

Mudbound

by Hillary Jordan

About the Book

In Jordan's prize-winning debut, prejudice takes many forms, both subtle and brutal. It is 1946, and city-bred Laura McAllan is trying to raise her children on her husband's Mississippi Delta farm—a place she finds foreign and frightening. In the midst of the family's struggles, two young men return from the war to work the land. Jamie McAllan, Laura's brother-in-law, is everything her husband is not—charming, handsome, and haunted by his memories of combat. Ronsel Jackson, eldest son of the black sharecroppers who live on the McAllan farm, has come home with the shine of a war hero. But no matter his bravery in defense of his country, he is still considered less than a man in the Jim Crow South. It is the unlikely friendship of these brothers-in-arms that drives this powerful novel to its inexorable conclusion.

Praise for the Book

"A compelling family tragedy, a confluence of romantic attraction and racial hatred that eventually falls like an avalanche...The last third of the book is downright breathless."

—*The Washington Post Book World*

"[A] supremely readable debut novel...Fluidly narrated by engaging characters...Mudbound is packed with drama. Pick it up, then pass it on."

—*People, four stars*

"This is storytelling at the height of its powers: the ache of wrongs not yet made right, the fierce attendance of history made as real as rain, as true as this minute. Hillary Jordan writes with the force of a Delta storm."

—*Barbara Kingsolver*

Courtesy of Algonquin Books

About the Author

Title: Hillary Jordan

American Novelist (1963 -)

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Personal Information

Born September 27, 1963. Education: Wellesley College, B.A.; Columbia University, M.F.A. Addresses: Home: Tivoli, NY. E-mail: hj@hillaryjordan.com.

Career

Writer. Also worked as a copywriter in the advertising industry for over fifteen years.

Awards

Bellwether Prize, 2006.

Works

Writing

- *Mudbound: A Novel*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 2008.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Story Quarterly* and *Carolina Quarterly*.

“Sidelights”

Hillary Jordan, who was born on September 27, 1963, served as a copywriter in the advertising industry for over fifteen years before transitioning entirely to fiction writing. Jordan has contributed short works to both *Story Quarterly* and *Carolina Quarterly*; her first book, *Mudbound: A Novel*, was published in 2008 by Algonquin Books.

Mudbound, set in the American South during the late 1940s, essentially tells the story of two struggling families. Jordan's narrative provides numerous complications which serve as catalysts for an abundance of emotional, racial, and economic pressures. After relocating to a rural farm in Mississippi, the McAllan family encounters hardship due to conflicts with each other and their failing cotton farm; similarly, Hap's family, tenant farmers on the McAllan farm, suffers equally due to their minority status in the South. A primary source of conflict stems from the bond established between the families' two war veterans who live within a racially segregated society. A contributor for *Bookdwarf* commented upon the pace and resolution of the narrative and stated, "Everything unfurls in slow motion. That the outcome is bad is never in question. Jordan superbly depicts the savageness of racism." Ron Charles, in an article for the *Washington Post*, described the book as "a confluence of romantic attraction and racial hatred that eventually falls like an avalanche. Indeed, the last third of the book is downright breathless. But, unfortunately, all of these narrators lack the essential quality of incompleteness. They're burdened with such thorough self-knowledge that the book has no room for dramatic irony." In other words, Charles felt the novel provides too much information regarding the characters' insights, which prevents adequate inference upon the reader's part. However, Charles acknowledged that Jordan "builds a compelling family tragedy" and that she "has plenty of talent to compose an engaging story." Furthermore, in an article for *Booklist*, Brad Hooper pointed out that "the narrative is told in alternating first-person accounts (each voice rendered distinctive and authentic to the character)." As Diane Leach remarked in a review for *PopMatters*, "What emerges [in this story] is a faceted story of the damages wrought by war and racism. Jordan's great gift is her ability to inhabit such disparate characters so well, seamlessly using language to convey their distinctions." Combining the realism of place with dynamic character studies, Jordan complicates the categorization of good and bad people, "making her characters likable despite their failings," concluded Leach.

