing a job at a factory because she could work as hard as a man.

Before getting married, Ward's father had been a trouble-maker who was often picked up in raids when the police would target his gang for drug activity. He was a talented artist and was offered a scholarship for art school, but he turned it down to work and help support his siblings. When Ward's mother arrived in California, he changed his ways a bit, but was never able to remain completely faithful.

When Ward is two, her parents have a party. She wanders through the group of people who are drinking and smoking. She picks up cans and drinks beer from them. Her mother takes a picture of her holding a beer can with beer dribbling down her chin.

Eventually Ward's father begins to miss living in Mississippi, but her mother wants to stay in California. Ward's mother gives in to moving back home because she loves her husband and is pregnant with Joshua.

Ward recalls little about Joshua's early years. Her mother has told her that he was born facing up and would turn back to face up no matter how many times the doctor turned him as he emerged.

The family moves often during Joshua's early years, eventually living in a house on Ward's great-grandmother Ellen's land. When Ward is five and Joshua three, she often leaves Joshua alone while her father is watching them so that she can walk to her cousin's house to play. On one of those occasions, Joshua comes looking for her. This makes her father angry and he grabs Joshua and begins hitting him for going outside by himself, which frightens Ward and makes her feel guilty.

Though Ward's father is not usually quick-tempered, he seems to have little patience with Joshua. Looking back, Ward believes he was trying to make Joshua stronger to prepare him to grow up as a Black man in the South.



Ward's father has a dark side and is attracted to violence. He taught his pit bull to fight and chops the dog's tail off with a machete as Ward watches. The dog licks his hand as he bandages the stump.

Ward's mother gives birth to Nerissa. The birth is difficult and the doctors have to force Nerissa out of the womb. By this time, Ward's mother has begun to realize that her husband will never be faithful. The two argue frequently.

Joshua and Ward learn lessons about violence that year. Joshua's lesson comes through a crash of his Uncle's moped in which Joshua's mouth is injured. Ward's lessons involves pit bulls. Her father's pit bull mix gets ill and her cousin takes him into the woods and shoots him. Her father gets a new dog named Chief, whom he plans to fight. One day, Chief becomes interested in a female dog and when Ward tries to move him out of the way, Chief attacks her. Ward's parents take her to the hospital. Her father and his friends hunt Chief down and shoot him. Ward feels guilty for having hit Chief on the back to move him.

Ward's family prepare to move to a small trailer home. The children are happy and unaware of their parents' fights until one night in 1984. By this time, Ward's father has one child out of wedlock. Ward's parents scream at each other and Ward hears the word "you" repeated over and over. Joshua and Ward sit on the back porch frightened and hugging one another during the fight while Nerissa is inside crying. They listen as their parents yell and break things.

## Analysis

Ward describes the events of her birth in this chapter. From the moment she is born, Ward has to fight for her survival. She is born early and suffers from blood tumors. However, in keeping with her family history, Ward is a fighter. Her father sees this in her is certain she will survive. Her mother doesn't dress her in delicate pink clothing, but in bold red to outwardly show the fighter within.

The story of Ward's birth is significant to the theme of history repeating itself because, like her grandmother Dorothy, Ward is a fighter. Ward states that Dorothy raised seven children on her own and even saved up to add on to her house to accommodate her large family. Not only does history repeat itself in Dorothy's fighting spirit being carried on in Ward, but Dorothy's story also bears similarities to Ward's mother's story, which will be told in later chapters. She, too, will go on to raise her children by herself and save up to create a home for them on a piece of land that she buys.

History repeats itself as well in Joshua's resemblance to his father. Ward tells readers that her father was a good artist who turned down a scholarship to art school. Later in the book, Ward will share with readers that Joshua is also an artist since he decorates his room with art he created while in school.

The theme of substance abuse also plays a role in this chapter. Ward tells of a party that her parents threw when she was just two years old. People at the party drink



copious amounts of beer, just as Ward and her siblings and friends will one day do. Though Ward is only two, she is left to wander through the party with apparently little supervision. She picks up beer cans and drinks from them. Rather than being appalled or even concerned by this, her parents instead take a picture of her holding a can with beer dribbling down her chin. This casual attitude toward drinking may be a factor in Ward's later abuse of alcohol.

The theme of home is evident early on in Ward's life. Ward is born in Oakland, California. Ward's mother loves the area and wants to stay there, but Ward's father feels the pull toward home. Though she really wants to stay, Ward's mother agrees to go back to Mississippi. Ward later suggests that this may have been the moment when her mother gave up on her dreams and accepted her responsibility as a Black woman who would be expected to take on the full burden of raising a family.

Violence is the most prevalent theme of this chapter. Ward talks about her father's past including his involvement in gangs and drug raids. However, it is the violence that occurs when Ward and Joshua are small children that is most shocking. Ward's father is involved in dog fighting and Ward describes a gruesome scene in which her father docks his fighting dog's tail with a machete. It's not just the fact that he chops the dog's tail off that is surprising, but that he does it in front of his children that lends itself to an acceptance of violence as a part of life. The dog licking Ward's father after such cruel treatment is symbolic of the way that his own children will continue to come back to him for affection even after he conducts himself in a hurtful manner.

Ward also describes the violent way in which her father disciplines Joshua when he is just a toddler. Ward leaves Joshua alone to go play with other children down the street. When Joshua follows her, her father becomes angry and grabs him by the arm while spanking him. The behavior seems unduly harsh to Ward who doesn't understand why her father is so much harder on Joshua than he is on his daughters. However, as an adult, Ward is able to look back and understand that her father viewed his son through the experiences he had had as a Black man in the South and wanted his son to understand that life would be difficult and certain things would be expected of him. As a child, Ward is left feeling guilty for not keeping a closer eye on her brother and leaving him vulnerable to such punishment.

Ward specifically speaks to violence when she says that she and Joshua both learn lessons about violence as children. Joshua's lesson occurs when a moped he is riding on with an older relative crashes, splitting Joshua's chin open. Ward's occurs when she attempts to swat a pit bull out of her way and is attacked by the dog, leaving her with a gash in her head that requires stitches. Ward again feels guilty for having caused the dog to attack by hitting at it. The reader may be left wondering exactly what the lesson each child learned is. Perhaps she is suggesting that Joshua learns that violence can occur for Black males even when they do not provoke the violence, and that she learns that her actions have the potential to bring violence out of others.

Ward's parents' marriage begins to take a violent turn in this chapter. While there is no physical violence between the two, they do begin to fight bitterly, screaming and



breaking things. Ward and Joshua are witness to this violence as they sit on the steps listening to their parents fight while their baby sister cries inside. Both feel helpless in the face of the breakdown of their parents' marriage.

With the event of this first fight in Ward's memory, this chapter marks the beginning of the decline of the marriage between Ward's parents. Their on-again-off-again relationship is marked by her father's infidelities and its breakdown will be a major event on Ward's life that will shape the way she feels about her role as a woman as well as her perception of herself.

Also of note in this chapter is the description of Joshua's birth. Ward's mother tells her that Joshua was born face up and, no matter how many times the doctor turned him, he continued to turn back to face up so that he was born facing the world. Later in the book Ward will talk about how Joshua has a different way of seeing and understanding the world and reader's may recall the events of his birth in which he made his entrance face up.

Ward names this chapter "We Are Born," using "we" as part of the title just as she does in the titles of all of the chapters about her life. While she is primarily telling her own story, the use of the word "we" suggests that her story is so inextricably connected to Joshua's story that it cannot be divided so that she can simply call the chapter "I Am Born." Ward will later talk about the way that many of her stories die when Joshua dies, which supports the use of the word "we" in the chapter titles.

## Vocabulary

awash, impending, tenacious, transformed, domestic, dregs, snippets, forbearance, guttural, dispersed



# Demond Cook

## Summary

This chapter begins when Ward gets to know Demond as an adult when Nerissa is living in her own apartment in Long Beach. Nerissa has been kicked out of her mother's house after a disagreement on the raising of Nerissa's son, De'Sean. Demond visits Nerissa's apartment with Rob, Nerissa's boyfriend. Ward is drinking beer, which is in abundant supply. There is a lot of drinking and partying among Ward and her friends that year as they have already lost three friends.

Demond grew up in DeLisle, is an only child, and still has both his parents who are working steady jobs. Demond's house was the place everyone wanted to be when they were growing up. Having worked many other jobs in the past and, like most Black people in the area, not having attended college, Demond works in a pharmaceutical plant.

Demond lives in a house that had belonged to his grandmother. The interior of the house is set up in a shotgun style, so that each room opens into the next one. It's a dark house and Ward wonders if the bedrooms are as dark as the rest of the house. She wonders what Demond's grandmother's life had been like when she lived there. She thinks about how they are living with the ghosts of the past and wonders if they are living the same stories over and over again through the generations.

Ward and Nerissa and their friends have a crawfish boil at Nerissa's apartment. As they prepare the food, Demond asks Ward questions about what she does. She tells him she's trying to be a writer. Charine says that she writes about life in the hood. Demond jokes that she should write about his life. She tells him, as she's told other men, that she doesn't write real-life stories. As she says this, she feels guilty because she knows that the characters in the book she is currently writing aren't as real as they could be because she protects them from death and drug addiction.

That night, Ward gets up at 2:00 a.m. to find that the apartment is still a mess and there's a cold pot of crawfish ruined and still sitting in the water. She feels a sense of loss and returns to bed.

Ward drives Nerissa and Tasha to a club called Illusions. Rob and Demond follow in Demond's car. Brandon, Ward's old boyfriend, meets them at the club. Rob buys the girls each a drink and Ward gulps hers down. She watches the people in the club and wonders about their stories. Demond buys more drinks. Demond is attractive and charismatic, so people are drawn to him, but he also has a temper. That night, he is in a good mood.

Nerissa and Ward dance and drink and later go into the bathroom where they both vomit. Ward follows Nerissa out of the bathroom and blacks out. She wakes up in the



backseat of her car with Nerissa and Tasha. She can hear the men talking about them being drunk.

The next time the group meets at Illusions is on New Year's Eve of 2004. They take a picture together and, later, someone drives them home. Ward never drives when she is drunk. They end up in Demond's yard at 4:00 a.m. They are all high and drunk. Demond comes over to Ward and she's happy to be there. Demond asks someone to turn the music down because he doesn't want to attract the police and doesn't want the neighbors to complain. Demond had once witnessed a shooting and had agreed to testify against the shooter and had also agreed to testify against a drug dealer who wasn't from DeLisle, but had been dealing there. Because of these events, Demond tries to avoid trouble.

On February 26, 2004, Demond works the third shift. He calls Rob before leaving work and says he'll call Rob again when he gets home to see if he wants to ride to Wal-Mart with him to get diapers. Demond never shows up at Rob's house.

Demond goes home after work and Rob falls asleep. Demond is shot as he approaches the front door of his house. His fiancée wakes up and realizes Demond is not in the bed. She goes out to the front door and thinks someone is sleeping in the front yard. It's Demond and she falls on him screaming.

Charine receives a call telling her of Demond's death the next morning. Charine wakes Ward to tell her the news and then climbs into bed with her. Charine falls asleep and as they lay there, Ward is thankful for every breath Charine takes even as she's sick about the deaths happening around her. She thinks the dying will never end.

Later, Charine and Ward meet Nerissa at Demond's house. Ward sits in her car outside Demond's house thinking about how she thought life would be better than this and that she's tired of people dying. They sit with Demond's fiancée who says she didn't hear anything. The police conduct an investigation for a few months, but the murderer isn't found.

The night after Demond's death, Ward and Nerissa sit on the steps in front of Demond's house. Ward knows the killer was human, but she has an urge to turn to Nerissa and ask her what she thinks the killer is.

## Analysis

Demond's family situation sets him apart from the other young men who die. He comes from a stable two-parent home and both of his parents have steady jobs. Ward is also a responsible young man who is conscious of how his actions may affect others. When the group of friends meets at his house to party, he reminds them to keep the music turned down so that they do not draw the attention of the police. He does this because he knows it's what his parents would want and he doesn't wish to get them into any trouble. Also, when he witnesses a murder and has knowledge of a drug dealer in the neighborhood, he testifies in the trials when he could just stay out of the situations. He



seems to be looking for a way to make the community a better place. However, readers should note that the drug dealer Demond testifies against is someone from outside DeLisle who is dealing inside DeLisle. The inclusion of this detail suggests that Demond would not have testified against someone from DeLisle who is dealing drugs. Perhaps, like Ward, he believes there is sometimes no other choice for young Black men.

Because Ward eventually concludes that two of the factors that play a role in the pattern of early deaths are poverty and broken homes, it seems like Demond may not fit in the pattern of deaths that Ward identifies. However, Demond may be a victim of whatever takes the lives of young Black men in DeLisle simply because he lives there and is, therefore, a part of that repeating history that Ward speaks of.

In fact, Demond's story plays into the theme of history repeating itself in that he lives in his grandmother's house. When Ward visits the house, she is struck by its darkness and wonders what it was like when Demond's grandmother lived there and raised her children there. She writes of the way they all live with ghosts of the past and continuously repeat the stories of those ghosts through their own lives.

The most prevalent theme in this chapter is the theme of substance abuse. Keeping in mind that Ward chronicles the deaths of the young men in reverse order, by the time this chapter begins, three of the five young men have already died. Ward indicates that they spend a great deal of time drinking and partying as a means of forgetting the tragic deaths. She states that beer is in abundant supply at Nerissa's apartment and tells of nights spent in a nightclub drinking heavily. On one occasion, she and Nerissa drink so much at the club that they vomit in the club's bathroom and then Ward blacks out. She also talks about drinking and getting high outside of Demond's house. It's clear that their casual partying has taken on a more manic tone as though they are trying to live life to its fullest before it is gone.

