

# **Mudbound Study Guide**

## **Mudbound by Hillary Jordan**

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# Plot Summary

Mudbound is the debut novel by author Hillary Jordan. In this novel, two families' lives are irrevocably changed by the events of one night. Laura thought she would never get married, but soon finds herself a wife and mother living on a farm in the Mississippi Delta, dealing with the mud, a cantankerous father-in-law, and a drunken brother-in-law haunted by what he has seen and done in the war. At the same time, strong-willed Florence finds herself fighting a battle on the home front to protect her family from the racism that threatens to poison all she holds dear. On one night both these women will find themselves on opposite sides of the fence fighting for the same purpose.

Mudbound is a novel filled with well-drawn characters and a climax that will leave the reader thinking about it even after the final sentence.

Laura resolved herself to the idea that she would die an old maid after her thirtieth birthday when it seemed no man would ever ask for her hand in marriage. However, just weeks later Laura meets Henry McAllan, an intelligent, educated man who works with her brother and seems interested in her. For weeks Laura and Henry court, but when Henry announces he must leave the state for a job, Laura believes her hopes have once more been dashed and she will remain forever single. Two months later, Henry returns and asks Laura to marry him.

For several years Laura and Henry live a happy life in Memphis, bringing into the world two beautiful little girls. War breaks out during this time, taking two of Laura's brothers and Henry's youngest brother, Jamie. It is a difficult time, but Laura counts herself lucky that she has not lost anyone she loves to the distant war with Germany. Then, a short time after peace is declared, Laura's brother-in-law commits suicide, prompting Henry to decide that he must move up his plans to buy a farm in the Delta section of Mississippi in order to be near and to care for his widowed sister.

At first Laura is shocked and frightened to leave her family in Memphis, but wants to support the wishes of her husband. Laura is consoled by the idea that Henry has rented the family a house in town rather than planning on having her live on the farm. However, when they arrive in Marietta, they learn that they have been swindled and there is no rent house. Laura and her daughters are forced to set up housekeeping in the tiny, rustic house on the farm. Laura is forced to learn not only how to live on a farm, but how to live without such modern conveniences as electricity and running water. To add to her troubles, Henry has brought his cantankerous father to live with them.

The farm includes six tenant families. Henry asks three to leave because he has bought a tractor to handle the bulk of the farm work. One of the families he allows to stay is the Jackson family, a black family. Immediately Henry's father reveals a deep seated prejudice for the family, but Laura embraces the presence of Florence, the matriarch, happy to have someone to talk to during the long, difficult days on the farm. Unfortunately, Florence's husband, Hap, breaks his leg and Florence must work in the fields to make up for his absence, leaving Laura alone in her home once more.



With the war over, Florence and Laura both look forward to the return of family, Florence her son Ronsel, and Laura her beautiful and charming brother-in-law, Jamie. When Jamie arrives, he is clearly marked by what he has seen in the war and drowns his sorrows in drink. As Jamie's depression and alcoholism deepen, he befriends Ronsel and they begin to drink together. This leads to trouble, however, when Ronsel is spotted by Jamie's father in the front seat of the farm truck. Pappy has already labeled Ronsel a troublemaker. Then Pappy finds a letter from a white woman to Ronsel announcing the birth of their child. Pappy cannot let this slide and he organizes a lynching party to teach Ronsel a lesson. Jamie happens upon the unfolding tragedy and tries to stop it, but is forced instead to choose the punishment Ronsel must suffer.

When Florence learns that old man McAllan and his friends have cut out her son's tongue, Florence goes in search of revenge, but finds she is too late. Jamie has already put his father out of everyone's misery.



# Part 1

## Part 1 Summary

This novel is the debut novel by writer Hillary Jordan.

**Jamie.** Jamie and his brother Henry are digging a grave to bury their father in while there is a break in the weather. The ground is so soaked with rain that they decide they must dig it at least seven feet deep so the body does not wash up with the next storm. When they are done, they move the body into a crudely made coffin and prepare for the burial.

**Laura.** Laura thinks back to the beginning of the story. She begins with her thirtieth birthday, the day she resolved herself to the idea that she would never get married, never have a family of her own. It was shortly after this day that Laura met Henry McAllan, her brother's boss with the Army Corps of Engineers. Teddy brought Henry to dinner and it was clear from the beginning he was interested in Laura. Laura's mother encouraged his interest, inviting Henry back for dinner the following weekend. Soon Laura and Henry were seeing one another regularly. However, after a few months, Henry came to Laura and told her he was leaving town to start work on a new project and did not know how long he would be gone. That was all he had to say. Laura thought that her hopes had been dashed once more, but Henry returned and asked her to marry him.

Laura had already met Henry's dashing brother, Jamie, younger than him by twenty years. However, she met the rest of the family for the first time in the days before the wedding and found them to be crude, unpleasant people. However, Henry and Laura would settle down to marriage in Memphis and experience six years of bliss.

**Jamie.** Jamie has recurrent nightmares of a flood that took place when he was ten years old. Jamie fell into the waters and was rescued by Henry, but in his dreams he often submits to the oblivion of the rising waters. Jamie remembers he always felt great admiration for Henry and often asked him about the war during which he was wounded and was left with a permanent limp. Henry told him if he ever had to fight in a war he should do it from the sky. That and Lindbergh's successful flight to France left Jamie with an unshakable desire to be a pilot.