Further Readings About the Author

Periodicals

- *Booklist*, November 15, 2007, Brad Hooper, review of *Mudbound: A Novel*, p. 30.
- *Bookseller*, September 28, 2007, "Deep South Debut to Heinemann," p. 17.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, January 1, 2008, review of *Mudbound*.
- *Library Journal*, December 1, 2007, Donna Bettencourt, review of *Mudbound*, p. 100.
- *Publishers Weekly*, November 5, 2007, review of *Mudbound*, p. 40.

Online

- *Algonquin Books Web site*, <http://www.algonquin.com/> (September 29, 2008), author profile.
- *Blogcritics Web site*, <http://blogcritics.org/> (August 2, 2008), Luanne Ollivier, review of *Mudbound*.

- *Book Daddy Web log*, <http://www.artsjournal.com/bookdaddy/> (March 11, 2008), Jerome Weeks, review of *Mudbound*.
- *Bookdwarf*, <http://www.bookdwarf.com/> (March 4, 2008), review of *Mudbound*.
- *Hillary Jordan Home Page*, <http://www.hillaryjordan.com> (September 30, 2008), author profile.
- *PopMatters*, <http://www.popmatters.com/> (March 10, 2008), Diane Leach, review of *Mudbound*.
- *USA Today Online*, <http://www.usatoday.com/> (February 28, 2008), Carol Memmott, review of *Mudbound*.
- *Washington Post Online*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/> (March 9, 2008), Ron Charles, "Water Rising."*

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Author Interview

Q: What inspired you to write *Mudbound*?

A: I grew up hearing stories about my grandparents' farm in Lake Village, Arkansas. It was a primitive place, an unpainted shotgun shack with no electricity, no running water and no telephone. They named it "Mudbound" because whenever it rained, the roads would flood and they'd be stranded for days.

Though they'd only lived there for a year, my mother, aunt and grandmother spoke of *Mudbound* often, laughing and shaking their heads by turns, depending on whether the story in question was funny or horrifying. Often they were both, as Southern stories tend to be. I loved listening to them, even the ones I'd heard dozens of times before. They were a peephole into a strange and marvelous world; a world full of contradictions, of terrible beauty. The stories revealed things about my family, especially about my grandmother, who was the heroine of most of them for the simple reason that when calamity struck, my grandfather was invariably elsewhere.

To my mother and aunt, their year on the farm was a grand adventure; and indeed, that was how all their stories, even my grandmother's, portrayed it. It was not until much later that I realized what an ordeal that year must have been for her --- a city-bred woman with two young children --- and that, in fact, these were stories of survival.

I began the novel (without knowing I was doing any such thing) in graduate school at Columbia. One of my teachers asked us to write a few pages in the voice of a family member, and I decided to write about the farm from my grandmother's point of view. But what came out was not a merry adventure story, but something darker and more complex. What came out was, "When I think of the farm, I think of mud."

Q: If *Mudbound* was indeed a true place, how much of the story is based on fact?

A: The basic premise is true: My grandfather decided to move the family from the city (Dallas, in reality) to the farm in 1946. Like Henry in the novel, he wanted to be near his recently widowed sister, whose husband had committed suicide. And too, my grandfather yearned to be a farmer. He was a native Mississippian; reverence for the land was bred into his bones.

My grandmother had never seen the property, and I can only imagine how she felt when she arrived to discover she would be living and rearing her two small children (my mother and aunt were three and six, respectively) in such a primitive place. But Nana was a woman of her time, obedient to her husband's wishes, and so she made the best of it. My grandfather's brother, Bobby, came to live with them, followed by her cantankerous father-in-law, and she cooked and cleaned uncomplainingly for all

of them. Like Laura in the novel, my grandmother was a singer, and the songs she sang were indicative of her mood. “Rock of Ages” was a frequent refrain on the farm, and --- when things got really bad --- “Were You There When They Crucified Our Lord.”