The theme of violence is evident in that Demond is murdered as he returns home from work one night. Ward describes the scene in concrete detail, talking about the way the streets would have been deserted and what it might have been like if Demond and Rob had actually met up that night. She paints a picture for the reader of the two young men riding companionably together running an errand to pick up diapers as a responsible young father would do. This description of what could have happened on a regular night makes Demond's murder stand out in violent detail as Ward then describes what actually happens and the way that Demond's fiancé finds him dead in the yard.

Ward returns to the image of the wolf that stalks the young people of DeLisle when she describes the way that the investigation into Demond's murder is fruitless. The murderer is never found and leaves no trace of himself in much the same way the wolf that Ward and her friends saw no tracks left in the swamp. Later, as she and Nerissa sit in front of Demond's house, she has an urge to ask Nerissa what she thinks killed Demond, even though her rational mind knows that his killer is human. Yet, she cannot escape the feeling that there is something else at work in DeLisle, something bigger and more mysterious like the wolf.



In this chapter, Ward also talks a bit about her experience as a young writer. Upon learning that she is a writer, Demond suggests to Ward that she write about him. Ward has grown used to young men telling her their stories are worthy of writing about. While she does write stories about people like herself and the men and women she's grown up around, she has a nagging feeling that what she writes about isn't truly realistic. She knows that she is somehow protecting the characters she creates from the harsh realities of world, such as substance abuse and death. Perhaps Ward uses her own writings to escape in the same way that she once used the books written by others to escape when she was a young girl.

Ward does, in fact, have much to want to escape from at this point in her life, such as the many deaths she has experienced. She has grown despondent and almost desperate for the deaths to stop. She thinks about how tired she is of people dying and that it seems like the deaths will never end. She feels like her life is too hard and that it should have been better somehow.

## Vocabulary

casual, sullied, largesse, tedious, predecessor, biopic, tacky, neglected, cavernous

# We Are Wounded

## Summary

As this chapter begins, Ward's family is living in a single-wide trailer in DeLisle and Ward is seven years old. Her father buys a new motorcycle. Ward's mother frowns and walks back into the house. She doesn't say anything to her husband about the motorcycle, who has taken money they'd been saving to buy land for the purchase of the bike.

A year after moving into the trailer, the people who own it decide to rent it to relatives instead and the family moves to live with Ward's grandmother Dorothy in the house her mother grew up in. After Dorothy's husband had left her to raise their seven children alone, she had added on to the house. This scenario has happened so often in Ward's family that she thinks of her family as a matriarchy. However, Ward knows that their story isn't special and that couples often divorce leaving women to raise children alone.

Ward falls in love with reading and uses books to escape from her world. In books, she finds a world that is easier to navigate than her own. Her parents fight often and her father leaves for weeks at a time.

Ward follows her older cousin Eddie as he goes out hunting for rabbits and squirrels. He goes over a fence and into the woods even though a sign is posted stating "No Trespassing." Ward plays with Joshua and Aldon and longs to go over that fence to explore like characters in a book. Instead, the three children find a place amongst some pine trees and decide to name it Kidsland.

Ward thinks it's harder to be a girl than a boy in the real world. She knows that boys can ride off on motorcycles, coming and going as they please while the women stay at home and work. When her uncle leaves a partially smoked cigarette lying in the yard, she takes it and tries to smoke it with Joshua and Aldon. Aldon's mother catches them and tells them never to try that again and says she won't tell Ward's mother. That night, Joshua tells their mother that she and Aldon were smoking. Her mother spansks Ward and Joshua and confines them to the bedroom for the weekend while Aldon plays outside. She knows that some boys have it easier.

On most Saturday mornings, the children get up early to watch cartoons. Ward makes them all bowls of WIC issued cornflakes and powdered milk. The milk doesn't taste like the good store-bought milk they used to get when her father was working. They watch the plump White children introduce the cartoons on "Popeye" and Ward hates them.

When Ward's father is out of work, he spends time with the children. Her mother is never home when her father is and she has a sense that something is wrong. After getting a job in an oyster factory, her father dresses in expensive leather suits and goes



away on his motorcycle. As an adult, she knows she was going to visit his many girlfriends.

One day her father brings home oysters from the factory and Ward asks for one. Her father says she won't like it, but she's determined to swallow one because her father says she won't. She does not like the oyster, but swallows it anyway.

Ward's parents do not throw her a party for her eighth birthday. Instead, they take her out to the yard and tie a long, thick rope to a tree branch to create a rope swing for her as a present. Ward knows her mother feels bad for not being able to give her more, but she loves the swing.

Ward's parents try to work on their marriage. Sometimes they leave Ward and her brother with a babysitter. The babysitter's husband beats her, which Ward knows is wrong. One day the babysitter leaves Joshua and Ward downstairs while she goes upstairs to visit neighbors. Ward goes upstairs to find her and sees her sitting around a table with other people snorting cocaine. She does not know what they are doing and goes back downstairs when the babysitter sees her and tells her to go.

Ward's parents still manage to gather enough money for Christmas presents when Ward is nine. She wants a ten-speed bike and lays awake on Christmas Eve wondering if she'll get one. When she falls asleep she dreams the police came to take her father and uncles away. As an adult, she knows that her father was not involved in criminal activity at the time. But, as a child, she listens to her grandmother worry about them being stopped by the police just for being Black.

Ward's mother tells her and Joshua that their father is leaving and he won't be coming home. Ward's mother is pregnant with Charine when he leaves. Ward cries and feels rejected by her father. She lays in her bedroom and tries to read. Joshua goes outside and runs circles around the house, screaming and crying for his father.

When Ward is ten, her mother files for a government subsidy for housing and they move to Orange Grove, Mississippi. Before leaving, Ward wanders around Kidsland one more time, but it no longer seems magical.

The summer before they move, Ward, Nerissa, Aldon, and Joshua sit on the porch playing a game called "That's My Car" in which Ward gets the first car that comes by the house, Nerissa the second, Aldon the third, and Joshua the fourth. They wait and wait to see what Joshua's future will hold.

## Analysis

The title of this chapter likely comes from the fact that it is in this chapter that Ward's father and mother separate after her mother can no longer tolerate her father's many infidelities. Prior to the split, Ward and Joshua witness their parents fighting often. There is very little money for the family to live on, so they eat food provided by the government, like cornflakes and powdered milk. Ward's parents cannot afford to throw



her a birthday party or even buy her a real birthday present. Instead, they fashion a rope swing for her out of a thick rope. Yet, in the midst of their money troubles, Ward's father takes the money they had been saving to purchase land to build a home on to buy a motorcycle. His bad decisions coupled with the stress of living in poverty are the cause of the marriage dissolving.

This chapter reveals a lot about Ward's father and her relationship with him. Ward has shown readers that her father loves his children and is affectionate toward them in previous chapters. In this chapter, she shows that he continues to be affectionate with his children as they grow older, but even his love for them does not keep him from making irresponsible decisions that are detrimental to them. He is unable to give up his dreams and an image he holds of himself. To him, it is more important that he be able to ride around town on a motorcycle wearing fancy leather suits than that his family have a house to call their own. As an adult, Ward comes to understand that this image was a large part of her father's ability to draw women to him. Those women, like the motorcycle, are just a part of his image as well and he cannot give them up for the sake of his family, either.

In spite of her father's flaws, Ward loves him and seeks his approval. When he brings raw oysters home from work, Ward asks him for one. Though she doesn't like it, she still swallows it because she doesn't want to disappoint her father. She again tries to impress her father when she receives the rope swing for her birthday. Ward climbs to the top of the rope over and over and calls out to her father each time to look at her and how high she has climbed.

When Ward's father leaves, she feels rejected by him. Her reaction is a quiet one in which she withdraws to her room to read. In contrast, Joshua is loud and angry at his departure. He screams and runs circles around the house, refusing to stop for anyone until he finally tires himself out.

Ward's and Joshua's reactions to their father leaving exemplify the differences between boys and girls that Ward notices at this time in her life. Ward believes that men have more freedom in that they are not the ones who have to worry about the children being fed, clothed, and disciplined. They have the freedom to ride off on motorcycles while the women work and raise children. Ward's quiet reaction to her father leaving shows a quiet acceptance of her place in the world, while Joshua is free to express his grief and anger.

Ward also talks about the freedom that boys have when she describes the incident in which she and her brother and their cousin Aldon attempt to smoke a cigarette left in the dirt by one of Ward's uncles. When they are caught by Aldon's mother, Ward's aunt decides not to tell Ward's mother in return for a promise that they won't smoke again. Joshua, who didn't get a chance to try the cigarette, tells their mother that night and both are punished. Meanwhile, Aldon goes free and Ward can hear him laughing and playing outside the windows of the bedroom she and Joshua have been confined to. When this happens, Ward thinks about how boys like Aldon have it easy and get more freedom.



While lamenting her lack of freedom, Ward also speaks to the way that Black males are at greater risk of losing their freedom. She grows up listening to her grandmother worrying about her sons getting arrested just because they are Black. Although Ward knows that her father and uncles aren't involved in anything illegal, hearing her grandmother voice her fears causes Ward to worry as well. That fear becomes so ingrained in her that on Christmas Eve when she should be dreaming of the new bicycle she's wished for, she instead dreams of her father and uncles being taken away by the police. This worry about unwarranted police arrests lends itself to the theme of racism that Ward explores throughout the book.

Ward also explores racism by exploring her feelings as a child watching White children introduce Popeye cartoons on television. Ward and her siblings and cousins get up early on Saturday mornings so that they can watch cartoons. On these occasions, Ward fixes cereal for all of the younger children using the government issued cornflakes and powdered milk, which don't taste very good. As she watches the White children on the screen with their plump cheeks, she feels anger and hatred toward them. Part of her feelings probably come from the fact that she can see the children are well-fed while she's eating a meal of mushy cornflakes, but she probably also notices that there are no Black children included in the crowd of kids who shout happily to introduce the next cartoon. Perhaps she understands on some level that these children will be afforded privileges that she will not because of the color of her skin.

The theme of substance abuse is shockingly displayed through the babysitter that Ward and her siblings are often left with. The babysitter goes to an upstairs apartment and when Ward goes looking for her, she finds her sitting around a table with other adults snorting cocaine. Of course, Ward didn't understand what was going on at the time, but as an adult she knows that her babysitter was doing drugs when she was supposed to be watching the children. She reflects that she saw at an early age the way that people who are poor and hopeless do to escape their lives, and that this means of escape plagues her own generation as well.

This same babysitter also speaks to the theme of violence. Ward's family knows that the babysitter's husband beats her. Ward's parents know that this woman is a victim of domestic violence because Ward learns about it from listening to the adults speak. Yet, they hire this woman to attend to their children, which might place them at risk of being in the way of the domestic violence. Ward knows that her parents don't think such violence is okay since they once went with a group of relatives to threaten the boyfriend of an aunt who had beat the aunt. Perhaps they hire the woman as a means of helping her by providing her with a few extra dollars earned by babysitting.

The theme of history repeating itself is explored through Ward's reflection on her family as a matriarchy. Women being left by their husbands and forced to raise the children on their own is so common in her family that it seems like the family is run by the women. Her grandmother Dorothy, whose house they move into for a time, raised seven children on her own and even managed to add on to her house while working to support her children by herself. Ward sees the strength of women that is part of the history of her family. At this point in her life, however, she doesn't yet know that her mother will follow



that history as well when her husband leaves her to raise Ward and her siblings. Ward, too, will fall into her place in the repeating of history as she is called upon to help care for her younger siblings. In fact, she has already begun to do so when she takes responsibility for making breakfast for the younger children when they get up early to watch Saturday morning cartoons.

Also of note in this chapter is Ward's budding relationship with the written word. Ward begins to love books and uses them as a means of escape from the chaos of her life. She often cannot make sense of her own world, but in books she sees order and meaning. She even escapes to books after her father leaves, lying in her room reading while Joshua screams. She longs to be the heroine of her own story. To that end, she creates a make-believe world with her brother and cousin that she dubs "Kidsland." Ward, Joshua, and Aldon play there at being the characters Ward encounters in her books, like knights. Kidsland represents Ward's childhood years, and when the family is about to move away after her father leaves, Ward goes back there one last time only to find that it just isn't the same. This event represents Ward leaving her childhood behind to move forward into a more adult world where she will have greater responsibilities.

Another interesting event occurs at the end of the chapter when Ward and the other children are sitting on the porch playing a game called "That's My Car." In it, the children number off and then watch for the car corresponding to their number to drive by. The car will be "their" car and provides hints about what their future might hold. On this occasion, Joshua is the last person to have a turn. The children sit watching for a car for him, but it seems a car does not come since Ward never says what car he got, only that they sat there waiting to see what Joshua's future would hold. What should be a sweet memory of a game played among siblings and cousins becomes a chilling event in light of the fact that Joshua will not have a future as he dies when he's just a young man.

## Vocabulary

deference, matriarchy, paradigm, delineated, heroine, escapade, articulate, consigned, incarnation, subsidy



# Charles Joseph Martin

## Summary

In this chapter, Ward becomes aware of her cousin C.J. when he is six and she is 12. His is a fair-skinned child with blonde hair and dark eyes. C.J. has great gymnastic abilities and often shows off his skills at family reunions and picnics.