**Ronsel.** When Ronsel joined the Army, he imagined he would be fighting in battle, but soon came to understand that the black soldiers would be relegated to the more menial tasks. Ronsel trained for two years in the south, putting up with racism from the same people he had sworn to give his life to protect. Just when he thought he would never see battle, Ronsel's tank unit was called to Europe by Patton himself.

**Laura.** When the war began, Laura was grateful that Henry's previous service and injury left him exempt from the draft even as two of her brothers enlisted. Laura did her duty



on the home front, running drives for bandages and silk stockings to benefit the soldiers. In the end, no one close to Laura died in the war, for which she was grateful, and no one came home with a serious injury other than a finger Jamie lost to frostbite. Then, as the war came to an end, Laura's world changed. The husband of one of Henry's sister's committed suicide. Henry decided that it was time to move up his plans to buy a farm in the Mississippi Delta and bought a small farm outside of Marietta in order to be close to his grieving sister. Laura was devastated to learn she would have to move away from her family to live in a strange area, but consoled by the idea of the rental house in town Henry had procured for her and their daughters. However, upon arriving in Marietta they learn that the owner of the house swindled Henry and sold it out from under him. The kind new owner's wife allows them to stay the night, but the next day Laura discovered the true horror of moving to the Mississippi Delta. The house on the farm had no electricity, no running water, and barely a roof to keep the constant rain from their heads.

Henry. Henry has wanted to own his own piece of land since he was a small boy and his grandfather taught him how important the land could be to a man. When Henry's father sold the family farm after the flood of 1927, Henry was bitterly disappointed. For years Henry saved up to buy a farm of his own and was near to his goal when his sister's husband died. Henry could not understand why Laura was so against the move and thought it unfair that she blame him when the children became sick the day after moving into the rustic farm house. Laura sent him into town for the doctor, but the bridge was washed out from the rain. Henry went to his tenant's house, the Jackson, because he knew Mrs. Jackson was a midwife and thought she might be able to help.

Florence. Florence recalls how agitated Mrs. McAllan was the first time she met her, fretting over her daughters as she was. Florence barged into the house and took control, telling Laura exactly what to do to help her girls. Later, as Florence prepared a broth for the girls, she met Henry's old father, Pappy. Florence disliked him right away because of the way he treated her, as if she were some old slave woman rather than a share tenant on his son's land, trying to help his grandchildren. When Florence told Laura she could not go home because the whooping cough was contagious, the old man wanted her to sleep in the barn with the animals. It gave Florence pause when Laura later asked her to keep house for her, but Florence needed the money so she agreed.

Laura. Laura is unhappy on the farm from the very beginning. She remembers Henry's decision to call the place Fair Fields, but Laura suggested Mudbound until the name stuck. She also recalls how superstitious Florence was, often causing her all kinds of discomfort with her rituals and warnings. Then, while Henry and Pappy were gone one night, Laura woke to the sound of gunfire. The following morning Hap, Florence's husband, stopped by to let her know that the gunshots were another tenant, Carl Atwood, shooting his plow horse. At first, Laura thought she would ask Henry to make the Atwood's leave, but a visit from Carl's very pregnant wife causes Laura to ask Henry to show mercy. Henry decides to let the Atwood's stay until after the harvest.



Hap. Hap believes it was pride that caused God to bring a storm that would break in the roof of his shed frightening his mule and causing it to break its leg so that Hap would have to put it down. Then, when Hap went up on the ladder to fix the shed's roof, the top rung of the ladder he had not gotten around to fixing would finally break through and cause him to fall, breaking his own leg while his entire family was out of house, leaving him out in the sun until Mr. McAllan happened by some hours later. Hap's leg was broken badly and Mr. McAllan went to town for the doctor, but Dr. Turpin, whom it was rumored was a member of the Klan in Florida, could not come till the next day. When he finally came, Dr. Turpin did a poor job of setting Hap's leg, leaving him with an infection.

Laura. When Laura learned of Hap's bleak prognosis, she was afraid Florence would have to work the fields permanently, leaving Laura alone in the farm house with Pappy. For this reason, Laura hunted out a doctor in Greenville willing to come and treat Hap.

Hap. Hap did not trust the Jewish doctor, but was relieved to learn he had reset his leg and it would heal well. However, Hap now had to face the fact that he could not work the fields for at least two months. Mr. McAllan forced Hap to take one of his mules because even with all three of his kids and Florence working the fields, they could not get them planted quickly enough. This, Hap knew, would leave his family in deep debt to the McAllans. Hap began to pray Ronsel would come home soon.

## Part 1 Analysis

In this first part of the novel, the author introduces all the main characters and begins to describe the situation into which each of these character's lives will collide. The story is told in the past tense, beginning with the preparations for burying Henry McAllan's father, Pappy, then going back to the beginning to describe what happened. The story is told in the first person point of view, but through the eyes of multiple characters, each bringing their own slant on the story to the reader.

The back story begins with Laura, a thirty-one year old woman who had been resigned to living her life alone only to find love sneaking up on her. Finally married to a man to whom she is deeply grateful for lifting her out of the stigma of spinsterhood, Laura quickly gives birth to two children and embraces a world that is quickly changing with the coming of World War II. However, Laura's world turns upside down when her husband suddenly buys a farm in the Mississippi Delta, taking her to a world she does not understand under conditions she cannot abide.

