

The Known World

by Edward P. Jones

About the Book

Henry Townsend, a black farmer, bootmaker, and former slave, has a fondness for *Paradise Lost* and an unusual mentor — William Robbins, perhaps the most powerful man in antebellum Virginia's Manchester County. Under Robbins's tutelage, Henry becomes proprietor of his own plantation — as well as of his own slaves. When he dies, his widow, Caldonia, succumbs to profound grief, and things begin to fall apart at their plantation: slaves take to escaping under the cover of night, and families who had once found love beneath the weight of slavery begin to betray one another. Beyond the Townsend estate, the known world also unravels: low-paid white patrollers stand watch as slave “speculators” sell free black people into slavery, and rumors of slave rebellions set white families against slaves who have served them for years.

An ambitious, luminously written novel that ranges seamlessly between the past and future and back again to the present, *The Known World* weaves together the lives of freed and enslaved blacks, whites, and Indians — and allows all of us a deeper understanding of the enduring multidimensional world created by the institution of slavery.

Praise for the Book

“Stunning. . . . His first novel is . . . likely to win acclaim.”

— *The New York Times*

“Heartbreaking. . . . fascinating.”

— *Newsweek*

“A masterpiece that deserves a place in the American literary canon.”

— *Time*

“Jones has written a book of tremendous moral intricacy.”

— *The New Yorker*

“Brilliant. . . . So utterly original that it makes most everything previously written about slavery seem outdated and pedestrian. It belongs on a shelf with other classics of slavery, like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.”

— *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

Courtesy of Amistad Books

About the Author

Edward P. Jones

1950-

Also known as: Edward P. Jones, Edward Paul Jones

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Personal Information: Born October 5, 1950.

Education: Attended College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, and University of Virginia.

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Career: Fiction writer. Columnist for *Tax Notes*.

Awards: National Book Award finalist, and Ernest Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, both 1992, both for *Lost in the City*; Lannan Foundation Literary Award and fellowship, 2003; National Book Award nomination for fiction, 2003, and National Book Critics Circle award, and Pulitzer Prize for fiction, both 2004, all for *The Known World*; O. Henry Prize, 2005, for the short story "A Rich Man."

WRITINGS

- *Lost in the City* (short stories), photographs by Amos Chan, Morrow (New York, NY), 1992.
- *The Known World*, Amistad (New York, NY), 2003.
- *All Aunt Hagar's Children* (short stories), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor of short fiction to periodicals, including the *New Yorker*.

"Sidelights"

Called "a poignant and promising first effort" by *Publishers Weekly*, Edward P. Jones's first book, *Lost in the City*, was greeted with critical and popular acclaim. The work was nominated for the 1992 National Book Award, an honor last granted to a short-story collection six years earlier. The appeal of the fourteen-story collection lies in the realness of the people and the experiences that Jones presents. Each of the stories profiles African-American life in Washington, D.C. The characters are all lost in the nation's capital, some literally, others figuratively. They are black working-class men and women who struggle to preserve their families, communities, neighborhoods, and themselves amid drugs, violence, divorce, and other crises. Jones's assortment of characters include a mother whose son buys her a new home with drug money, a husband who repeatedly stabs his wife as their children sleep, and a girl who watches her pigeons fly from her home after their cages are destroyed by rats. They are all stories that "affirm humanity as only good literature can," remarked Michael Harris in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*. "There's no secret to it, or only the final, most elusive secret: Jones has near-perfect pitch for people. . . . Whoever they are, he reveals them to us from the inside out."

Washington Post writer Mary Ann French noted that in *Lost in the City* Jones “creates sympathy through understanding — a sadly needed service that is too seldom performed.” *Washington Post Book World* reviewer Jonathan Yardley commented that the assembled stories are set in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, “so there is little sense of the drug-and-crime haunted place that the inner city has become.” Nevertheless, Yardley added, “danger and death are never far in the background.” While the stories usually convey a sense of hope despite some bleak settings and horrible events, “Jones is no sentimentalist,” according to the critic. Rather, he is “a lucid, appealing writer. He puts on no airs, tells his stories matter-of-factly and forthrightly, yet his prose is distinctive and carries more weight than first impressions might suggest.”