Ward goes away for college when C.J. is 12 and does not see him for a long time. When she returns he is a grown man, short and wiry. Most of the young people in Ward's neighborhood hang out in the park because many of the parents don't want too many cars parked at their houses for fear it will attract police attention. Their county park is meager in comparison with the parks in the White neighborhoods.

Ward and C.J. sit on a bench watching other boys play basketball and she takes pictures of him. The pictures turn out blurry because the camera is too old to capture his speed.

When C.J. is 14, he and Charine begin dating. C.J. and Charine are inseparable. C.J. often stays at places other than his own home, sleeping on couches. Movement of children from family to family is common in DeLisle and has been for generations. C.J. sells drugs and Ward judges him for it at the time, but later learns that he hated doing it because he wanted more for himself.

C.J. drops out of school at 17. Ward doesn't know exactly why he dropped out, but she knows that Black males who are just passing their classes are seen as a problem by the administration, so they are often neglected.

When Ward is home from college, she makes Charine spend time with her and C.J. often tags along. One night they go to a hotel suite that one of Nerissa's friends is renting. They get high. Nerissa's friend goes into the bathroom and comes back out sniffing and sucking back snot. Ward gets up to go to the bathroom and finds it in dismal condition, so they leave. C.J. tells them that the others were doing coke in the bathroom. Ward wonders how C.J. would know that.

One night when Nerissa, Charine, and Ward are at their mother's house alone, C.J. and Duck drag a cooler full of beer into the yard. Duck leaves and C.J. remains at the edge of the yard because he knows Ward's mother doesn't like him. Nerissa and Ward go inside. A short time later, the phone rings and it's C.J. asking them to come back outside because Charine is upset and thinks they are mad at her. Ward goes outside and finds Charine crying. C.J. insists that Ward talk to her and tell Charine that she loves her. Ward talks to her briefly and then goes back inside. Later, she hears yelling and looks out the window to see C.J. throwing beer cans. She feels afraid.

Ward and a group of people go to New Orleans. They walk around the city getting drunk and C.J. acts as Charine's protector. The next morning Ward wakes up in Nerissa's



apartment. They begin drinking and getting high again at 8:00 a.m. C.J. plays one song over and over and sings along. C.J. is funny and kind. He asks Ward if she's ever done cocaine and when she says she hasn't, he warns her never to do it. C.J. says he has done cocaine and wishes he never had. Ward now understands why his moods are often erratic.

C.J. tells Charine that he has a feeling he won't be around long. He tells other people as well and lives like he believes it, never really talking about his future. Though he sometimes speaks to Charine about living, he seems hopeless. Ward wonders if he looks at the living and the dead and doesn't see much difference.

Years later, Nerissa tells Ward a story she heard from one of C.J.'s friends about C.J. playing chicken with trains and waiting until the last second to jump from the tracks.

On January 4, 2004, Ward spends time with C.J. and Hilton in the park. Ward invites C.J. to the movies that night and he accepts the invitation. They stay in the park for three hours while C.J. and Hilton smoke weed.

A fog rolls in and they do not go to the movies that night. Instead, Ward packs to return to college in Michigan. While Ward packs, C.J. and Charine sit in her car and smoke. C.J. leaves at midnight. At 2:00 a.m. C.J.'s mother calls and says he has been in an accident and has died. She asks Ward to tell Charine.

C.J. and his cousins had driven upcountry and had hit a train at an intersection where the lights and bells didn't work and there was no reflective gate arm. C.J. had been trapped in the car as it burned. Stories from others say he was still alive and that he told his cousins to leave him. Charine sometimes blames herself for not sitting with C.J. longer that night.

The night after C.J.'s death, Ward drives Charine around DeLisle while Charine smokes weed. Ward wonders if they are courting death.

Years later, Ward learns that the park has been designated to be used as burial sites so the graveyard can expand. She wonders if there is a way to slow the deaths.

## Analysis

As she does with the other young men in the book, Ward describes C.J. in a way that first lets the reader see the many good things about him, and then reveals the darkness that is there as well. One of the qualities that sticks out for Ward is C.J.'s extraordinary athleticism. At the age of six, C.J. entertains people at family reunions with his gymnastics. Later, he plays basketball in the park and is able to jump so high that he dangles from the hoop by his elbow. The reader is left to wonder if C.J. might have been able to compete in professional sports had he been given the chance. However, because of where he lives, C.J.'s talent would never be seen by athletic talent scouts, and so he never gets a chance to find out.



Ward talks about the way she tries to take pictures of C.J. as he leaps toward the basketball hoop, but her pictures always come out blurry. She describes her inability to capture his grace in an almost poetic manner. In reality, she knows her camera was too old and slow to capture his quick movements, but she seems to suggest that a person cannot truly be captured on film no matter how hard someone might try. She later returns to this idea in the chapter about Joshua's death when she looks at pictures of him in an attempt to recapture her memories.

C.J. is also a loyal and loving boyfriend to Charine and is fiercely protective of her when they spend time in New Orleans, in spite of his small frame. Ward describes him as being funny and kind. Yet, she also notices that his behavior is sometimes erratic. This attribute sometimes strains his relationship with Charine and there is one instance in which C.J., who is on the front lawn with Charine, calls Ward who is in the house and asks her to come out and talk to Charine because she's crying. C.J.'s behavior is strange and he's adamant that Ward tell Charine that she loves her. Charine seems overly hysterical as well. Later, when Ward learns that C.J. snorts cocaine, his behavior makes sense, as people on drugs often act erratically with extreme highs and lows.

C.J.'s cocaine use is in keeping with the theme of substance abuse. Though Ward has grown up exposed to substance abuse, she sometimes seems naïve about it. When she and Charine and C.J. go to a party, she doesn't recognize that the people coming out of the bathroom have been snorting cocaine, not even after she goes into the bathroom and discovers it in a disarray. C.J. immediately recognizes that the bathroom is being used to snort cocaine and, at the time, Ward wonders how he knows that. It isn't until C.J. comes out and tells her that he has used cocaine that she puts the pieces together and recognizes his erratic behavior and knowledge of cocaine use as signs of his own drug abuse.

C.J. not only uses cocaine, but he also sells drugs. Ward states that she judges him for doing so when she first finds out about it, but later understands that it wasn't something he wanted to do, but felt he had to do because he needed the money. She knows that he truly wanted more for himself, but felt trapped.

Alcohol abuse is also prevalent in this chapter. Probably the most blatant instance of alcohol abuse occurs when Ward and her sisters go to New Orleans and party. They go around town getting drunker and drunker as the night goes on. The next morning they wake up and start in again at 8:00 a.m. Such early drinking is a sign of alcohol addiction, but Ward doesn't recognize it as such at the time. In fact, she never really comes out and says that she had a problem with alcohol. However, she does say that she now knows that alcohol was her drug of choice and that she used it to escape just as others used drugs.

Other instances of substance abuse include C.J. and a friend dragging a cooler full of beer into Ward's yard to sit and drink, smoking marijuana in the park, and smoking marijuana in Ward's car. Marijuana use is prevalent throughout the book and it's what Charine turns to after C.J.'s death. Ward drives her around town while she smokes marijuana and grieves the loss of her boyfriend.



C.J.'s chapter also serves to further demonstrate the theme of racism. C.J., like other young Black men, drops out of high school. He is another victim of the lack of interest afforded by the school administration to Black men of average or below academic ability.

Ward and her friends spend a lot of time in the park because their parents don't like to have too many of them congregate at one house for fear that the number of cars parked there will draw the attention of the police. As Ward has mentioned before, the people in their community worry about the police because they are Black and are often accused of breaking laws just because of the color of their skin.

The park itself indicates that there is racism at work in DeLisle. Ward describes the park in their neighborhood as being quite pathetic. It's not much more than a couple of ratty basketball hoops. In comparison, the parks in the White neighborhoods are well kept and have much nicer basketball courts and other amenities. Ward suggests that the parks in Black neighborhoods receive far less funding and care simply because they are used by Black people.

Another area of the community that receives inadequate funding and care are the railroad crossings. C.J.'s death is caused by broken signal lights and the lack of a reflective arm to warn of oncoming trains. Again, Ward suggests that this would not have been the case if the crossing had been in a White neighborhood.

The fact that C.J. is killed by a train is ironic given that Ward later finds out that C.J. often played chicken with the trains, walking along the tracks and jumping out of the way just in time to avoid being hit by a train. It almost seems the thing that Ward imagines is stalking them finally catches up to C.J. and he loses the game.

C.J. often speaks of a feeling of impending death, saying he feels like he won't be around long. Perhaps, like Ward, he also feels like death is a tangible force in DeLisle. Ward suggests that C.J. may have looked around him and seen very little difference between those who were still alive and those who were dead so that it gave him a feeling of hopelessness and impending doom.

At the end of the chapter, Ward indicates that it is after C.J.'s death that she really begins to think about what is happening in DeLisle and what it might take to stop it. She tells readers that the park where C.J. used to play is now set aside as space to expand the graveyard. It's as though the city government can see the frequency with which violent deaths occur, but instead of trying to do something about it, they just make room for more bodies. Ward begins to think about the idea of people somehow courting death and whether or not they can do anything to slow the rate of death.

## Vocabulary

corridor, studiously, gendered, clientele, inexorably, histrionics, pinioned, cleave, accretion



# We Are Watching

## Summary

This chapter picks up just after Ward's father has left. Ward's mother moves with her children to Orange Grove. The move helps Ward's mother feel more free since the people in DeLisle all knew about her husband's infidelities. Ward is ten years old at the time of the move. For the first time ever, Ward is without her extended family and it makes the world seem more dangerous.

Neither of Ward's parents had wanted the children to be raised without a father, but husbands leaving their wives is almost a tradition, which Ward believes may stem back to the time of slavery when Black families were torn apart.

Ward's mother takes a job as a housekeeper for a rich White family.

Ward is affected by her father's leaving. She sees herself as an unattractive, poor, Black woman. Her self-hatred is evident to her classmates and they respond to it by bullying her. Ward's depression makes her mother think she's angry at her for her husband leaving. She tries to discipline the anger out of Ward and gives her more responsibility for her siblings and the upkeep of the household.

When Ward's grades continue to decline, her mother's wealthy employer hears of Ward being bullied and offers to pay her tuition to the private school his children attend.

Ward's father occasionally visits them. Ward's father is able to fully engage with the children when he is there, a luxury Ward's mother does not have because of her responsibilities. The third time Ward's father visits Ward's mother makes him dinner and they all watch television together. The children go to bed and Ward lies awake listening for her father to leave, but he doesn't. Ward's father moves back in and tells her mother he wants to open a kung fu studio. She encourages him to follow his dream and silently agrees to keep working to support the family.

One night, Ward's mother receives a call from a woman who tells her that Ward's father is parked outside his girlfriend's house. Ward's mother kicks him out of the house.

As an adult, Ward knows her father had many dreams, which he often spoke about or showed through the way he acted. On the other hand, any dreams her mother had had she buried when she was pregnant with Joshua and moved back to Mississippi.

When her father leaves, Ward again becomes responsible for helping around the house. Her mother gives her a key, which means she is now responsible for unlocking the house when they get home from school. In those days, they run wild every day until their mother gets home.



One day Joshua tells Ward he's found a secret room. The girls go into the woods with him and he shows them an old cellar. Ward is disturbed by the dark hole and urges them all to leave. That night she lays in bed picturing the cellar as a grave.

Ward thinks she's too unattractive for a boyfriend. Ward isn't allowed to have kids in the house when her mother isn't home. She lets a boy named Thomas in once because she thinks he is Joshua's friend. He sits with her on the couch and tries to touch her, but she refuses him. He yells at her and finally leaves. After that, Thomas sometimes lurks around the yard saying he sees her. Ward believes that he can see that she deserves to be treated badly by a boy.

Ward's mother is withdrawn after her husband leaves. She shows her love to her children by keeping the house running, disciplining them, and providing food. She begins hitting her children when they do something wrong and telling them she's going to put them all up for adoption. Ward cries and feels like they are failing their mother.

The children tell Ward's mother that they miss DeLisle and she saves up to buy some land there. One day when Ward's mother goes to DeLisle to work on clearing the land Ward sets her sisters to work cleaning up. She asks Josh to take out the garbage, but he remains outside. When she looks out the door at him, she sees that they are both growing up and have an understanding of what it means to be men and women.

## Analysis

The theme of history repeating itself is evident in this chapter as Ward's family continues to mimic the generations before them. Ward's family has been torn apart and her mother is left to raise her children alone. Ward suspects the fact that divorce is so common in Black families may stem back to the time of slavery when families were separated through the sale of slaves. Like her mother, Ward is further tasked with household responsibilities as her mother struggles to work enough hours to support her children. She tells Ward about how she helped her own mother to raise her siblings and indicates that it is now Ward's turn to step up. She shows Ward how to do laundry and gives her a key to the house so that she can let herself and her siblings in after school since she will now be expected to watch them until her mother gets home from work.

History also repeats itself in the roles that Ward's parents take on after their separation. Ward's mother becomes the caretaker like her mother before her, which also forces her to be the disciplinarian and keeps her apart from her children because of the burden of responsibility she carries. She isn't able to have fun with her children and show affection because she simply doesn't have the time. In contrast, when Ward's father visits he is able to fully engage with his children, playing with them and having fun. This is because when he sees his children, their enjoyment is his only responsibility. He does not have to worry about feeding them, their progress in school, or how he'll keep a roof over their heads; their mother does all of that.