As Laura's story unfolds, the reader also learns about Henry's deep love for the land inherited from his grandfather, and the laziness of his father that caused him to lose the family farm and start a search for a farm of his own. The reader also meets Jamie, Henry's much younger brother who is handsome, charming, and full of resentment toward his strong, steady older brother. Then there is the Jackson family, a black family living in an area where racism is still the acceptable behavior toward the blacks who want nothing more than to save money to buy their own farm, a dream eerily similar to Henry McAllan's. Their son, Ronsel, is a strong, moderately educated man who enlisted

in the Army to fight for the same country that allows his friends and family to suffer the indignities of racism.

As the first section of the book comes to an end, the author has written many strong and likeable characters, characters who push the plot forward with their hopes, dreams, and passions. However, the reader is unclear as to where the plot is headed except to see on the horizon the dangers of racism and illicit passions that ride over each character like the sword of Damocles.





## Part 2

### Part 2 Summary

Laura. While in town a few weeks later, the McAllan family stopped at the store to buy a few supplies. Inside with the girls to gossip with the owner's wife, Laura was surprised by the arrival of a black man in uniform, especially when she learned he was Florence's son, Ronsel. Laura told Ronsel of the trouble at his family's home and Ronsel rushed to the door to go home. However, Ronsel reached the door at the same time some white men were coming inside, including Laura's father-in-law and husband. The men told Ronsel to use the back door. Ronsel balked, but soon left out the back door.

Ronsel. Ronsel was agitated by the actions of the white men in the store, but told himself he should have expected it despite his service in the war and the kind reception he received in Europe. Ronsel went home, but his happy reunion with his family was ruined by Mr. McAllan stopping by to force an apology out of him for the scene in the store. Ronsel got his back, however, by announcing to Mr. McAllan his family would no longer need the McAllan mule because he planned on buying a new one.

A few days later, Ronsel ran into an old crush that caused him to remember some of the atrocities he saw in Europe, but also some of the good. Ronsel was among the first ranks to arrive at Dachau and he was horrified by the skeletal survivors they found there. Later, Ronsel found himself drawn into a love affair with a widowed German woman. At first it was a lark, a way to experiment with the freedoms of war. Later, however, Ronsel fell in love and even elected to stay longer in Germany to be with his lover. Unfortunately, the Army gave him no choice and he had to leave. Now he regretted his choice.

Florence. Florence recalls how she had wanted her son to come home, but once he was there she knew he wanted nothing more than to leave again.

Laura. In May of that first year, Laura went with her girls to Memphis to attend her goddaughter's confirmation. Laura was happy to be off the farm and in the city again, but eventually came to miss her husband. At the same time, Laura learned she was pregnant again and hoped it would be a son. Laura's mother warned her that a late pregnancy could end in tragedy. However, Laura was caught off guard a few months later when she miscarried after a terrifying visit by Mrs. Atwood. Mrs. Atwood had learned her husband was molesting their young daughter and she wanted a ride into town so she could kill him. Laura talked her into leaving, but Mrs. Atwood followed through on her threat even as Laura suffered through her miscarriage. Laura would lie in bed for weeks afterward, finally regaining enough of her former strength to return to her duties, but going through the motions without her previous spirit. Laura felt invisible to those around her. Then Jamie returned from war, physically intact but mentally damaged.



Henry. Henry admits he knew that the war had broken Jamie from the beginning. Henry tried to help Jamie, but he would not talk about it. Henry also knew that Jamie was drinking, but hoped working on the farm would help bring him out of it. One afternoon Henry learned Jamie was in jail in Greenville for driving drunk and running the car into a cow. Henry got the sheriff to drop the charges, but it would cost him nearly a thousand dollars to pay for the cow and the damage to the car.

Jamie. Jamie recalls thinking how it was always Henry who saved him. Now Jamie found himself indebted to Henry once more for paying for his accident. Jamie was struggling, he drank because it was the only way he could overcome the nightmares and the memories of war. Then one day he was in town when a car backfired. Jamie fell to the ground, making a joke of himself in front of some of the locals. Ronsel was there and assured him that he had been told these things would someday pass. On the way out of town, Jamie saw Ronsel walking so he offered him a ride. Jamie ordered Ronsel to ride in the cab of the truck with him. They shared a bottle of whiskey and discussed their mutual experiences in the war. At the Jackson's, Jamie dropped Ronsel off in full view of his father and offered to stop by again the following week in case Ronsel needed another ride.

## Part 2 Analysis

In this second section of the novel, the author continues to develop her characters. The reader learns that Hap broke his leg, placing him in a position where he had to use a mule from the McAllans and promise another quarter of his harvest to them for the pleasure. This would leave the Jacksons in debt to the McAllans for the unforeseen future, making their situation suddenly precarious. The return of their son, Ronsel, could not have come at a better time, not only because he could work the fields for them, but also because Ronsel bought a new mule. However, Ronsel's return spells trouble since he has become used to the acceptance of blacks he experienced in Europe and he balks at the racism still rampant in the Mississippi Delta.

As the Jacksons experience troubles of their own, Laura has a miscarriage that deepens her unhappiness at living on the farm. Laura feels as though no one truly sees her and that she has somehow disappeared. This feeling stems in part from the large family Laura once had around her in her parents and siblings in Memphis, and in part the oblivion with which Henry treats her now that he has possessed his mistress, the land. This places Laura in a vulnerable position as Jamie, Henry's much younger and charming brother, returns home. Jamie is a broken man who is struggling with his experiences in the war, leaving him just as vulnerable to Laura's needs and desires.