The Known World, Jones's first novel and second published book, generated even more critical acclaim than his short-story collection. In 2004 the work won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle award for fiction, both on the heels of a National Book Award for fiction nomination in 2003. *The Known World* begins with the antebellum story of African-American Henry Townsend, a farmer, bootmaker, and former slave. Townsend, an intelligent man with a fondness for John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, has taken an unusual adviser: William Robbins, a powerful man residing in Manchester County, Virginia. Under Robbins's guidance, Townsend rises economically to become a landowner and, ironically, a slave owner. When he dies, his widow, Caldonia, cannot carry on alone and things at the Townsend plantation begin to deteriorate: slaves run off in the night, and families with once-strong bonds start to turn on one another. Outside the farm, everything else, in other words, “the known world,” is falling apart, too: free black people are sold into slavery and rumors of slave rebellions circulate widely, setting white families on edge and destroying their trust in the blacks who have worked for them for years.

According to Champ Clark, writing in *People*, readers of *The Known World* “will be rewarded many times over by Jones's masterful ability to convey even the most despicable aspects of the nation's history with humanity and poetic language.” In *Booklist*, Vanessa Bush described the novel as “a profoundly beautiful and insightful look at American slavery and human nature.” “Jones moves back and forth in time,” she explained, “making the reader omniscient, knowing what will eventually befall the characters despite their best and worst efforts, their aspirations and their moral failings.” *Newsweek* reviewer Susannah Meadows was less enthusiastic about the novel, writing that while “The human mystery that drives the narrative is the question of how a freed man could own another, . . . Jones never quite solves the puzzle of Henry's odd spiritual kinship with his former master.” Mark Harris, reviewing the book for *Entertainment Weekly*, cited the “difficulty and occasional randomness of Jones's storytelling.” This “doesn't seem accidental,” Harris maintained. Jones “is writing about a landscape in which families, identities, and the very notion of self can be destroyed in the course of a casual business transaction — and he doesn't want you to get too comfortable tracing a single life across a tidy narrative line.”

In an interview with Robert Fleming of *Publishers Weekly*, Jones explained his use of a dispassionate voice when describing the brutal episodes that take place in *The Known*

World by noting that he wanted “to highlight the inhumanity of the whole situation of slavery.” “I didn't want to preach,” he added. “It was my goal to be objective, to not put a lot of emotion into this, to show it all in a matter-of-fact manner. But still I knew I was singing to the choir. In a case like this, you don't raise your voice, you just state the case and that is more than enough.”

Sarah Anne Johnson, in an interview with Jones for the *Writer*, asked the author where he found his inspiration for *The Known World*. “You just wake up one morning with some image or some words in your head, and you go from there,” Jones replied. “The first thing that set me off with *The Known World* was the image of Henry Townsend on his deathbed in the first few pages. You have to figure out how he got to be in the bed and who's in the room with him. Then you branch out further and further until finally you have all the pages that are in the book right now.”

Despite praising Jones's award-winning novel, several critics have noted that *The Known World* is not an easy read. A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* described the first hundred pages as “daunting,” saying, “The reader struggles to sort out initially quickly glimpsed characters and absorb Jones's handling of historical background information.” But then the novel gains “overpowering momentum,” the critic added, and becomes “a harrowing tale that scarcely ever raises its voice.” “By focusing on an African-American slaveholder,” Edward B. St. John noted in *Library Journal*, “Jones forcefully demonstrates how institutionalized slavery jeopardized all levels of civilized society so that no one was really free.” The novel, St. John continued, is “a fascinating look at a painful theme.” “Everyone in *The Known World* exhibits good, bad, and every other shade of humanity inside their actions,” added Carroll Parrott Blue in *Black Issues Book Review*. “Jones uses his hard-won mastery of craft to gently entice us to stare directly into the face of our universally human quest for freedom.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS

- *Contemporary Literary Criticism, Yearbook 1992*, Volume 76, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1992.