My grandparents also had black and white (as well as Mexican) sharecroppers on the farm, and a black maid who helped with the housework.

And there reality ends, and fiction begins. I started with actual people and events, but the more I wrote, the more the characters insisted on being themselves, and the more trouble they got themselves into. Murder, lust, betrayal, forbidden love --- with fiction, all these things were possible, and oh so beguiling to me as a writer.

Q: Why did you choose to tell this story through six first-person voices?

A: Well, I wanted to make the process of writing my first novel as difficult for myself as I possibly could.

That aside, I began by writing a short story in Laura’s (my grandmother’s) voice and ended up with the Cliff Notes of a novel, squeezed into 35 pages. As I thought about how I would unpack the story, I started experimenting with other voices. Jamie’s came first. I woke up in the wee hours, typed five pages about the flood and went back to bed. It wasn’t until I turned on the computer the next morning and saw the pages on the screen that I remembered having written them. Florence’s voice was next. She poured out of me, though it took me a while to get the dialect right. Then Henry, who was stubborn and difficult, and Hap, who was a talker from the beginning. Ronsel didn’t even exist until I saw a PBS documentary called *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. There was a segment about the 761st Tank Battalion --- their heroism and the discrimination they endured. I knew right then that Florence and Hap had a son and that he was in that battalion, though I had no idea how central he would become to the story.

Q: Was it difficult for you to write in the voices of African American characters?

A: Yes, but no more difficult than it was to write in the voices of men, of soldiers, of farmers, of mothers, of devout Christians, of desperately poor people with little education, of bigots or of an alcoholic --- none of which I am, and all of which I had to embody convincingly.

Q: How would you answer those who might say that's not something a white writer has any business doing?

A: In the stories I grew up hearing, black people were always in the background --- where African-Americans in the Jim Crow South were thought to belong. I decided to put my black characters front and center, and to let them answer the ugliness of Jim Crow in their own voices. Still, I was a little afraid. I knew I would be excoriated (and rightly so) if I got it wrong. A number of well-meaning colleagues said things to me like, "You know, even Faulkner didn't write about black people in the first person." But ultimately, I decided that letting my African-American characters speak was the only way to give them a small measure of justice.

Also, from an artistic point of view, I think it's nonsense to tell a writer, "You can't write about X because you're Y." If writers didn't make leaps into existences other than our own, we wouldn't have Madame Bovary or Moll Flanders or Jane Eyre or half of literature. Instead, we'd have a whole lot of tedious books about lonely, neurotic types with writer's block and knotted shoulder muscles. At the time I began *Mudbound*, I was a single woman dating and struggling to survive in New York City --- and how many more novels do we need on that subject?

Q: Your manuscript won the prestigious Bellwether Prize, judged by Barbara Kingsolver. Tell us what it was like to get this news.

A: I sent off the second draft of the book in September 2005 with the \$30 entry fee, thinking, There goes thirty bucks. Then I heard in January that I was one of a dozen semi-finalists, and I thought, Well, I was in the top twelve anyway. A couple of months later I found out I was one of three finalists, and I thought, Hey, at least I got close. Then, the night Barbara called, she didn't identify herself right away, and I thought she was a telemarketer. I was pretty un-cordial. I was about to hang up on her when she said, "This is Barbara Kingsolver, and I'm calling to tell you that you've won the Bellwether Prize."

I responded with the immortal words of a beauty pageant contestant: "Oh my God!"

Q: Writers often say it took them many years and permutations to arrive at the final version of their first novel. How long have you been working on *Mudbound*?