With this section of the novel, the author has sets up a series of events that can lead only toward tragedy. With Ronsel and the Jacksons, racism is clearly going to play some role in their future tragedy, while with Laura and Jamie infidelity appears to be a danger that will threaten both them and the unwitting Henry.



## Part 3

### Part 3 Summary

Laura. Laura admits she fell in love with Jamie, especially after he thoughtfully built her a shower out behind the house. This love Laura attempted to keep hidden from those around her, but in time she became aware that her face was not one that was capable of deceit. However, Laura did not act on this love and thought she treated Henry with greater ardor rather than less.

In April of that year, Laura was driving Pappy into town when they came across Jamie returning from town in the truck. Pappy saw Ronsel riding in the cab of the truck with Jamie and was outraged. Later Pappy would confront him on it in front of Henry.

Florence. Florence claims she knew Jamie McAllan was trouble from the start and she disliked his growing relationship with her son. Florence knew that Jamie and Ronsel went to the old sawmill several times a week and drank together, worried it would come to no good. Florence tried to run Jamie off with her superstition, but nothing worked. Then Mr. Henry McAllan came to the house and warned Ronsel not to take rides from Jamie anymore. Ronsel threatened to leave afterward.

Henry. Henry and Jamie had a fight a few days after the confrontation over Ronsel and Henry told him to leave the farm. Jamie agreed to stay until the planting was done, but promised to leave soon after.

Laura. While the McAllans were in town having lunch at the diner, they learned that Henry's sister had an emergency and needed him. Jamie offered to go, but Henry refused since he had promised to keep him out of Greenville. Jamie and Laura returned to the farm alone and Jamie completed a group of chores to prepare for a coming storm before going to take a nap. Laura heard him cry out during a nightmare and went to console him. In consoling him, Laura seduced Jamie and they made love.

Hap. Hap was getting ready to fertilize the fields when Ronsel finally returned from an errand into town. Ronsel went into the house only to return a moment later in search of a missing letter. Ronsel ran off to find his missing letter. Hap notes that it was the last time he heard his son's voice.

Ronsel. Ronsel went into town and retrieved the mail only to find a letter from his German lover waiting for him. The letter announced that Ronsel was the father of a son. On his way home, still trying to decide what to do, Ronsel was nearly run over by a drunken Jamie McAllan. They talked for a few minutes and then Ronsel drove Jamie as far as the turn for the farm. It was soon after that that Ronsel realized the letter was missing. He returned to the sight of his near accident, but could not find the letter anywhere. On the walk back from town, Ronsel was overrun by two vehicles and men in white robes.



Laura. Laura recalls that Jamie disappeared for the entire weekend and Pappy was driving her nuts because he had run out of cigarettes and Jamie had left them without a vehicle. When Jamie finally returned, Pappy belittled him and forced him to give him the keys to the truck. Laura put Jamie to bed. Later, Florence came by looking for Jamie, convinced he had something to do with her missing son. When Laura went to ask Jamie, she found him gone.

Jamie. Jamie woke when the storm began and went in search of a bottle of whiskey. Jamie saw a light out at the sawmill and, afraid it was a vagrant who would drink his whiskey, made his way out there in the dark. When he arrived, Jamie found a group of men in white robes torturing Ronsel.

Ronsel. Ronsel was taken off the road by the men in white sheets and taken to the old sawmill. There, the men showed him the letter from his German lover and asked him how many times he had slept with her. The men had placed a rope around Ronsel's neck and were beating him, threatening to kill him for touching a white woman. Ronsel tried to remain brave, but became frightened by talk of castration. Then Jamie burst through the door.

Jamie. Jamie pulled a gun on the men and told them to let Ronsel go. The men refused so Jamie threatened to go to the sheriff, letting them know he knew who most of them were. Two men charged Jamie and took him down, knocking the gun away from him.

Hap. The Jacksons were praying for Ronsel's safe return when the sheriff knocked and informed them that Ronsel had been attacked and his tongue cut out.

Florence. Hap went with the sheriff to where Ronsel had been taken to a doctor while Florence remained behind. Florence intended to kill Pappy.

Laura. Pappy returned home and asked after Jamie. Laura became concerned, but Pappy cowed her into silence. When Pappy went to bed, Laura went in search of Jamie and found him in the barn. Florence arrived with a knife in her hand, convincing Laura she and Jamie were about to die. However, Florence moved on in silence. The following morning, the girls woke Laura and told her Pappy was dead. Jamie arrived a short time later and they sang a prayer over the old man's body.

Jamie. Later in the morning, Jamie told Laura an edited version of what had happened the night before, leaving out the fact that Pappy had forced Jamie to make the decision as to what punishment would be inflicted on Ronsel. When Henry returned, it was Laura who told him Pappy was dead.

Laura. Laura, convinced that Florence killed Pappy, went to see her to let her know she would not say anything. Laura found Florence defiant, announcing that the family would be moving as soon as the bridge was passable. Ronsel, Laura was relieved to learn, was still alive.

Jamie. As Jamie and Henry attempt to lower Pappy into the ground, they realize they cannot do it with just the two of them. The Jacksons happen by and Henry asks for their



help. Hap is the only one willing to help. When the coffin is in the grave, Hap reads from the Bible over the grave, choosing a passage from Job rather than the traditional passages of comfort for the bereaved. As Jamie listens, he recalls suffocating his father a few days earlier.