PERIODICALS

- *Black Issues Book Review*, November-December, 2003, Carroll Parrott Blue, review of *The Known World*, p. 50.
- *Booklist*, September 15, 2003, Vanessa Bush, review of *The Known World*, p. 211.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, August 22, 2003, Mark Harris, review of *The Known World*, p. 134.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, July 15, 2003, review of *The Known World*, p. 928.
- *Library Journal*, August, 2003, Edward B. St. John, review of *The Known World*, p. 131.
- *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, July 12, 1992, p. 6.

- *Newsweek*, September 8, 2003, Susannah Meadows, review of *The Known World*, p. 57.
- *New York Times*, June 11, 1992, p. C18; August 23, 1992, section 7, p. 16.
- *People*, September 29, 2003, Champ Clark, review of *The Known World*, p. 45.
- *Publishers Weekly*, March 23, 1992, p. 59; August 11, 2003, Robert Fleming, interview with Jones, p. 254.
- *Washington Post*, July 22, 1992, pp. G1, G4; October 6, 1992, p. B4.
- *Washington Post Book World*, June 21, 1992, p. 3.
- *Writer*, August, 2004, Sarah Anne Johnson, interview with Jones, p. 20.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Author Interview

Q: Throughout *The Known World*, you intersperse your fictional account with historical records and data about Manchester County, Virginia. Are these records factual? What was your intent in incorporating them into your novel?

Edward P. Jones: The county and town of Manchester, Virginia, and every human being in those places are products of my imagination. Other counties and towns (Amelia County, Charlottesville, etc.) are real, but were employed merely to give some heft and believability to the creation of Manchester and its people. The same is obviously true of real, historical people — President Fillmore, for example.

The census records I made up for Manchester were, again, simply to make the reader feel that the town and the county and the people lived and breathed in central Virginia once upon a time before the county was “swallowed up” by surrounding counties. Saying that the census of 1840 shows that there were so many black people, so many white people there, et cetera, affords a hard background of numbers and dates that makes the foreground of the characters and what they go through more real.

Q: How unusual was it for free blacks to serve as slaveholders in the South? How did the idea come to you to write a novel that dealt with this issue?

EPJ: I don't have any hard data but I'm quite certain that the numbers of black slaveowners was quite small in relation to white slaveowners. The fact that many people — even many black people — didn't know such people existed is perhaps proof of how few there were. In addition, as I note in the novel, husbands purchased wives and parents purchased children, and so their neighbors may have come to know the people purchased not as slaves, as property, but as family members. Finally, owning a slave was not a cheap proposition, and the economic status of most blacks back then didn't lend itself to owning a human being.

Q: Women in *The Known World* wield roles of extraordinary power, whether assuming the typically male responsibilities of the plantation like Caldonia Townsend; educating the illiterate like Fern Elston; inspiring violence, passion, and grief, like Celeste and Minerva; or creating art that transcends the brutal realities of slavery, like Alice Night. How important was it to you to give voice to women's experiences of slavery in this work?

EPJ: I didn't set out with any agenda. When you are raised by a woman who had it hard and you are sensitive to how hard a life she had, you don't necessarily look around and think of women as fragile creatures, whether slave or otherwise. You develop the belief that they can "make a way out of no way." The hardy women of today had predecessors, I'm sure. It would have been insane for me, of course, to write a novel about a black woman who was president of the U.S. in 1855, or even a senator. But a black woman who becomes the head of a plantation due to the premature death of her husband who was helped along the way by the wealthiest white man in the county, that is believable. It is also believable that Fern Elston could make part of her living by teaching free black children; there were educated black women back then, and not all of them would choose to stay in the shadows, especially one with Fern's temperament. And no doubt there had to be people like Celeste who tried in their small way to fight something they were forced to live under; perhaps she, of them all, understood how Moses got to be that way: He was not born hating the world, she would have said. And I suppose Alice would have said that as well, had she not been so focused on escaping alone.