When the children begin to miss living in DeLisle, Ward's mother again follows in her mother's footsteps by working hard to save up money to purchase land that they can live on. While Ward's grandmother didn't buy land, she did manage to save up money to add on to her house to accommodate her large family after her husband left. Both women show incredible strength when they do such things in spite of the poverty they live in and the menial jobs they are forced to work because they lack an education beyond high school.

The children's desire to move back to DeLisle is evidence of the theme of home. Ward's mother decides to move the family to Orange Grove after receiving a government housing subsidy. She feels the need to escape from DeLisle because everyone there knows about her husband's infidelities. While she feels more free, the move away from home and her extended family makes Ward feel like the world is suddenly a dangerous place. She and her siblings eventually feel the pull toward home that Ward describes several times throughout the book. Once again, Ward's mother capitulates and makes the move back to DeLisle to satisfy the wishes of her family instead of her own.

This chapter is especially important since it expresses a turning point in Ward's life. She undergoes a time of serious depression after her father leaves. She misses him and sometimes looks at her face in the mirror trying to see some of his features. However, what she sees is an ugly girl who, like other Black women, is undervalued by everyone around her. She feels as though her father left because she is somehow not good enough and not worthy of him staying around. After her frightening experience with a boy who tries to force himself on her, she even begins to feel like she deserves to be treated badly. Her classmates pick up on her low self-esteem and she becomes the target of bullying. Her mother mistakes her depression for anger at her for Ward's father leaving, so she tries to discipline Ward by giving her even more responsibilities. At the same time, Ward's mother becomes abusive with her children because of the strain she is under. Her abuse makes Ward feel like she's failing her mother, too. In describing these feelings, Ward gives voice to her own difficulties and some of the reasons for her need to escape from the real world. Her need to escape is likely to be at least partially responsible for Ward's desire to become a writer.

Though her depression and experiences with being bullied are undoubtedly horrible, they have the effect of her mother's rich White employer making the offer to pay for Ward's tuition to the private school his children attend. His intention is to save her from bullying while also helping her to reach her full potential since he's heard she is very smart. Without these difficulties, Ward would not have been offered the chance to attend a better school, which will eventually lead to her being able to attend college. A college education may have been out of her reach had Ward continued to go to school in DeLisle or Pass Christian.

The title of this chapter is also significant. The "we" again refers to Ward and Joshua. Ward never explicitly says what it is they are watching, but implies that what they are watching is how to become men and women in their community. Ward again talks about the roles of men and women and how her parents fit into those roles. Her father continues to be allowed the freedom of chasing his dreams since her mother



encourages him to start a martial arts school when he moves back in with them for a time. She probably knows that he's unlikely to be successful at such an endeavor, but she also knows from experience that her husband will resent her if she tries to hold him back. So, she quietly agrees to fall into her role as the provider and continues to work hard to earn the money her family relies on. Ward knows that her mother buried all her dreams when she moved from Oakland back to DeLisle. By watching their parents, Joshua is learning that he does not need to concern himself with responsibilities while Ward is learning that her life as a woman will be all about responsibility. Ward illustrates this at the end of the chapter when Ward takes charge of cleaning the house. She and her sisters busy themselves with the cleaning, but when she asks Joshua to help, he stays outside and simply looks at her.

## Vocabulary

transient, endemic, keenly, mottled, plummeting, disciplinarian, resentment, fatigue, overtly, omen



# Ronald Wayne Lizana

## Summary

This chapter begins when Ward is a counselor at a day camp. She is 15 and she meets Ronald, who is nine. He's considered an attractive boy and people say he'll be a heartbreaker when he grows up. Ward volunteers at the Christian camp to give herself something to do. She is also going through a devout Christian phase and likes the idea of a man who will love her unconditionally and never leave her.

She teaches dance at the camp. Ronald is a charming boy who likes to show off. He is respectful in the dance class and catches on quickly. He tells Ward he's going to marry her someday.

As Ronald grows older, he remains handsome and charming. He is confident, especially with women. Ward does not see at the time that there is also a darkness in Ronald and he suffers from some of the same insecurities that she does. The people in her community are unable to trust in anything and it weighs on them. To protect themselves from this lack of trust, the boys turn to violence and misogyny and the girls become deceitful.

In the spring of 2002 Ward watches Ronald playing basketball with a girl in the park. Ward jokingly asks Ronald if they're still getting married and he says they are. Charine tells Ward that later that day when they drove around DeLisle some of her friends were making fun of Ward and Ronald stopped them, telling them not to talk about his wife.

After seeing him in the park that day, Ward thinks she knows Ronald, but later realizes there was a lot she didn't know. Ronald is 19 now and living with his mother, whom he argues with often. He eventually moves in with his sister, but moves out of her house after arguing and is homeless for a while. He snorts cocaine and hustles for money.

Ronald eventually moves in with his cousin Selina and tells her he wants to go to rehab. He feels like a disappointment to all of the women in his life. Selina goes to Ronald's mother to tell her that he's okay and she expresses her frustration. Ronald feels rejected by his mother, but Selina assures him that his family really just wants him to get better and find a real job.

One night Ronald and Selina go to a park in Pass Christian to talk. Ronald tells her he sat in that park once and contemplated suicide. He had the gun in his hand when his phone rang and it was his sister. When Selina asks him why he wanted to die, he says it's because of his girlfriend.

The night before his death Ronald tells another cousin that he's joining the military. The cousin later says that he seemed like he had hope, but Selina remembers things differently. She had thrown a birthday party for her son and Ronald called her several



times that day to tell her he would be there soon, but he never came. Friends said they'd seen him at the gas station and he didn't seem like himself.

Ward says that she doesn't know what all of Ronald's demons looked like. She only knows that hers looked like a cellar in the woods, but she knows what it feels like to live with a sense of despair. She knows Ronald felt like he'd be better off dead. She knows that he felt like death would allow him to escape the struggles with his girlfriend and all of the other problems of being a Black male.

Years after Ronald's death, Ward searches statistics about Black people and mental health. She finds that racism, poverty, and violence are the major contributors to depression among Black men. Few African Americans seek care for mental health, making them more vulnerable to a host of problems like incarceration and homelessness. She feels like Ronald understood more quickly the same grief and depression it took her years to understand.

Ronald is at his sister's apartment when he has an argument on the phone with his girlfriend. He tells her he's going to kill himself and she doesn't believe him. He hangs up the phone and shoots himself.

Charine calls Ward while she is at work in New York City to tell her about Ronald's death. Days later Ward goes home for Christmas and Ronald's burial. She and Charine and Nerissa go to New Orleans. They hear gunshots and run with the panicked crowd of people in the streets. She wonders what they are running from. They don't go home, but instead spend the night getting drunk.

Years after Ronald's death Ward learns from Ronald's girlfriend that on the night of his death, though she loved him, she was too frustrated with him to tell him. Later, after Ronald's girlfriend leaves, Charine tells Ward that she's had that same conversation with the girl many times.

## Analysis

Telling Ronald's story allows Ward to begin to solidify what she has begun to understand about some of the factors that lead to early deaths in Black men. While telling Ronald's story, Ward identifies substance abuse, violence born of mistrust, and poverty as major factors. In Ronald, these things lead to the depression that causes him to take his life.

Ward describes Ronald as being an extremely handsome and charming young man. Women seem to find him irresistible and he is confident around him. On first glance, he seems like the kind of man who has every reason to live. However, Ward isn't privy to the darkness that resides in Ronald's heart until after his death when she begins to talk to people about his life.

Ronald's struggle with cocaine lends itself to the theme of substance abuse. He knows he has a problem and that he cannot stop on his own, so he wants to go to rehab. Ward



never identifies what stops Ronald from going to rehab, but it is very likely that he could not because he didn't have the money to do so since Ward tells readers that Ronald earns his money by hustling. His drug abuse makes Ronald feel like he's letting his family down, which deepens his depression.

Another instance of substance abuse occurs when Ward and her friends go to New Orleans after Ronald's death. They hear gunshots in the street and the crowd scatters. Given that Ronald had just shot himself, one might think the group of friends would be especially disturbed by the sound of gunshots. However, instead of leaving New Orleans and going home, they continue on with their night out and get drunk. Apparently, their need to drown their grief with alcohol is greater than their instincts for self-preservation.

Ward suggests that substance abuse is tied to the theme of violence, which again comes into play in this chapter. Ward talks about the way that young men in her community turn to violence and misogyny as a means of protecting themselves from the pervasive mistrust that exists between people in the neighborhood. Their mistrust is born of the society in which they live that deprives them of so many of their basic rights, such as a good education, safety, jobs, and fair treatment by the justice system. Young men find themselves unable to trust anyone around them, so they lash out. When the pressures of society become too much, some of them also turn to drugs to escape.

Ronald's suicide also plays into the theme of violence since death via self-inflicted gunshot wound is an extremely violent way to die. Though Ward says she can't say exactly what caused Ward to kill himself, she can understand the self-hatred and hopelessness that he must have felt because she's experienced those same feelings. In an attempt to describe her feelings, Ward again returns to the image of the cellar in the woods that frightened her as a child. She feels like there is a gaping grave just waiting for her and it looks like that cellar.

Ward returns to the theme of history repeating itself in this chapter as well. When she talks about the factors that lead to depression in African Americans being violence, poverty, and racism, one cannot help but think of the history of African Americans in the United States, which is rife with poverty, violence and racism as African Americans first endured slavery and then fought for civil rights.

Ronald also moves from house to house, living with different members of his family. Ward has previously mentioned that this is common throughout the history of their community, with children living with first one family member and then another. Though Ronald is no longer a child at this point, he grew up in a place where people often moved from one house to another, so doing so must seem commonplace to him.

The theme of home is evident as Ward talks about the way that Ronald moves from his mother's house, to his sister's house, and then to his cousin's house. Ronald's somewhat nomadic existence, like that of C.J. in a previous chapter, suggests that perhaps home is a fluid concept. Home is not a building or even a single person, but is instead a community of people.



Also of note in this chapter is the devout Christian phase that Ward says she is going through when she first meets Ronald while working at a Christian day camp. Ward says that, at the time, there is something appealing about a man who would love her unconditionally and never leave her. Her need for this kind of love stems from her own feelings about her self-worth. As Ward mentions in the previous chapter, she has experienced depression and often sees herself as someone not worthy of love and even deserving of poor treatment. Her feelings of abandonment when her father left leave her wanting the love of a man who will not leave her, which she finds in God.

## Vocabulary

underprivileged, imbue, charisma, corporeal, tamped, optimistic, factors, incarceration, oratory



# We Are Learning

## Summary

In this chapter, Ward's family moves to a single-wide trailer on the land her mother purchased. Her father moves to New Orleans in hopes there will be more job opportunities there.

Ward begins high school and is the only Black girl in the private school. Ward experiences several instances of racism at school including a girl asking her to put "nigger braids" in her hair, boys joking about lynching, and a boy telling racist jokes in a classroom and taunting her to tell "honky jokes." Incidents of racism are very common in her school, but she still doesn't know how to react to them. Students see her as different because of the color of her skin and they see her as inferior.

Ward's mother takes the children to see their father in New Orleans on the weekends. She brings bags of groceries to make certain her kids are fed while they are there. When they stay for a week the food runs out by the end of the week and they end up inventing meals from whatever is left.

Joshua and Ward go to the movies with their older cousin Marcus. Marcus passes out drunk in the bathroom. Ward panics, but Joshua remains calm and calls their uncle who finds their father to come and get them. Her father praises Joshua and asks Ward what happened to her. She takes this as a criticism and silently adds it to the list of reasons her father left her.

Incidents of racism at school leave Ward feeling less than human and sometimes she wants to leave the school. She tries to talk to her mother about going to a boarding school in California, but her mother says she has to stay and help with her siblings. She resolves to leave the area when she goes to college, but her life becomes a cycle of wanting to leave and being drawn back by love.

When he is 13, Joshua goes to live with their father for two months during the summer. Her mother consents to Joshua living with his father because she thinks there are things about being a Black man he can learn from his father.

Once when their father takes the children out for a treat a skinny, sickly woman approaches them. Ward asks what's wrong with all of the terribly thin people they see. Her father says they are on crack.

Ward is afraid to walk in the neighborhood alone. Her father tells her that Joshua was punched by some boys just because he isn't from the area. She asks what her father did and he says he talked to the boys. She is disappointed that her father, with his martial arts training, hadn't done something different. Today she knows that her father did what his training had taught him and that he was trying to teach his son to avoid violence.



Ward's father moves back to Mississippi and Ward's mother sends Joshua to live with him full-time. At the age of 14 Joshua is a good thief. This is one of the first changes Ward notices in him as he is reaching manhood. She knows, too, that he's begun experimenting with alcohol and marijuana.

Ward starts to become somewhat a member of her school community when she joins drama club and becomes a cheerleader, but she knows she is still an outsider. She hears that there are boys who are attracted to her, but they won't act on it for fear of being judged.

Ward spends more and more time in the library reading a variety of books. She is appalled by the way Black people are viewed in *Gone with the Wind* and even more appalled that the movie is so beloved. She begins to read books by Black authors. Though she's proud of her Black heritage in private, she doesn't feel that way when she's at school.

Meanwhile, Joshua faces the indifference of the administration at his school when he struggles in his classes. He is never referred to a counselor, tested for a learning disorder, or given any individual attention.