A: About seven years, or was it seventy? I was putting myself through graduate school, supporting myself in the city and frankly, doing a lot of dithering. My best friend, James Cañón, was also struggling to finish his first novel (he and I met at Columbia and were each other's primary readers while writing our books). So we made a bet:

whoever didn't finish his/her first draft by April 1, 2005, would have to pay the other the unthinkable sum of \$1,000, plus endure a lifetime of daily taunting and shame. I cut back my freelance ad work and focused on my writing. I finished on time, and so did James.

Et voilà --- two published novels!

Q: Is there a particular character in *Mudbound* that you side with the most or feel most sympathetic toward?

A: I started by identifying the most with Laura, for obvious reasons. But as the others' voices developed, I became enamored with each of them in turn. Henry was the hardest to love (and to write), but he won me over in the end. Ronsel has the last word, so I suppose you could draw some conclusions from that.

Q: Without giving too much away, the conclusion of your novel is unforgettably powerful. Did you know how the book would end when you first began writing it?

A: I never had an outline for the novel; I wrote it very much as it came to me, or it came to me as I wrote it --- I'm not sure which. I struggled for months to come up with a conclusion I could write towards. And then one night, it was just there in my head. I called up James, and I said, "I know what happens in the last big scene." When I told him, all the hairs rose up on my arms, and I knew I really had something.

Writing the scene was wrenching. I had terrible nightmares for weeks. Enough said.

Courtesy of Algonquin Books

Discussion Questions

1. The setting of the Mississippi Delta is intrinsic to *Mudbound*. Discuss the ways in which the land functions as a character in the novel and how each of the other characters relates to it.
2. *Mudbound* is a chorus, told in six different voices. How do the changes in perspective affect your understanding of the story? Are all six voices equally sympathetic? Reliable? Pappy is the only main character who has no narrative voice. Why do you think the author chose not to let him speak?
3. Who gets to speak and who is silent or silenced is a central theme, the silencing of Ronsel being the most literal and brutal example. Discuss the ways in which this theme plays out for the other characters. For instance, how does Laura's silence about her unhappiness on the farm affect her and her marriage? What are the consequences of Jamie's inability to speak to his family about the horrors he experienced in the war? How does speaking or not speaking confer power or take it away?
4. The story is narrated by two farmers, two wives and mothers, and two soldiers. Compare and contrast the ways in which these parallel characters, black and white, view and experience the world.
5. What is the significance of the title? In what ways are each of the characters bound —by the land, by circumstance, by tradition, by the law, by their own limitations? How much of this binding is inescapable and how much is self-imposed? Which characters are most successful in freeing themselves from what binds them?
6. All the characters are products of their time and place, and instances of racism in the book run from Pappy's outright bigotry to Laura's more subtle prejudice. Would Laura have thought of herself as racist, and if not, why not? How do the racial views of Laura, Jamie, Henry, and Pappy affect your sympathy for them?
7. The novel deals with many thorny issues: racism, sexual politics, infidelity, war. The characters weigh in on these issues, but what about the author? Does she have a discernable perspective, and if so, how does she convey it?
8. We know very early in the book that something terrible is going to befall Ronsel. How does this sense of inevitability affect the story? Jamie makes Ronsel responsible for his own fate, saying "Maybe that's cowardly of me, making Ronsel's the trigger finger." Is it just cowardice, or is there some truth to what Jamie says? Where would you place the turning point for Ronsel? Who else is complicit in what happens to him, and why?

9. In reflecting on some of the more difficult moral choices made by the characters — Laura's decision to sleep with Jamie, Ronsel's decision to abandon Resl and return to America, Jamie's choice during the lynching scene, Florence's and Jamie's separate decisions to murder Pappy — what would you have done in those same situations? Is it even possible to know? Are there some moral positions that are absolute, or should we take into account things like time and place when making judgments?

10. How is the last chapter of *Mudbound* different from all the others? Why do you think the author chose to have Ronsel address you, the reader, directly? Do you believe he overcomes the formidable obstacles facing him and finds "something like happiness"? If so, why doesn't the author just say so explicitly? Would a less ambiguous ending have been more or less satisfying?

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