Q: Your account of antebellum Manchester County, Virginia, is by no means linear; you weave different strands of the story together and return to them at various phases of the novel. Why did you choose this format for your book?

EPJ: I always thought I had a linear story. Something happened between the time I began the real work in January 2002 of taking it all out of my head and when I finished months later. It might be that because I, as the "god" of the people in the book, could see their first days and their last days and all that was in between, and those people did not have linear lives as I saw all that they had lived. What Tessie the child did one day in 1855 would have some meaning for her 50, 75 years later. She might not be able to look back and see that moment, but her creator could. That, perhaps, is why she says something about the doll her father made for her to Caldonia and Fern in September 1855 that she will repeat on her deathbed, some 90 years later; she might not even remember the first time she uttered those words, but I can't afford to forget if I'm trying to tell the truth.

Q: There is a touch of the supernatural in events such as the spontaneous combustions of the Otis boys and the slave Teacher, the cow with the endless supply of milk, the transformative experiences of Stamford with the crows and the lightning, and the details of cadavers “talking” to Wilson and Morris Calhenny. How do you explain these incidents in the larger scope of your novel?

EPJ: I was raised among a people who believe that if a person is killed on a city street, the blood of that person will show up on that spot every time it rains. Even years and years later. I was raised to believe that one's hair should be taken from combs and brushes and burned (my mother did it in an ashtray) because the hair could somehow get out into the world where birds could find it, make a nest of the hair, and give the person headaches. Those people believed you shouldn't rest your hands on the top of your head because it will shorten your mother's life.

Given all that, it's easy to create a situation where lightning runs away from a man because the lightning doesn't think it's time for the man to die. The cow with all the milk came from hearing law school friends talk in the 1970s about a court case where a man sued his neighbor to get back a cow he had sold him after the cow began producing milk again. So the supernatural events are just another way of telling the story by someone who grew up thinking the universe did weird things all the time.

Q: You open and close with the figure of Moses, the overseer of Henry and Caldonia Townsend's land. In what ways is his odyssey central to your novel?

EPJ: Moses became another symbol of what slavery had done. I have no doubt that when Moses was standing naked in John Skiffington's jail and saying that he and Bessie were “one,” were “family,” that he was not the man who years later was bitter and grasping and wanted, as he put it, to get rid of his family now that they stood in his way of becoming Caldonia's husband. Slavery did things to everyone; some were able to transcend, as with Celeste, and others succumbed.

Q: What are some of your favorite books and authors? Which writers have most influenced your work?

EPJ: Black fiction writers, including Ann Petry, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks. The southern writers (black and white), including Faulkner. And others such as Chekhov and James Joyce, who was the primary inspiration for my collection of stories, *Lost in the City*.

Courtesy of Amistad Books

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the character of Moses significant to the novel? How would you characterize his relationship with Henry and Caldonia Townsend? What about with his wife and child?
2. What is the significance of the title, *The Known World*? What “known world” is charted in John Skiffington's map in the jail? What world is charted in The Creation described by Calvin in his letter to his sister Caldonia? What role does the land and its borders play in this book?
3. Who is William Robbins and how does he impact the lives of blacks on neighboring plantations? Did you find his relationships with Henry, Augustus, and Mildred Townsend, and Philomena, Dora, and Louis compelling?
4. What is the significance of the Augustus Townsend character? In what ways is Augustus a victim of attitudes about slavery in the South? In what ways is he a victor? How did you respond to his captivity and its outcome?
5. How would you characterize Jebediah Dickinson? What explains his sudden appearance at the Elston farm? When Fern says of Jebediah: “With him there . . . I feel as if I belong to him, that I am his property,” what does she mean?
6. Were relationships between parents and children notably different during the era of slavery than in the present day? Consider Caldonia, Calvin, and Maude; William Robbins, Patience, and Dora; and Augustus, Mildred, and Henry in your evaluations.

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