At the age of 16 Ward has her first drink. She drinks with her best friend and gets so drunk that she vomits on the carpet. She spends the night in the bathroom with her head on the toilet. The next day she tells Joshua about it and he asks her if she's smoked weed yet. He tells her it's better because there's no hangover.

As they talk, a thin woman walks up and talks to Joshua as though she knows him. He shakes her hand and she walks away with her balled fist held to her chest. Joshua tells Ward he's selling crack. He says he's doing it because he needs the money. Their father struggles to pay the bills and buy food, but Joshua is too young for a real job, so he sells drugs to help out. Ward thinks that Joshua has their father as a role model and sees that being a Black man in the South means unsteady work and being devalued. She, on the other hand, has her mother who has created an educational opportunity for her so that she can aspire to attend college. Joshua seems to know more of the real world and now seems older than Ward.

## Analysis

Racism is the main theme of this chapter of the book. Ward has begun attending the private school where she is the only Black girl. Her fellow classmates see her as an outsider and treat her as such. They think nothing of making racist comments in her presence. One girl asks Ward to put "nigger braids" in her hair. Ward is shocked by her use of the racist term and isn't even sure she heard the girl right. When she asks the girl what she said, the girl repeats herself and seems proud to have used the hateful word. On another occasion, Ward passes a group of boys who are joking about lynching. Ward is appalled and speaks out before she can stop herself. The boys try to scare her, but she stands her ground and says they can't do anything to her. Though they back



down, she knows she hasn't really gained anything and that the boys still see her as an outsider. Then, when a teacher leaves the classroom while the class is taking a test, a boy walks in and starts telling racist jokes about black people in an attempt to taunt Ward. He dares her to make "honky jokes," but she remains silent.

Ward remarks that even though she is constantly exposed to racism, she doesn't know how to react to it. These incidents have shown her that neither speaking out or remaining silent help. She speaks out when she hears the lynching jokes, but the only thing that happens is that the boys walk away. They don't see her any differently than they did before. Yet, staying silent as she does when the boy tells jokes in the classroom doesn't change anything either; it only makes her resent the way his presence steals her voice.

At this time in her life, Ward becomes aware of racism in other facets of her life as well. She is a voracious reader and begins to read a wide variety of books from the school's library. She discovers that Black people are often treated poorly in books as well. She is struck by the way Black people are written about in *Gone With the Wind* and even more so by the fact that the movie is held in such high esteem. As a result, she starts seeking out books by Black writers, which makes her feel proud of her heritage. However, she acknowledges that at this time in her life she is proud of her heritage in private, but still experiences self-hatred in public.

The theme of racism ties to the theme of home in this chapter in that it is her experiences of racism at school that lead Ward to want to leave Mississippi. She tries to get her mother to let her go to a boarding school in California, but her mother won't allow it. This leads Ward to vow to herself that she will go to college in another state to get away. Ward says that this is the beginning of a cycle in her life in which she leaves home only to find that she misses it terribly and needs to return.

Substance abuse is also a main theme in this section of the book. When she and Joshua are on a visit to their father's house, they go to a movie with an older cousin who ends up passing out drunk at the theater. Later, both Joshua and Ward have their first experiences with drug and alcohol use. Ward becomes aware that her brother has begun to experiment with both drugs and alcohol even before she does. Then, when she is 16 and drinks for the first time, Joshua advises her to smoke marijuana instead to avoid hangovers. His suggestion is both shocking and sad since it makes it clear that he is already quite experienced in both drinking and doing drugs.

Ward also notices the large number of people in the area who are crack users. They stand out because of their extremely thin bodies and sickly pallor. Ward is frightened by the crack addicts when she first sees them. Later in the chapter, Ward witnesses Joshua selling crack to an addict. He confesses to her that he is selling drugs, but says he has to do it to bring in extra money to help their father pay the bills. He's not yet old enough to work a regular job.

Ward also touches on the theme of violence when she tells about her brother having been punched by a group of boys while walking through her father's neighborhood. She



asks what her father did and is disappointed to learn that he only talked to the boys. It's interesting to note that in this instance, Ward actually hoped for her father to have reacted in a violent manner. However, in what seems to be a rare moment of responsible thinking, her father chose to instead teach his son to try to avoid violence.

Sadly, her father remains, overall, an irresponsible father. Her mother doesn't trust him to feed the children when they visit, so she sends bags of groceries with them. Ward's father spends much of the time that his children visit staying at his various girlfriends' houses while the children remain at his house alone. Ward's mother is correct in not trusting him to feed the children since they do sometimes run out of food and have to invent meals using whatever scraps of the food their mother sent are left. In spite of all of this, Ward still seeks her father's approval as is evidenced by the way her father admonishing her for not remaining calm when Marcus passes out in the theater makes Ward feel like it's her fault that her father left her.

Of particular note in this chapter is the way that Ward's views of her family members begins to change. Ward sees that Joshua is growing up and changing. The first change she sees is that he begins stealing things. He even gets banned from Wal-Mart for theft. Then she discovers that he is using alcohol and drugs and then selling drugs. Finally, she notes that he seems older than she is and is more knowledgeable about the real world.

Ward also experiences a change in the way she sees her mother. Having once thought of her mother as someone who has given up her dreams and is trapped in her life, Ward begins to really see the strength of her mother. Where her father is a victim of his life as a Black man in the South, undervalued and often jobless, her mother instead creates opportunities. She works a thankless job as a housekeeper for the White parents of the children Ward goes to school with to create an opportunity for her daughter to get a better education so that she can perhaps break out of the repeating history of her family and lead a different kind of life. She now sees how strong her mother is and that she is worthy of being a role model.

## Vocabulary

recruits, lexicon, denigratingly, dominance, verge, ethnic, complicity, cope, heritage



# Joshua Adam Dedeaux

## Summary

This chapter begins before all of the other young men whose stories are told in the other chapters have died. Ward has earned two college degrees and her father now has six more children with four different women. Ward says that this chapter is where all of the other stories come together.

Ward moves home in April 2000 after completing her masters coursework at Stanford. She has missed being at home. She has felt lonely, confused, small, and alone in the big world outside of Mississippi. Her mother and Joshua, who is now 19, pick her up at the airport. Nerissa is now 17 and Charine is 14.

Ward and Joshua wake at noon each day after Nerissa and Charine have left for school and her mother has gone to work. Ward fills out endless job applications. Despite her degrees she is unable to find a job. Meanwhile, Joshua fills out applications and goes from one job to the next. Though he doesn't like his low-paying jobs, he is able to find good anywhere he is. Ward's mother hints that she may kick Joshua and Ward out soon if they don't find jobs. Joshua takes a job as a valet at a casino and enjoys the work. Ward is still unemployed.

Joshua continues to sell crack when he's between jobs and for extra money. Ward discovers this fact before finishing at Stanford and moving back home. He doesn't like selling drugs, but feels like there's no other choice as blue collar jobs are being moved overseas making them scarce.

Most of the time Ward feels like she's younger than Joshua. On one occasion that summer she feels like his older sister. She and Joshua are going to buy an oil filter for her junky old car and he asks for advice about his girlfriend. He struggles with trusting her and Ward suggests he just keep trying. This conversation finally makes her feel like the big sister.

Joshua teases her about her driving so she tries to impress him by pulling out of a parking lot too quickly, causing her bumper to partially separate from her car. When they get to their father's house to have the filter changed, Joshua tries to comfort her by attempting to help her father move the bumper back into place. When they aren't able to, Joshua tells her the damage isn't that bad. Later, this memory of an ordinary moment takes on greater significance for Ward.

Ward's last real memory of Joshua occurs in the hallway of her mother's house. She has packed her suitcases to go to a job interview in New York. He asks if she plans to stay there and she says she does. She sees a look of sadness cross his face. As her mother and grandmother drive her to the airport, Ward cries in the backseat because she's scared. She tries to hide her tears.



Ward plans to stay in New York City for four days for job interviews and then return home for Charine's birthday. On October 3, Ward goes to an interview. When she returns to her boyfriend's house he's standing at the door. Her boyfriend comes from a very different background and is always shocked when some bad luck affects her family. He tells her to call her father, but won't tell her why.

Ward calls her father and he tells her that Joshua was in an accident and didn't survive. She breaks down crying and her boyfriend holds her.

On October 2, Joshua had gone to work to pick up some extra hours. Nerissa and Charine had driven to the casino to pick up Nerissa's check and had sat waiting to see Joshua coming into work since they'd seen him drive past the entrance of the casino. They didn't see him, so they left. Now they wished they'd stayed just five more minutes.

When Joshua left work that night he drove the beach road home and was hit by a drunk driver, who was a White man in his forties.

Ward reads a poem she's written at Joshua's funeral. She picks out the picture for the funeral t-shirt and chooses one of herself and Joshua when they were three and five. She doesn't wear the shirt to the funeral or at the gathering afterward. She doesn't wear it until after Hurricane Katrina.

Eight months later when Ward has returned to New York, Nerissa calls to tell her the outcome of the trial for the man who killed Joshua. He is given only five years in prison and charged with leaving the scene of an accident and not manslaughter. The man had been drunk and had even swerved off the road and ended up on the beach. His car on the beach had been reported to the police and he'd staggered home drunk, but because the police didn't find him until the next day, he was no longer drunk. He served only three years and two months of his sentence and never paid Ward's mother any restitution.

## Analysis

This chapter is the most emotionally charged chapter in the book as Ward tells the story of her brother. She reveals to readers that this is the point in her life where all other stories merge. Ward's grief is palpable as she tells readers about how she lives with the grief of Joshua's loss every day and it never goes away

Ward and her family try desperately to hold on to their last memories of Joshua as though they somehow keep him closer. Ward's final memory is of Joshua standing in the hallway of their home as she drags her suitcases out to leave for New York. She remembers the look that crossed his face and thinks that it's the first time she ever really understood the phrase "his face fell." It seems particularly tragic that her final memory of Joshua is of making him sad.

She also holds on to her ordinary memories of him, such as the time that he went with her to get an oil filter so that her father could change the filter in her car. When she tries



to impress him, but instead ruins her bumper, Joshua is kind and comforting, more like an older brother than a younger brother. He's the kind of person who can find some good in nearly every situation, and that is the good quality that Ward highlights in telling his story.

Ward's sisters cherish their final memory of Joshua, which is of seeing him drive up to his job at the casino. They had waited to see him walk into the building, but miss him. Now they wish they had sat for just a little longer so that they could have had one last glimpse of him.

In telling Joshua's story, Ward touches on the themes of the book. The theme of home is evident in the way that Ward feels the tug toward home after finishing her master's coursework. She has missed being at home in Mississippi and has felt alone and confused since moving away. These feelings draw her back to her home state where she attempts to find work. When she is unsuccessful in finding a job, she decides to go to New York, but cries as she leaves because she is afraid.

The lack of good jobs and her inability to find work speaks to the theme of history repeating itself. Ward has previously talked about how scarce good jobs are for the people in her community. Her own father has struggled to find consistent work as have generations of people before him. Even having a college degree doesn't help Ward to find a job. When Joshua finds work, it never lasts long and he is frequently between jobs. It's especially tragic that just as Joshua finds a job as a valet and really enjoys it, his life is cut short.

When Joshua is between jobs or not making enough money at his job, he turns to selling crack. This, of course, is an example of the theme of substance abuse. Joshua doesn't want to sell drugs and would rather work to earn his money, but that's not always an option, so he sometimes turns to dealing drugs in order to make ends meet.

The theme of violence comes into play in the way that Joshua dies. As he is driving home from work, he is hit by a drunk driver and dies. Ward imagines the scene in vivid detail as she has the deaths of the young men she writes about in the previous details. She hopes that the night was a beautiful one and that Joshua took a different road home from work so that he could enjoy the night air.

Finally, the theme of racism is evident in the light sentence the man who kills Joshua receives. The drunk driver is a White man in his forties who leaves his car on the beach after the crash and stumbles home. Although his abandoned car is reported to the police, they do not find him until the next day when he is already sober. Though there is ample evidence that he was indeed drunk at the time of the accident, the man receives an extremely light sentence; he's sentenced to only five years in prison, and serves only a little over three years. Although he's ordered to pay restitution to Joshua's mother, he never does and nothing is done about it. One has to wonder how harshly Joshua might have been punished if it was he who had struck and killed the White man.



One other aspect of this chapter that is important is Ward's refusal to wear a funeral t-shirt when Joshua dies. She has previously mentioned these types of shirts and the importance they play in her community, yet she won't wear one for her own brother. In fact, she never wears it until after Hurricane Katrina. Her refusal to wear the shirt suggests that by wearing it she somehow makes Joshua's death more real and perhaps more ordinary, just another funeral in what will be a long line of funerals. The fact that she puts it on for the first time following the hurricane indicates that she has finally accepted that he is gone. This may be because she has just gone through an event that has caused massive deaths and destruction. Perhaps death on such a large scale makes it impossible for her to escape the fact that she has lost so many people, including Joshua.

## Vocabulary

perpetually, demoralizing, groggy, hemorrhaging, designation, oddity, befell, preternatural, elegy



# We Are Here

## Summary

At the beginning of this chapter, Ward shares statistics concerning the poverty rate among African Americans in the South. She concludes that, according to the statistics, their lives are worth nothing. The factors that lead to tragedy, despair, and self-hatred are inherited.

After Joshua's death, Ward lives and works in New York City. She lives with rich White friends and cleans like a maid because she feels beholden to them. Later, she lives with her boyfriend who charges her rent. As she moves from place to place she feels confused and depressed. She spends a lot of time drinking and smoking weed.