Henry. Henry is sad to see his brother leave the farm a few weeks later, but happy that Laura has expressed her decision to remain with him on the farm.

Laura. Laura is sad to see Jamie leave. However, Laura has found contentment in her husband and her life, especially as she awaits the birth of her third child, one she is the only one who knows Jamie fathered.

Ronsel. Ronsel expresses some doubt as to whether a man whose tongue has been cut out can survive to find some happiness in his life. However, Ronsel suggests that if such a man wrote to his GI buddies and received a scholarship to Moorehouse College, found a job suitable to his disability, met a woman willing to love him and bear his children, and marched with Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. that he might find something like happiness.

## Part 3 Analysis

This third part of the novel rushes to the night of tragedy that will unite the McAllans and the Jacksons in a painful history forever. Jamie has befriended Ronsel, causing him to catch the attention of the old man, Pappy. This sets up a situation in which Pappy is just waiting for an excuse to hurt Ronsel. Pappy finds his excuse when Ronsel loses the letter from his German lover in the McAllan truck and Pappy finds it. Pappy organizes a Klan posse and attacks Ronsel. Jamie tries to protect Ronsel, but fails to shoot either his father or any of his Klan friends. For this reason, Jamie is forced to choose the punishment Ronsel will face or face his own death. Jamie chooses the least of the evils, but still leaves Ronsel without a tongue.

Jamie has been tortured and belittled by his father for many years, finally coming to the end of his level of toleration. After Jamie is forced to choose the way in which Ronsel will be tortured, he finally finds the strength to stop his father, smothering him with his own pillow. Laura believes that Florence committed the murder and does not blame her, vowing to protect her from any repercussions because in the end Laura understands Florence's actions and is grateful for the death of the mean, cantankerous old man.

Jamie will have to live with his own actions, as will Laura for her affair with Jamie and the love she still feels that has dampened into deep affection. Laura is content to live out her life with her husband whom she has finally grown to love. Jamie runs off and continues his self-destruction with booze. Henry, who remains somewhat oblivious of the secrets surrounding him, is happy with his farm. The Jacksons, who suffered the greatest indignities of all, disappear after Hap helps to bury Pappy. It is ironic that Hap helps with the burial, but also a clear example of how Hap's faith helps him to transcend even the darkest aspects of human behavior. Perhaps this spirit will be inside his son as

well, helping Ronsel to overcome his new disability as suggested by the last chapter of the novel.



# Characters

## Laura Chappell McAllan

Laura is a thirty-one year old spinster when Henry McAllan comes into her life and changes everything. Henry, a college educated man who works with the Army Corps of Engineers, marries Laura and gives her two daughters and a good life in Memphis. However, after World War II draws to a close, Henry buys a farm in the Mississippi Delta, tearing Laura from the only world she has ever known and dumping her into the rural farm country to make a home in a rustic house that has no electricity or running water.

Laura feels as though she has lost her identity with the move to the farm. A miscarriage adds to Laura's sense of having disappeared, as though her husband and children do not see her anymore. However, when Henry's younger brother, Jamie, comes to stay at the farm, Laura suddenly comes alive under his constant attention. Laura falls in love with Jamie, indulging in fantasies she had never had before. One afternoon brings them together in passion, an event that is only another cycle on the downward spiral to tragedy.

## Henry McAllan

Henry McAllan is a college educated man who is much older than the typical bachelor searching for a wife. Henry grew up on a farm in the Mississippi Delta and longs to have another. Injured in the First World War, Henry works stateside during the Second World War saving up money to buy a new farm. When his brother-in-law dies, Henry takes advantage of the situation in order to buy that farm.

Henry is so intent on owning his own land that he does not notice his wife's unhappiness on the farm until it is too late. Henry hopes that Laura will come around, but he does little to help this come about. Henry is a strong, gentle man, but he is a man who has a dream on which he cannot turn his back. The one who always cleans up his brother's messes, the one who always comes to save the day, Henry is a lonely man who is deeply resented by those who do not understand his simple, black and white world.

## Jamie McAllan

Jamie McAllan is a handsome, charming man who gains affection easily from those around him, especially women. Jamie charms his brother's new family, including his new wife. Laura falls deeply in love with Jamie, craving him in a way she never thought possible. Jamie has been changed by the war, however. Jamie struggles to live with the things he did during the war, such as dropping bombs on women and children, killing an unknown number of innocents in the name of war.



Jamie begins to drink a lot, the only way he knows to stop the nightmares. Jamie befriends Ronsel, the son of one of his brother's tenants, who was also in the war. Together these two men talk about the war and drink together, helping one another get past their nightmares. However, this friendship leads to trouble for Ronsel, leaving Jamie forced to choose between saving Ronsel or himself.

## **Pappy McAllan**

Pappy McAllan is Henry and Jamie's father. Pappy is a dark, angry man who belittles everyone around him, including his own sons. Pappy is deeply prejudiced against blacks and dislikes the fact that his son, Jamie, has befriended the son of Henry's black tenants. When Pappy discovers a letter in the family truck belonging to Ronsel that shows that he had an affair with a white woman in Germany, Pappy organizes a lynching posse to punish Ronsel. This leads to a final confrontation with Jamie that will end in Pappy's death.