Ward frequently looks at the train tracks and considers suicide, but wonders how her family will feel to lose her, too. When she considers slitting her wrists she gets a tattoo of Joshua's signature across her left wrist because she knows she could never cut across it. And when she thinks of slitting her right wrist she gets "love brother" in Joshua's handwriting tattooed there.

She leaves New York and finds that it isn't true that time heals all wounds. Her grief does not fade, but changes to hurt in new ways.

Death continues to spread in the community and Ward takes life insurance at every job she works because of the fear she feels. She hates answering the phone. And yet, she returns home and turns down higher paying jobs to be in Mississippi. She continues to carry her grief and wakes every morning hoping to have dreamed of Joshua.

Her memories are shrinking and she sometimes needs photographs to aid her memory. Videos of Joshua are harder to watch. She watches one with her mother and sisters and it makes her cry. Every year on the anniversary of his death she wakes up feeling the weight of another year having passed. She spends those days alone in her room crying.

Her father stopped working after Joshua's death and works odd jobs to afford inexpensive food. Her mother cleans Joshua's grave every few weeks. On his death anniversary, she too spends her day alone in her room. On his birthdays she places flowers on his grave and cleans the figurines she's placed there. Ward's sisters attach balloons to his grave. Her mother always thinks of Joshua as her little boy.

Ward believes the grief they feel and the stories she's shared mean that Joshua's life, as well as the lives of the other young men, matter.

Ward shares the memory of a day before Joshua's death when they had all gathered at a park once where they were the only group of Black people amongst many Whites. They sat on the beach drinking beer as a boat full of White people came up the river



flying the Confederate flag. The White people on shore all cheered. Ward had wanted to leave because it was a reminder that many White people, including the White politicians, think Black people are nothing. Josh wasn't shocked at all and tells the others in their group that White people have gangs, too.

Ward knows now that Joshua had his own way of understanding the world and that he had been trying to find the story behind the statistics. Josh used to sit with an old man who sold crosses he made from woven plastic and string and talk to him about God. The man was always pleased to have a young man sit with him and ask questions instead of swaggering by. Ward wonders what answers the man might have given Joshua and if he thought about what the man said when Ward would get so drunk he'd have to carry her to his car to take her home.

Ward always felt special when Joshua would ask her to take a ride with him even though she'd been mean to him in that summer before his death. She wonders if he knew it made her feel special. She most clearly remembers the last time they rode together when Joshua had played a song called "All I Got is You" for her and said it reminded him of them. She no longer rides with anyone in quite the same way she rode with Joshua.

When Joshua died, many of the stories he shared with Ward died with him. She writes about him to find him and to assert that all they lived through together in their lives happened. She knows the repeated history through their drinking and smoking and believing they were nothing.

Those who remain have to show up and survive. Though Ward saw all her faults as a Black girl in the mirror when she was 12, now she looks in the mirror and sees her mother's legacy. She sees the burdens her mother held and the courage and strength she had to provide for her children. She knows that without the things she learned from her mother, she would never have been able to examine the history of loss in their community and written this book that reminds people that they are here. Sometimes she feels weary and when she does, she imagines that at the time of her death, Joshua will drive up in his car with the music blaring and ask her to take a ride with him and she will.

## Analysis

This chapter sees Ward struggling to come to grips with Joshua's death and a grief that never goes away, only changes and hurts her in different ways. Ward gives her grief an almost palpable weight. Her family is affected by the weight of grief as well. Her father just stops working after Joshua dies. He only works odd jobs to bring in enough money to buy hot dogs and ramen noodles to exist on. He simply sits in his house watching television all day. He's clearly a much different man than the one who rode around on his motorcycle, had multiple girlfriends, and big dreams for himself. Meanwhile, Ward's mother spends every anniversary of Joshua's death locked in her room where she mourns for her son, whom she always remembers as her baby. Ward's sisters visit



Joshua's grave every year to place balloons there, one for every year of his life and each year after his death.

Ward states that her memories of Joshua are beginning to slip away, making his death that much more painful. She talks about the way that she sometimes needs to look at pictures of him to jog her memory, but says that it's particularly hard to look at videos and hear him speaking. This reminds readers of the way that Ward tried to capture C.J. in pictures, but never really could. Though the pictures of Joshua might help her to remember, they do not fully capture him so they also remind her of his loss. She, too, hides in her room and cries on the anniversary date of Joshua's death. She lives with her own fear of death and purchases life insurance at every job she works as though to stave off that fear.

Ward uses this final chapter of the book to tie all of the pieces and themes together into a conclusion about what is causing the early deaths and also to make a statement about the people of her community and that statement is "we are here." Now the "we" that Ward refers to isn't just herself and her brother, but all of the Black men and women living in the South. Ward seeks to remind herself and readers that Joshua and all of the other young men lived and their lives matter just as do the lives of all the people of her community who continue to live within the cycle of poverty, substance abuse, violence, and racism. She doesn't want to be forgotten and she doesn't want the world to forget the people of DeLisle.

Ward continues to utilize the major themes of the book to draw the reader toward the conclusion. She returns to the theme of home as she talks about the way that she feels lost, confused, and depressed when she moves back to New York after Joshua's funeral. She lives with friends and then her boyfriend, continuing to wander through the city in a state of confusion. Finally, she decides to move back to Mississippi and even turns down higher paying jobs elsewhere just to be at home. This suggests that though Ward has often sought to escape her home, it's where she really needs to be in order to feel stable.

The theme of history repeating itself is discussed when Ward talks about the statistics concerning poverty in the South and the number of Black people who live there. In researching for the writing of this book, Ward learns that "poverty, lack of education, and poor social support contribute to as many deaths as heart attack, stroke, and lung cancer in the United States" (249). These factors, as Ward has shown in writing of her family and ancestors through the years and of the people in her community, have existed for many, many years. The very history of her people suggests that they are more susceptible to death than are those living in more affluent areas. She reminds readers that these factors are perpetuated from one generation to the next. And, she knows that she and Joshua were a part of that repeating history, that they drank too much, abused drugs, and saw themselves as worthless just as so many of their ancestors had before them.

Ward also talks about the theme of violence when she speaks of her desire to commit violence against herself. Ward contemplates suicide and thinks about jumping in front of



a train when she sees them pass. Later, she looks at her wrists and considers cutting them. To prevent herself from doing so, she tattoos one wrist with Joshua's name and the other with his signature from letters he's written her. She knows that she could never cut through these tangible reminders of her beloved brother.

Ward also shares one last tale toward the theme of racism. She tells of a day when her family sits in a park amidst groups of White people who cheer when they see a boat flying the confederate flag go by. Ward and the others in her family are shocked by this display of racism, but Joshua, who Ward has come to see as wise in matters of the real world, points out that they shouldn't be shocked because White people have their own kind of gangs as well.

The theme of substance abuse is displayed when Ward confesses to spending many of the days following Joshua's death smoking marijuana and drinking. She turns to the same escape method that she has for much of her life just as she has seen the people around her do so often.

Also of importance in this chapter is the final way in which Ward's perception of her mother has changed. She tells readers that her mother has been her example of what it really means to be a Black woman. She has quietly taught Ward a lesson about strength as she struggled to continue on in the face of her husband's infidelities and in the wake of their divorce, to provide for her children, and to go on living after the death of her son. She is a woman who created opportunities for Ward and gave her a way to break out of the cycle her family has been living in. Ward knows that without her mother's example she would never have had the courage to write this book and share the tragedy that has encumbered her life.

## Vocabulary

statistics, beholden, connoisseur, immobilizes, spindly, pervaded, perceived, legacy, holocaust



# Important People

## Jesmyn Ward

Jesmyn Ward is the author of the memoir “The Men We Reaped” and is, therefore, the protagonist of the book. She is a Black woman from Mississippi who grows up in a broken home. Her family struggles with poverty throughout her childhood. To escape the confusion and difficulty of her life as a young child, Ward turns to books and finds there worlds that make more sense than her own. Because Ward shows great promise as a child, her mother’s rich White employer pays for her tuition to attend private school beginning when she is in middle school. This opportunity allows Ward to break away from the cycle of poverty, violence, and drug abuse that plagues her community.

As a child and into her college years, Ward struggles with a poor self-image. She feels as though the world sees her as nothing more than a poor, unattractive Black woman whose life is worth nothing. Her father’s inability to appropriately parent her and her siblings exacerbates the situation and leaves Ward feeling as though she is so worthless, even her own father doesn’t want to be with her. Ward also believes that her classmates can see what she sees in herself, and so they bully her. She is also the victim of racist remarks made by the White kids who surround her in school. Her feelings of worthlessness and lack of hope later lead Ward to substance abuse.

Even as she turns to drugs and alcohol, Ward is aware of the drastic effect such things have on the lives of the people around her. She sees people who are addicted to crack and knows that her brother is involved in selling crack. She also sees that the high rate of joblessness amongst Black people in the South is a major cause of the drug problem. Many young men turn to selling drugs as a means of making money to support themselves and their families.

Funerals for young people in her community are common throughout Ward’s life. After her brother is killed by a drunk driver, others among her friends begin dying in violent ways at an alarming rate. The deaths naturally take a toll on Ward, who contemplates suicide after her brother’s death

As an adult and an author, Ward is struck by the way that death among young Black men is so prevalent in her community. She feels an urge to break the silence and speak out about the factors that lead to such violent deaths. She is prompted to tell her story in order to not only examine the reasons for the deaths, but also to give the lives and deaths of the young men whose stories she tells meaning.

## Joshua Adam Dedeaux

Joshua is Ward’s younger brother. He and Ward are very close, partially because they were old enough at the time that their parents’ marriage fell apart to have been aware of the problems in a way their younger sisters were not. Growing up, Ward sees that



Joshua is disciplined more harshly by her father. At the time she does not understand and sometimes feels guilty about it, but later comes to realize that her father was harder on Joshua because he knew that Joshua's life as a Black man would be hard.

Joshua lives with his father for a time when he is in high school because his mother believes that his father can teach him things about being a man that she cannot. His father struggles to pay the bills and is frequently jobless. As a result, Joshua turns to theft and later to selling crack because he's too young to get a real job. Joshua hates that he sells drugs, but feels as though he has no other alternative. Ward believes that their father probably asked Joshua for help paying the rent since he had also approached her at times for help.

Joshua struggles in school and eventually drops out. Ward knows that the school's administration treats him as they treat so many other Black males whose grades are poor; she knows that they simply write him off as hopeless. Joshua is never referred for any kind of school counseling, tested for learning disabilities, or given any individual assistance at all.

When he has a job, Joshua is a hard worker who strives to make something of his life. Unfortunately, he never has the chance to do so. One night as Joshua is driving home from his job at the casino, he is struck and killed by a drunk driver. The driver is a White man in his forties who is only convicted of leaving the scene of an accident and serves only a little over three years in jail.

## Ward's Mother

Ward's mother, whose name Ward never reveals, is a hard working woman who strives to provide for her children. She grew up in Mississippi and moved out to Oakland, California as a young woman. She marries Ward's father and wants to stay in California, but when she is pregnant with Joshua, Ward's father insists on moving back to Mississippi and she agrees to go because she loves him. However, Ward believes that her mother's dreams for her life probably ended at that point.

When Ward's mother's husband is continuously unfaithful to her, the marriage falls apart. The two frequently fight and finally separate for good after having four children together. She is left to raise the children on her own with very little support from their father. She even sends bags of groceries along with her children when they go to their father's for the weekend to ensure they have food to eat.

Having been raised by her own mother in a single parent home, Ward's mother was the caretaker for her younger siblings while her mother worked. When her husband leaves, she places this same burden on Ward, continuing the cycle. At the time, Ward is unhappy and feels like her mother is unduly hard on her. She sees her mother as a harsh disciplinarian who has little time for showing affection toward her children. This leads Ward to set her mind on attending college in another state in order to get away.



However, as an adult Ward can see that her mother worked so hard because she loved her children and providing for them was the only way she knew how to show her love.

As Ward writes her memoir she comes to the conclusion that she learned to be strong from her mother's example of strength. She knows that without this strength she never would have had the courage to write her story as well as the stories of her brother and the other young men.

## **Ward's Father**

Ward describes her father as a man of extraordinary beauty. Because he is so handsome, women are drawn to him and this is the downfall of his marriage to Ward's mother. He is frequently unfaithful to her, which leads Ward's mother to eventually kick him out of the house.

When Ward is a young child, her father is kind and loving toward his children. He plays with them often, teaches them martial arts, and takes them for rides on his motorcycle. He seldom disciplines his daughters, but is often hard on Joshua as he teaches him about being a Black man in the South. As the children grow older and after the divorce, he is more distant from the children. When they come to visit him for weekends or for full weeks in the summer, he spends the time they are there with his girlfriends, leaving the children to fend for themselves.

Ward's father is a dreamer who seems to have higher aspirations for his life that he is never able to achieve. This leads him to make poor decisions, such as using the money he and his wife had been saving for a house to purchase a fancy motorcycle. He is often out of work and struggles to pay his bills after he and his wife divorce. He even asks Ward to help him pay his rent. He most likely asks Joshua to help as well, which leads to Joshua selling crack to earn money.

After Joshua's death, Ward's father stops working, except for odd jobs to earn enough money for the extremely cheap foods on which he subsists. He spends all of his time watching television.

## **Roger Eric Daniels III**

Roger is the last of the young men whose stories are told in the book to die and the first that Ward writes about. Roger is raised by his mother after his father dies of a heart attack at the age of 28. He dates Nerissa when the two are in middle school. He drops out of school in the tenth grade.

Roger is a gentle and kind person who looks after Ward and her sister when they drink too much at a party. He is an artist and decorates his walls with the pictures he has drawn.



Though Roger warns one of his cousins against taking drugs, he snorts cocaine. Ultimately, his drug use leads to his death when he snorts cocaine and takes pills, which cause him to have a heart attack

## **Demond Cook**

Ward gets to know Demond when she is at Nerissa's apartment and Demond comes over with Nerissa's boyfriend. He comes from an unusual home since his parents are still together and both have good jobs. Demond works at a pharmaceutical plant and is aware of his responsibilities to his family. He is conscious of the troubles that face Black men and so strives to keep gatherings quiet so as not to attract the attention of the police. When he witnesses a murder, he testifies against the person accused of the murder and also testifies against a drug dealer from outside of DeLisle who sells drugs in the community.

Demond is engaged and lives with his fiancée and their daughter in a house his grandmother once owned. One night when he returns home after work, he is shot and killed as he approaches his door. His fiancée finds him dead on the lawn and the murderer is never found.

## **Charles Joseph Martin**

Charles is Ward's cousin and he goes by the name C.J. Ward gets to know C.J. when he is six. He is very charismatic and a great athlete who likes to show off his skills. C.J. dates Charine and the two are inseparable. He loves Charine and takes great care of her, but his behavior is sometimes erratic. Ward discovers that he is snorting cocaine, which is the cause of his erratic behavior.

C.J. lives his life with a feeling that he isn't going to be around long. He is a nomad who goes from place to place sleeping on couches and drops out of school when he is 17. He plays chicken with trains, jumping off the tracks just before the train reaches him.

C.J. dies when he and a car full of friends are driving on a foggy night. They cross a train track that has no lights and no reflective bar and are struck by a train. C.J. is the only one in the car to die.

## **Ronald Wayne Lizana**

Ward meets Ronald when she works as a counselor at a day camp and Ronald is a camper. He is attractive, charismatic, and a good dancer. He tells Ward he's going to marry her someday. As an adult, he is protective of Ward and sticks up for her when some of his other friends are speaking badly of her.

Ronald is also a victim of substance abuse and feels like he has let the people in his life down. He wants to go to rehab and talks about joining the military, but he also



contemplates suicide. On the night of his death he calls his girlfriend and tells her he's going to kill himself. She doesn't believe him. He hangs up the phone and shoots himself.

## **Nerissa**

Nerissa is Ward's younger sister. Nerissa has a baby at the age of 13 and moves out after having a disagreement with her mother about how to raise the child. Her son remains with her mother and she sees him on weekends. She is the first to move out of the house and live on her own. Ward often spends time at her apartment and the two go out drinking together.

Nerissa dates Roger Daniels when the two are in middle school and before she gets pregnant. They remain friends and he sometimes teases her about giving him another chance.

## **Charine**

Charine is Ward's youngest sister and the one that Ward often turns to for comfort when she's home from college. Ward sometimes crawls into bed and holds Charine when she's feeling sad. Charine is dating C.J. at the time of C.J.'s death. She holds herself responsible for his death because he had asked her to sit with him longer that night and she had refused to, so he left. She thinks that if she'd just stayed a little longer he would not have been at the train tracks at the same time as the train.



# Objects/Places

## Wolf

Ward tells of an incident in which she and friends saw what appeared to be a black wolf slinking across the road one night. The wolf is significant because, for Ward, it represents the conditions and factors that are the cause of the early deaths that are so frequent in her community. At the start of the book, Ward cannot identify just why her brother and friends died so young. She feels like the town itself, once called Wolf Town because of its proximity to the Wolf River, is stalking them. When she sees the wolf, it gives a tangible form to her feelings of being stalked and she says that she sometimes believes that DeLisle is the wolf.

## Cellar

When Ward is a child, Joshua finds an old cellar in the woods and takes her to see it. The cellar disturbs Ward, though she isn't quite sure why. She runs from it dragging her siblings behind her. Later, when she begins to experience depression as a result of the bullying and racism she experiences at school and her feelings of abandonment when her father leaves, Ward sees her depression as that dark hole in the woods. When Ward writes about Ronald's depression and suicide, she says that she doesn't know what form his dark feelings took on, but hers were a cellar in the woods.

## DeLisle

DeLisle is the small town in Mississippi where Ward and her siblings live for much her life. It's a sleepy town that has been devastated by hurricanes twice: Hurricane Camille when her parents were young and Hurricane Katrina when Ward is an adult. The people of DeLisle are primary of African American heritage and lower to middle class. Many of the families there have been in DeLisle for generations and often live in homes built by their ancestors.

Ward's parents move back there from Oakland, California when Ward's mother is pregnant with Joshua. Throughout her college years, Ward feels a pull back to DeLisle. And, as an adult, though she finds it harder and harder to go back after Joshua's death and then Hurricane Katrina, she still cannot resist the pull to home.

## New Orleans

Ward's father moves to New Orleans after he and Ward's mother separate due to his infidelities. His brothers live in New Orleans, so he moves there to be closer to them. Ward and her siblings visit him there on weekends and during the summer. The White kids at Ward's school call New Orleans the "murder capital," but she has a much



different perception of the city since she loves her father and her uncles. She sees it as a place of adventure. When she is older, Ward and her friends go to New Orleans to party and watch the Mardi Gras parade.

## Oakland

Ward's parents live in Oakland, California at the time that Ward is born. Ward's mother loves it there, but Ward's father begins to miss living in Mississippi and feels the pull toward home. Since she is pregnant and because she loves her husband, Ward's mother sees no other choice but to return to Mississippi with her husband. Ward believes that it was at this time that her mother's dreams for a life different than the one she would lead in DeLisle die. Ward's mother is forced to set her dreams aside and accept that, as a Black woman especially, she is responsible for raising her children and providing for her family.

## Pass Christian

Pass Christian is a small town in Mississippi that is something of a sister town to DeLisle. Many of Ward's friends and extended family members live there. Like DeLisle, it's a town where generations of the same family have lived. It is also populated by primarily African Americans of lower and middle class.

## Motorcycle

When she is a child, Ward's father buys a motorcycle using the money they had been saving up to buy a house. The purchase angers Ward's mother, but she says nothing about it. The motorcycle represents Ward's father's view of himself, or at least of the person he would like to be. He often rides around on the motorcycle wearing expensive leather outfits. The motorcycle gives him a sense of freedom from the mundane life of a working man. It is also a part of his image as a ladies' man and undoubtedly helps him to attract the many women he has affairs with.

## Books

Ward grows to love reading at an early age and uses books as a means of escaping her chaotic life. Ward finds that books make more sense than the real world. When her parents fight or when life becomes difficult, she often goes to her room and reads books she has checked out from the library. This is, perhaps, the reason that Ward becomes an author.



## Funeral T-Shirts

Funeral t-shirts are common in DeLisle for the funerals of young people. They usually have a picture of the deceased on them as well as a saying that represents something important about the person. Ward describes the shirts worn at Roger's funeral as having a picture of Roger as well as pictures of the other four young men who died shortly before him, including Joshua. This indicates that Ward is not the only person who can see that the deaths of young Black men are somehow connected and are occurring far too frequently.

## New York City

Days before Joshua's death Ward goes out to New York City for job interviews. While she is there, she stays with her college boyfriend. One day she returns home from an interview to find her boyfriend waiting on the steps for her. He tells her to call her father, and when she does, her father tells her about Joshua's death. After Joshua's death, Ward moves out to New York City and works there for some time, until she feels the pull to move home again.

## Michigan

After graduating from high school, Ward goes to Michigan to attend college. As a teenager, she vowed to herself that she would get away from Mississippi and go to college in another state. She saw college as her way out of DeLisle. However, while attending college she frequently finds herself feeling homesick and so returns to DeLisle on every break.

# Themes

## History Repeats Itself

Ward's use of the theme of history repeating itself shows readers that certain factors have been at play in her community for generations, indicating that the cycle they live in is extremely difficult to break out of. Her ancestors have lived in a certain way, her parents lived in that same way, and the people in her generation do, too. This cycle is a contributing factor in the early deaths that occur in her community and Ward sets out to show that through the stories she tells.

Ward begins the book by examining the history of her ancestors. In their stories she discovers instances of racism, violence, and substance abuse. Among her ancestors are Black man and a White woman who marry and have children. When they visit the woman's family, they have to be especially careful to return home before dark to avoid the Klan. Another White man marries a Native American woman and is disowned by his family. He builds a school to educate his children since he knows they won't be able to get an education anywhere else. This same man is a moonshiner during Prohibition who is shot to death. And, women throughout her family history are left to raise children on their own after their husbands leave them or die. This includes her grandmother Dorothy who raised seven children on her own. This examination occurs early on to show readers that such things have always existed in Ward's community. By sharing this information early on, readers are able to see the commonalities between Ward's ancestors, herself, and the young men who die. For example, Ward shows that schools were indifferent to the education of Black students during the time when her ancestor built a school for his children. This indifference continues into the stories of the young men since some of them dropped out of school after administrators and teachers ignored their needs and pushed them to the back of the class when they struggled academically.

Ward then goes on to show how these stories continued to play out in the lives of her parents. She does this so that readers can see that she, too, has been affected by the historical cycle they are stuck in. The way in which Ward is raised in a single-parent household is an excellent example of the cycle. Ward's mother, Dorothy's daughter, is raised in a single parent home and is given the responsibility of helping to raise her siblings since she is the oldest daughter and her mother needs to work. Ward's father, too, is raised in a single parent home. The two of them never want that to happen to their own children, and yet they fail to keep their marriage together, leaving Ward and her siblings to be raised by their mother just as so many of their ancestors were. Ward, like her mother, is tasked with helping raise her siblings.

Ward talks about this repeating history as living with ghosts from their past. She talks about the way that many people in DeLisle live in homes built by their ancestors and the sometimes feel as though they are filled with ghosts of people who came before them. For generations, the people who have lived in these houses have raised their children



there, with children often moving from one relative to another as they grow up. Many Black men who lived in the houses have died early deaths just as Joshua and the other young men Ward writes about do.

In the end, Ward concludes that it is their inability to break out of the cycle of these repeating stories that is the chief cause of the young deaths. The people in her community continue to live in poverty, turn to violence, abuse drugs and alcohol, and believe that their lives are worth nothing. Ward believes that these factors are the reason there is so much death in her world.

## **Substance Abuse as a Factor in Early Deaths**

Ward uses the theme of substance abuse to show readers that people in her community have a casual attitude toward drug and alcohol use, which leads them to substance abuse as they seek to escape the difficulties of their lives. Ultimately, this substance abuse contributes to a feeling of worthlessness and is a factor in the early deaths.

In sharing her own experiences with drugs and alcohol, Ward shows readers that substance abuse is so common in her community that children simply grow up being exposed to drugs and alcohol. She has her first taste of beer when she is just a toddler picking up cans at a party thrown by her parents. Instead of being concerned by their child drinking beer, Ward's parents apparently think it's cute since they take a picture of her holding a beer can with beer dribbling down her chin. Such a story may be shocking to many readers, but Ward includes the story to show that the attitude toward drugs and alcohol is so casual that children don't grow up learning the dangers of substance abuse. As such, they are not equipped to make better choices as adults and turn easily to drugs and alcohol for entertainment and in an attempt to escape reality, as Ward does when her brother and friends die.

Ward demonstrates the way in which substance abuse leads to feelings of worthlessness through the stories of C.J., Joshua, and Ronald. C.J. and Joshua both turn to selling drugs as a way of supporting themselves when jobs are scarce. Neither likes selling drugs, but they feel they have no other choice. Undoubtedly they know they are contributing to the problem in their community. The need to turn to drug dealing probably leaves them with feelings of hopelessness and a lack of worth in terms of their lives as young men who are supposed to be able to support themselves and their loved ones. Ronald's drug use causes him to feel as though he is a complete let down to the women in his life. He wants to do better and has a desire to join the military. In the end, he is unable to break his habit and it leads to his death.

## **The Effects of Violence on Men and Women**

Ward's use of the theme of violence is intended to provide readers with a view of the way that violence is common in Black communities in the South and how it affects men and women differently.



Ward shows that Black children are exposed to violence early on, and these experiences may lead to men and women growing up with differing views on violence. Ward and Joshua learn early lessons about violence. Ward learns about violence when she accidentally provokes her father's pit bull and it attacks her. From this she learns that her actions, no matter how innocent, can bring violence upon her. This is later reinforced when Ward is a teenager and she lets a boy into the house thinking he is Joshua's friend. The boy tries to force himself on her and, because of her low self-esteem and the lessons she's learned, Ward believes she deserves to be treated badly.

Joshua learns about violence in a number of ways. His first lesson is at the hands of his father who disciplines him harshly by spanking him when he's just a toddler who wanders out of the yard in search of his sister. Then, he learns another lesson about violence when he is riding a moped and it crashes, injuring him. These two lessons teach him that he will be judged harshly and sometimes violently if he steps out of line and that sometimes he will meet with violence through no fault of his own. As a teenager, Joshua's father attempts to teach him to avoid violence when Joshua is punched by boys in his father's neighborhood. Though he is trained in martial arts and capable of inflicting great harm, Joshua's father simply talks to the boys. In doing so, he is attempting to teach Joshua to avoid violence whenever possible.