## **Hap Jackson**

Hap Jackson is Ronsel's father. Hap is a deeply devoted man who trusts that God has a plan for everyone. When Hap breaks his leg, making it impossible for him to work in the fields, he believes God is punishing him for his pride. When Ronsel is attacked by the Klan, Hap still stops and helps the McAllans bury Pappy and even says a prayer over his grave. Hap is a strong man of good morals who is the antithesis to the bigoted Klan members who maim his son.

## **Florence Jackson**

Florence is Hap's wife. Florence is a strong woman who intimidates some around her. Florence is a midwife, delivering babies in the area. Florence works for Laura McAllan, helping to clean her house, but the two women never truly become friends. Florence does not trust Laura and the same can be said for Laura. In the end, when Ronsel is attacked, Florence blames Pappy and Jamie McAllan, and by association, Laura and Henry.

## **Ronsel Jackson**

Ronsel Jackson is an educated black man living in the Mississippi Delta in the 1940s. Ronsel has just returned from Europe where he discovered that European whites do not share the same prejudices as Southern Americans, creating a foreign place where Ronsel not only feels accepted, but where he takes a white lover. Back on the Mississippi Delta, Ronsel feels more outrage at the outright prejudice than he ever did before. For this reason, perhaps, he disregards warnings to stay away from Jamie McAllan and accepts his overtures of friendship.





A year after returning home, Ronsel receives a letter from his German lover informing him that she has given birth to his child. Ronsel is excited by this news and begins making plans to return to Germany. However, Ronsel leaves the letter in the McAllan truck by accident and it is found by Pappy. Pappy organizes a Klan posse that attacks Ronsel and cuts out his tongue for sleeping with a white woman.

## Vera Atwood

Vera Atwood is the wife of Carl Atwood, one of Henry's tenants on his farm. Carl is a drunk who is violent with his wife and children. When the McAllans first come to the farm, Carl's oldest daughter is pregnant. Laura later learns that Vera believes Carl is the father of the child. In fact, Vera has come to be convinced that Carl intends to violate their youngest child as well. Vera threatens to kill Carl and asks Laura to take her to town to find Carl. Laura refuses, but believes it is this violent encounter that causes her to have a miscarriage. Later Laura learns that Vera followed through with her threat to kill Carl.

## Eboline

Eboline is one of Henry's sisters. Eboline is a stuck up, rude woman who insults Laura and her family in the days leading up to their wedding. Eboline has married well, but it turns out her husband made some bad investments and cannot face telling her. Eboline's husband kills himself on Christmas. If not for the death of Eboline's husband, Henry might have waited longer to buy a farm and might have bought a different farm. However, with Eboline in need of Henry's care, he decided to buy the farm, setting into motion the events that would lead to his father's death.

## Theresia 'Resl' Huber

Theresia Huber, known as Resl, is a German widow Ronsel meets while serving in Germany toward the end of the war. Although they cannot communicate because of a language barrier, Ronsel and Resl become lovers. Ronsel falls in love with Resl and volunteers to remain in Germany after the rest of his unit is sent state side. However, the Army finally forces Ronsel to choose between going home and re-enlisting, so he finally goes home. A year later Ronsel learns in a letter that Resl has given birth to his son. It is this letter that gives Klan members the excuse they have been looking for to go after Ronsel.



# Objects/Places

## Resl's Letter

Ronsel loses the letter from Resl informing him of the birth of his son in the McAllans' truck. Pappy finds the letter and uses it to form a Klan posse against Ronsel.

## Resl's Picture

Jamie has Laura return to Ronsel the picture Resl sent to him of his new son in her letter informing him of the child's existence.

## Cigarettes

Pappy runs out of cigarettes during one of Jamie's binges in town and berates him into handing over the truck the moment he returns. It is then that Pappy discovers the letter from Resl that Ronsel lost in the truck.

## Pillow

Jamie kills his own father with a pillow in revenge for a lifetime of cruelty and for forcing Jamie to choose how the Klan would mutilate Ronsel.

## Knife

Florence plans to murder Pappy with a large knife after her son's tongue is cut out by the Klan, but Jamie gets to him first.

## Shower

Jamie builds Laura a shower when he notices how unhappy she is with the lack of running water at the farm and the difficulties in bathing.

## Lavender

Laura discovers before Jamie left the farm for good he planted lavender in the garden for her use.



## Shed

Hap breaks his leg while attempting to repair the storm damaged roof on his mule shed.

## Tractor

Henry buys a tractor to help him do the bulk of the work on the farm. The tractor is a fairly new invention and it brings scorn on Henry by Mr. Jackson who prefers to work the land with his own hands.

## Truck

Henry buys a truck to help on the farm. Jamie often drives the truck when he goes on drinking binges and it is in the truck that Jamie often gives Ronsel rides, allowing him to ride in the cab.

## Mules

Each of the tenants on Henry's land uses mules to plow their land. When Carl Atwood shoots his plow horse, Henry gives him the use of one of his mules in exchange for an additional quarter of his crop. When Hap breaks his leg after losing his mule, Henry makes him the same deal, but Ronsel returns and buys the family a new mule to replace the one lost in a storm.

## Mudbound

Mudbound is the name Laura gives to the McAllan farm because of the amount of mud covering the ground each time it rains.

# Themes

## Family

In this novel, there are two types of families. The first type of family is the kind that loves one another, the one that sticks together through whatever might happen, and who survive hardships together. Two families fill this requirement in this novel in different ways. The Jacksons are clearly a close family. Hap is a strong, God-fearing man who works hard to care for his family and to save to someday buy a farm of his own. His wife is equally as strong, a woman who speaks her mind and works hard to provide as she sees fit. These two have raised four strong kids, three of whom are still minors, but one who is grown and has made them proud by fighting for his country in World War II. However, it is all this son has learned in Europe that brings pain on the family, forcing them to live through one of the worse things a family can face, the injustice that leaves a loved one maimed and bitter. While the Jacksons did everything right, they still had to face tragedy. What sets them apart is that they faced tragedy together and survived.

The McAllans are another example of the loving family type. Laura is unsure in her love for her husband when he drags her from the only life she has ever known and allows this insecurity to distract her from what is important. Laura has a momentary fling with Henry's brother, but the tragedy of Ronsel's maiming leaves Laura acutely aware of the man to whom she is married and helps her come back to him and devote her life to him as she should have all along. In this way, the McAllans also are a strong, loving family. However, there are aspects of the McAllan family that are not. Pappy is not a good father, but a mean belittling man who berates his son until he is driven over an edge, finally murdering his family. This branch of the family is the other type of family illustrated in this book, the dysfunctional type that is bound to self-destruct.

The other family in this novel which represents the more dysfunctional type is the Atwoods. Carl Atwood is a drunk who is violent with his wife and children. Mrs. Atwood comes to the conclusion that her husband has sexually violated her oldest child and intends to do the same to their youngest. Mrs. Atwood first defends her husband, but later she murders him and turns herself in. This family is not based on love and trust, but need and necessity. For this reason, this family falls apart in the face of adversity.

## Passion

This novel discusses passion in several different ways. Laura is a thirty-one year old woman when she meets and marries Henry, old enough to have settled into a life without passion. Therefore when Laura marries Henry, she finds herself moving into a world she had never understood before, one that is completely new to her. Henry is not an overly passionate man, but Laura finds him satisfactory. That is until Henry moves Laura to the farm and loses track of the mild passions that once defined their marriage. It is then that Laura turns her attentions to Jamie, discovering a different kind of passion



that has the potential of ruining her life. In the end, Laura decides that Henry is better suited to her personality and she learns to find happiness in him.

Another type of passion is described in this novel. This passion involves Henry's love of the land. Henry was taught by his grandfather to have great respect for land. All his adult life, after his father sells the family farm, Henry fights and struggles to buy a farm of his own. Eventually Henry reaches his goal and puts everything he has into making it work. Henry's love for the land causes him to overlook his wife's unhappiness, to miss the signs of his brother's growing alcoholism, and to allow a series of events to take place that will eventually turn into tragedy. Passion is an important motivator in this novel, making it a theme of the novel.

## Inequality

The novel is set in the 1940s in the years immediately after World War II. This decade in American history is still rife with racial inequality, especially in the southern states. Since this novel takes place in the Mississippi Delta, deep in the south, the reader expects that the novel's plot will deal with, in some degree, the darkness of this racial inequality.

Ronsel comes home from fighting in Europe, a place where he found acceptance among the whites, and finds that the racial prejudice he left behind still remains. Ronsel has changed, however, more defiant than he had been before the war. For this reason, Ronsel disregards warnings that he should curb his behaviors and eventually incurs the wrath of a group of radically prejudiced men who attack Ronsel and leave him without his tongue.

Ronsel's situation aside, there is also inequality in many other aspects of the novel. Ronsel's father finds himself in a situation where he cannot make the money he needs to buy a farm like Henry has done simply because of his station in life. Laura finds herself treated differently before her marriage to Henry because of her lack of a man in her life. The Atwoods are also treated with inequality, their daughters left to be abused without anyone taking enough of an interest to protect them from their own father. For these reasons, inequality is a major theme of the novel.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrating character changes from section to section with the writer alerting the reader to the change in narrating character by placing the character's name at the beginning of the chapter section.

The use of the first person point of view is an intimate choice, allowing the writer to speak directly to the reader through the voice of her characters. In most first person point of view novels, the narrating character is the main character of the novel and the entire novel is told through that character's eyes. However, in this novel the writer uses all the major characters in her novel as her narrating characters, giving the reader a well-rounded story while still keeping the intimacy of the first person point of view. It is a new and unique way to use the first person point of view and is handled with great skill.

## Setting

The majority of the novel takes place at Mudbound, a moderate sized farm on the Mississippi Delta. The farm is primitive, lacking some of the basic comforts such as electricity and running water. The farm is constantly covered in mud from the frequent storms that pass over the area and dust when the rains are kept at bay. As a part of the south in the 1940s, the setting of the novel is also a hotbed of racial tensions, leaving the black characters of the novel in danger of the lawlessness of the time toward blacks.

The setting of this novel is important because the time and place sets up some of the tensions that propel the plot. The uncomfortable accommodations of the farm create a situation that allows Laura to feel neglected by her husband and opens her to an inappropriate relationship with her brother-in-law. At the same time, the setting also places a great burden on the Jackson family, a black tenant family on Mudbound who face many obstacles in their attempts to raise a family and live a comfortable life. With the return of their son from the war, these obstacles grow substantially as he finds himself a target of racial hatred. For these reasons, the setting of the novel is deeply essential to the tensions that drive the plot to its climax.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is basic English. The author has created characters who are living in a time period and place that has its own unique uses of language. The author does not delve deeply into the slang that characterizes this time period, but she does use some basic grammar choices that makes the characters come to life and feel authentic to their time period.