Ward also talks about the way that people in her community live with a feeling of mistrust due to their circumstances. She says that this feeling of mistrust leads people to want to protect themselves. Men, she says, turn to violence and misogyny.

## **The Effects of Passive and Overt Racism**

Ward uses the theme of racism to show readers the effects of both passive and overt displays of racism on the lives of Black men and women. Ward is frequently a victim of overt racism as she attends private school and is the only Black girl there. While in school, Ward is frequently subjected to racism. She is the only Black girl in her private school and is, therefore, seen as an outsider. The White kids in her school make comments about Black people and then look at her. They tell racist jokes and use the word "nigger" around her just to see her reaction. Though she experiences racism often, Ward doesn't know how to react to it. She learns that neither speaking out or keeping silent seem to change her situation. Her constant exposure to racism leaves Ward feeling as though her life is worth less than the lives of the White students around her. She begins to see herself as ugly and despises herself, leading to a deep depression.

Ward also examines the effect of overt racism on Black men. She talks about the way that Black men are at a greater risk for losing their freedom through encounters with the police. She mentions that young Black boys who are caught playing pranks end up in juvenile detention centers and that mothers must constantly worry about their sons being harassed by police or even jailed simply because of the color of their skin.

Passive racism, too, effects the lives of the people in Ward's community. One example of passive racism that Ward provides is a discussion of the way that Black boys who do



not excel at school are sent to the back of the class and are not offered individualized help to succeed. This frequently leads to the boys dropping out of school and remaining uneducated.

Passive racism is also to blame for C.J.'s death. The car C.J. is in is hit by a train at an intersection where the signal lights are not in working order and there is no crossbar. The intersection just happens to be in a Black community and Ward suggests that had it been in a White community, the lights would not have been left broken and there would have been a crossbar.

## The Pull Toward Home

Ward uses the theme of home to suggest that the great pull that people have toward the place in which they grew up makes it difficult to break out of dangerous cycles. Ward first suggests this when talking about her parents who lived in California for a time and returned to Mississippi when Ward's father became homesick. Ward talks about the fact that her mother did not want to leave California and perhaps saw it as a way out. She believes that her mother's dreams died when she moved back home.

Ward feels this same love-hate relationship with home. As a teenager, she is desperate to get out of Mississippi when she is constantly bullied at school, but her mother refuses to let her go. She vows to go to college out of state and eventually does. Yet, while in college, Ward is constantly homesick and returns to Mississippi every chance she gets. Even when she finishes her master's coursework, Ward goes back to Mississippi and tries to find a job there, though she must know that jobs in her field will be scarce. Ward states that still today she feels that pull even when it's become so much more difficult to go home due to the deaths and Hurricane Katrina. However, the fact that Ward was ultimately able to get out of Mississippi to pursue her education and is today a successful author shows that being able to get away helped her to break the cycle that others in DeLisle are stuck in.



# Styles

## Structure

The Men We Reaped consists of a prologue and 11 chapters. Six of the chapters tell Ward's story while the other five tell the stories of five young men who have died. Each chapter is titled rather than numbered. The chapters about the young men are simply titled with their names. The chapters about Ward's life each begin with the word "we." The "we" refers to herself and Joshua as she later explains that her story is inextricable from Joshua's story.

The timeline of the book moves simultaneously forward through time and backward through time. The chapters in which Ward tells her own story move forward from before her birth to the present day. The chapters about the young men move backward in time, starting with the last man to die and moving back in time to the first man to die. The purpose of this juxtaposition of timelines seems to be to weave together the two parts of the book to show how the community, its history, and their place in society play a role in the early deaths of Black men.

## Perspective

The Men We Reaped is told entirely from Ward's perspective. Because the book is a memoir, it is logical that the story be told from the author's perspective. Doing so allows Ward to interject her present day thoughts on the events of the past. This is important since Ward wrote the book for the purpose of discovering what factors lead to the young deaths of her brother and friends. Ward also reveals a need to break the silence surrounding the deaths, so her perspective is warranted since she is the one who wants to speak out.

Ward tells her story entirely in the past tense, which is typical in memoirs. Ward is telling the story of her past as well as the pasts of her family and friends, so the use of past tense is the most logical and clear way of sharing these stories. The use of past tense also allows to Ward to tell stories of the past while also giving her present day perspective on the events that happened as she grew up.

## Tone

The tone of the book is fairly dark from the outset. Ward begins the book by telling about her brother trying to convince her and her sisters that her father's house has a ghost. Ward focuses on the idea that someone died in the house and uses that as a stepping off point for telling about the many people who have died over the course of her life, including her brother.



The tone remains dark in the chapters in which Ward tells about her own life. As she grows up, Ward endures her parents' divorce, bullying, and racism. She witnesses her parents fighting frequently and participates in a great deal of substance abuse. Her life is struck by poverty and hopelessness.

The chapters about the young men are also dark. Ward does begin each chapter by telling about the good points of each man, detailing their positive characteristics before delving into the parts of their lives that lead to their deaths, such as substance abuse, violence, and depression.



## Quotes

Coming home to DeLisle as an adult has been harder for this reason [Hurricane Katrina], a concrete one. And then there are abstract reasons, too. As Joshua said when we were kids hunting down ghosts: Somebody died here.”

-- Jesmyn Ward (Prologue paragraph 20-21)

**Importance:** This quote sets the tone of the book. Ward talks about the way that she finds it difficult to go back to her hometown as an adult. In part, the return home is difficult because so many of the people of DeLisle have been scattered as a result of Hurricane Katrina and the government offering them the chance to relocate rather than providing them with tools to rebuild. However, after Joshua and her four friends die, though Ward continues to feel the pull toward home, it becomes more and more difficult to go back because DeLisle is a reminder of the people she has lost.

I wonder why silence is the sound of our subsumed rage, our accumulated grief. I decide this is not right, that I must give voice to this story.

-- Jesmyn Ward (Prologue paragraph 22)

**Importance:** This quote explains Ward’s need to write this memoir. She believes that people have been silent for too long about the problems in their community that contribute to the prevalence of young deaths. People don’t talk about the factors involved, which allows them to perpetuate. Ward hopes that by telling her story and the stories of the young men, she can give the people of her community a voice.

Rog and Charine talked about how things in the hood had changed, how we felt like death was stalking us, driving us from one another, the community falling apart.

-- Jesmyn Ward (Roger Eric Daniels III paragraph 40)

**Importance:** This quote is important because it shows that Ward is not the only person who feels the weight of the deaths they’ve experienced. Rog and Charine also see the way that people are dying far too young in DeLisle and that their deaths are having a profound effect on the community. Ward’s use of the word “stalking” in this quote refers to the use of the image of a wolf as a symbol for the deaths that occur. It is a symbol that Ward returns to frequently in the book.

Red was the color my mother chose to dress me in, again and again: no pink or blue or green or purple, but red. Red as the blood tumors. I was not a pink girl.

-- Jesmyn Ward (We Are Born paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This quote shows that Ward is a fighter and her mother saw the strength in her from a very young age. Her mother didn’t see her as a frail girl in frilly pink outfits, but as a tough child who would triumph over her difficult birth, and later, over the difficulties in her life. Ward later talks about the way her mother’s example of strength made it possible for her to write her memoir.



Not only was he unusual because he was an only child, but he was also unusual among my generation because he had both parents, and both of his parents had solid working-class jobs.

-- Jesmyn Ward (Demond Cook paragraph 10)

**Importance:** This quote describes the way that Demond is different from most of the young people in DeLisle. It speaks to the high rate of divorce, joblessness, and poverty in the area. In many ways, Demond doesn't seem to fit the pattern of the other young men that Ward writes about. However, even he is not immune to what is going on in DeLisle and he ultimately dies a young death just as so many others there.

It was easier and harder to be male; men were given more freedom but threatened with less freedom.

-- Jesmyn Ward (We Are Wounded paragraph 85)

**Importance:** This quote talks about the way that Black men have more freedom than Black women do because it is usually the women who bear the responsibility of raising children, including while they are young and their mothers work long hours so they raise their siblings. However, Black men are more susceptible to the loss of freedom since they are more likely to be arrested for a wide variety of infractions than are Black women.

The fact that he was a Black male barely scraping by in his classes meant he was seen as a problem. And the school administration at the time solved the problem of the Black male by practicing a kind of benign neglect.

-- Jesmyn Ward (Charles Joseph Martin paragraph 20)

**Importance:** This quote exemplifies the passive racism that occurs in schools as Ward and Joshua are growing up. Joshua is a victim of this type of racism because he isn't a particularly good student. When he is not successful in his classes, he is simply ignored. He is never tested for a learning disability, sent to a school counselor, or offered any kind of individual assistance. As a result, he drops out of school. Charles suffers from this same problem. Like Joshua, he isn't a good student, so the school system simply pushes him toward the back of the classroom and ignores him until he just leaves.

I looked at myself and saw a walking embodiment of everything the world around me seemed to despise: an unattractive, poor, Black woman. Undervalued by her family, a perpetual workhorse. Undervalued by society regarding her labor and her beauty.

-- Jesmyn Ward (We Are Watching paragraph 18)

**Importance:** After her father leaves, Ward slides into a depression that stems from the way that she begins to see herself. She is bullied by her classmates who make snide comments about Black people in her hearing range and then look over at her. Her mother sees Ward's depression as a willful attitude, and tries to discipline it out of her by saddling her with more chores and responsibilities. Ward wonders what it is about her that makes her father want to leave her and begins to believe that she is worthless.



I don't know what that debilitating darkness, that Nothing that pursued him, looked like, what shape his depression took. For me, it was a cellar in the woods, a wide, deep living grave."

-- Jesmyn Ward (Ronald Wayne Lizana paragraph 91)

**Importance:** This quote talks about the depression that led Ronald to take his own life. Ward references the cellar she saw in the woods as a child. The cellar disturbed Ward in a way she couldn't identify as a child. Her depression is like that cellar in that, at the time she is experiencing it, she cannot identify the causes of her feelings, except the feeling that somehow death is after them all.

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?

-- Jesmyn Ward (We Are Learning paragraph 66)

**Importance:** This quote is an excellent example of the theme of home that runs throughout the book. Ward repeatedly talks about the way that she sometimes wants to escape from Mississippi, but when she is gone she feels homesick and cannot wait to go back. There are several other people in the book who experience the same thing, such as her father who moved out to California as a young man, but later grew to miss Mississippi and so moved his pregnant wife and young daughter back.

This is the heart. This is. Every day, this is.

-- Jesmyn Ward (Joshua Adam Dedeaux paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Ward introduces the chapter about Joshua using this quote. She is speaking of the horrible grief she lives with since Joshua's death. It's a grief that she cannot escape and that doesn't dull with time, only changes. Joshua's death is at the heart of her need to write this memoir as she seeks to understand what took him from her, as well as what took the other young men who also died too soon.

We tried to outpace the thing that chased us, that said: You are nothing. We tried to ignore it, but sometimes we caught ourselves repeating what history said, mumbling along, brainwashed: I am nothing.

-- Jesmyn Ward (We Are Here paragraph 42)

**Importance:** This quote sums up what Ward concludes is the cause of the deaths among the young Black men of DeLisle. In the end, all of them are repeating the histories of their community. Their lives embody the attitudes of history in which Black people are undervalued and unable to escape from the effects of racism, substance abuse, and violence that surround them.



# Topics for Discussion

## Roger Eric Daniels III

In the chapter titled “Roger Eric Daniels III,” Ward has a conversation with Roger’s cousin Brandon in which Brandon says, “They picking us of, one by one” ( 50) Ward wonders who “they” are. At the end of the memoir, what conclusion has she drawn readers to make about who “they” are? Do you agree with her analysis of the deaths and the causes of them? Why or why not?

## We Are Born – Theme of Violence

In the chapter titled “We Are Born,” Ward writes about she and Joshua learning lessons about violence. How do the lessons occur for each child? How do the two events differ? What lessons about violence do the children learn? How does Ward suggest violence is different for Black males versus Black females?

## Demond Cook

How does Demond differ from the other four young men in the book? Why don’t these differences save him from suffering an early death as his friends do? Does Demond’s death support or weaken the conclusions that Ward draws about the factors involved in the deaths? How?

## Black Men, Black Women, and Freedom

What differences does Ward note between the lives of Black men and Black women? What does she say about the freedoms they are afforded or deprived of? How do her parents fit into that pattern? Does Ward follow the pattern? Why or why not?

## Progression of Thought Toward Writing Memoir

How does Ward show the progression of her decision to write this memoir? When does she begin thinking about it? How do her thoughts evolve? What finally makes her decide to write her stories and those of her brother and friends?

## We Are Watching

In the chapter titled “We Are Watching,” what is it that Ward and Joshua are watching? What do they learn from what they see?



## **Mental Health in African Americans**

What factors that cause depression among African Americans does Ward identify? Which of these factors are at play in each of the young men that Ward writes about? Which of these factors are at play in Ward's life? How does Ward describe her own depression?

## **Strength of Black Women**

How does Ward see her mother at the start of the book? How does her perception of her mother change as she grows up? What effect does Ward's mother have on her life? What conclusion does Ward draw about the strength of Black women?

## **Grief**

What does Ward say about grief? How does it affect her? How does it affect her family?

## **The Cause of the Deaths**

What does Ward ultimately conclude has caused the young deaths she writes about? What statistics does she point to? Do you agree with her conclusion? Why or why not?