The language of this novel is basic, simple English that is not filled with too many difficult words or phrases or unique grammar and spellings. However, some of the language is a little more complicated than the reader might expect in order to reflect the high education level of two of the main characters. The writer does not slip into stereotypes to express the thoughts and opinions of some of the main characters, moving slightly away from authenticity, but making her novel easy for the average reader to enjoy.

## Structure

The novel is divided into three parts. Each part is filled with sections that tell a story from the narrative point of view of more than six characters. These characters tell their story in the first person point of view, each giving their own vision of a series of events that lead to tragedy for two families. The story is told in the past tense, beginning in the present and moving into the past to explain how the characters got to that point in their lives.

The novel contains multiple plots, including one main plot and multiple subplots. The main plot tells the story of how the Jackson and McAllan families became involved in the maiming of one young man. Some of the subplots describe the relationships between all the main characters, the romance between Laura and Jamie, and the difficulties Pappy causes for all those around him. Each plot comes to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



## Quotes

"Henry and I dug the hole seven feet deep. Any shallower and the corpse was liable to come rising up during the next flood: Howdy boys! Remember me?" Part 1, pg. 12

"I was glad Henry wasn't there to hear the satisfaction in her voice." Part 1, pg. 17

"I was never beautiful like my sisters." Part 1, pg. 20

"Rebuild and replant: that's what farmers do in the Delta." Part 1, pg. 60

"As we went by him, I traded another glance with him through the open window of the car. His eyes were defiant, and they were shining." Part 2, pg. 106

"It wasn't personal. The Jerries were the enemy, and while I tried to account for as many as I could, I didn't hate them. Not till the twenty-ninth of April 1945. That was the day we got to Dachau."

Part 2, pgs. 110-111

"I loved all my children, but I loved Ronsel the most. If that was a sin I reckoned God would forgive me for it, seeing as how He the one stacked the cards in the first place."

Part 2, pg. 121

"The war had dimmed him, but I would bring him back to himself." Part 2, pg. 135

"Jamie set about making me love him from the first day he arrived." Part 3, pg. 155

"I held myself very still, knowing he could see everything I felt and letting him see it. It was the most intimate act of my life, more intimate even than the acts that followed."

Part 3, pg. 174

"Strips of light showed between the planks, and I put my eye to one of the gaps. At first all I saw was white. Then it moved and I realized I was looking at the back of somebody's head, and that he was wearing a white hood." Part 3, pg. 193

"That's the ending we want, you and me both. I'll grant you it's unlikely, but it is possible. If he worked and prayed hard enough. If he was stubborn as well as lucky. If he really had a shine." Part 3, pg. 237





## Topics for Discussion

Who is Laura McAllan? Why does she marry so late in life? How does Laura feel about this late marriage? Does Laura love her husband on their wedding day? How many children do they have? Why does Laura want to have a third child? What warning does Laura's mother give her when she learns that she is expecting a third child? What does this seem to foreshadow for Laura? Does this take place? What is the impact of this?

Who is Florence Jackson? How does she come to know the McAllans? How does she feel about the McAllans? For what reason? Is there tension between Florence and Laura McAllan from their first meeting? For what reason? How does Laura treat the Jacksons? Is Florence's attitude toward the McAllans a reflection of this treatment? In what way?

Who is Jamie McAllan? What is special about him? What does Laura notice about him upon their first meeting? What does she realize about Henry's opinions of his brother during this first meeting? How does Jamie's arrival at Mudbound impact Laura? For what reason? Why does Laura begin to fall in love with Jamie? How does she act on these feelings? What is the result of these actions?

Why does Henry want to buy the farm? Why does Henry not talk to Laura about this desire? How does Laura feel when she learns what Henry has done? Why does Henry refuse to be talked out of this action? How does owning the farm change Henry and Laura's relationship? For what reason? How does Laura eventually come around to accepting Henry's passion for the land?

Who is Ronsel? Why does he enlist in the Army? How does he react to the blatant discrimination against black soldiers during basic training? Why does Ronsel begin to lose faith that he will ever see combat? How does Ronsel eventually get to Europe? What surprises Ronsel about the treatment he and his fellow soldiers receive from the whites in Europe? How does Ronsel become involved with a white German widow? How does this relationship change Ronsel's life?

How does Hap break his leg? Why does he think it is God teaching him not to be so prideful? What does this say about Hap's faith? Why does the doctor refuse to come right away? Why does the doctor not set Hap's leg properly? Why does Laura believe the doctor has done this without seeing Hap despite Henry's refusal to believe it? Why does Laura find a new doctor for Hap? Is this a selfish move or an act of kindness? Explain.

Why does Pappy organize a Klan posse to punish Ronsel? What has Ronsel done that makes it necessary to punish him? Is what Ronsel has done really a bad thing? Why does Jamie come to Ronsel's defense? Might Henry have done the same thing in Jamie's place? Would Laura? Why does Jamie choose how Ronsel will be injured? Why does Jamie choose for Ronsel to lose his tongue? How does losing his tongue impact Ronsel's life? What does the final chapter of the book imply about Ronsel's future?