Book review:

A hard life, then Hurricane Katrina: Jesmyn Ward's Salvage the Bones

Sandy English
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Jesmyn Ward's second novel, *Salvage the Bones*, which won the 2012 National Book Award, is an organic and spontaneous portrait of a family living in Mississippi before, during and after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Events take place in the fictional Gulf Coast community of Bois Sauvage, in which Ward also set her first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds*.

The author herself experienced Katrina in her hometown of De Lisle, Mississippi (30 miles west of Biloxi) and wrote a novel that takes place in the midst of that disaster, as she has explained, so that the events would not fade from public memory.

The book focuses on the four Batiste children: 15-year old Esch, who narrates the story, her brothers Randall, 17, Skeetah, 16, and Junior, 7. Their father, an abusive alcoholic, works odd jobs on oyster boats or hauling scrap metal, and their mother died giving birth to Junior. They live around a clay pit that the family owns in the woods.

Randall is a promising high school basketball player. Skeetah is focused on rearing and training China, his pit bull, to fight--sometimes to the detriment of his relationships with other humans.

As the family prepares for the storm, Esch discovers she is pregnant and Skeetah attempts to care for a litter of China's newly born pups. Motivating the older children is a need to rise above, to escape, their economic and emotional conditions--although exactly how inevitably remains unclear to them.

Skeetah's struggle to save and raise his dogs is intensely studied, and indeed carries the story. Esch's feelings about her pregnancy, and the boy who got her into that condition, are somewhat more diffuse, but still strike an urgent note.

Poverty rules every aspect of the family's life. There are few jobs in the community, and those pay next to nothing. Aspirations are limited, like the diet. The children eat ramen noodles and hope to come up with a few hundred dollars to send Randall to basketball camp. Often, basic necessities must be borrowed or stolen, in spite of hard work.

Salvage the Bones includes a faithful description of social life in Mississippi, the state with the greatest number of counties with high rates of children living in poverty. Fully 33 percent of Mississippi children are poor, according to the derisory official poverty rate. As a recent report noted, "By many measures--life expectancy, infant mortality rates, chronic conditions--Mississippi is equivalent to the developing world."

The strength of Ward's novel is the honest depiction of the lives and feelings of these young people as they go on without the prospect of anything that might be called a future.

However, the novel makes almost no reference to a world beyond the extended family and friends, and even within the family, the most potent interactions are almost all among young people.

Telling a story though the voice of a teenager, and one who lives in dire poverty at that, presents its own set of difficulties under any circumstances, and the problems of American fiction in the last 30 years or more only make the approach more problematic in this particular case.

Generally, when writers have depicted the lives of the oppressed--and contemporary fiction in the US has not shied away from doing that--there remain big problems of perspective. The writers in general cannot see the forest for

the trees. They avoid these questions like the plague: What are the origins of the harsh social environment so many characters inhabit? Is there a historical component to the everyday troubles that people face?

Anything is possible in art, but recent examples of the young narrator in American fiction have erred on the side of impressionism and simplification of the social problems that bear down on the thoughts and emotions of the characters.

Fiction writers in the first half of the last century, under other influences and within another social climate, worked these matters out differently.

For example, Henry Roth's classic 1934 novel, *Call it Sleep*, creates a world whose central intelligence is a boy of six. While the point of view centers on the latter, Roth felt it necessary to include the perspective of a narrator who supplies much of the history of people and things. The book is not limited to the boy's immediate perceptions of the Jewish ghetto in New York's Lower East Side.

Ward need not have employed this technique in her novel, but the restrictions of a very young consciousness were clearly a problem for Roth that required some sort of solution.

One feels that opportunities are lost in *Salvage the Bones*. Esch's father prepares for the storm or recuperates from the horrible accident that follows, but much of the action is done around him. He is not quite absent, but not a central player. At any rate, the thoughts of a man who might know something about the bitter civil rights struggle in Mississippi would have added perspective to his children's difficult situation.

Instead, the past, in *Salvage the Bones*, is usually restricted to the children's memories of their mother. Family stories about their grandparents, Papa Joseph and Mother Lizabeth, are also limited to the immediate and the incidental. Bois Sauvage is a place largely without or outside of history.

The limitations in perspective have artistic consequences. Sometimes Esch's voice is a 15-year-old's, as one might expect it to be: "I was making him hot with love, and he was loving me," she says about her boyfriend.

At other times, Ward attempts to give Esch a deeper insight. Such language can be effective and add another dimension to the story: "My hair laid on my neck like the blankets my mother used to crochet, the ones still piled on in winter to keep warm and wake up under in the morning, sweating."

But more often this kind of figurative speech falls flat. "Seeing him broke the cocoon of my ribcage, and my heart unfurled to fly," she says when she sees the same boy. Frankly, such passages clutter up the narrative and do not add up to much.

Ward has chosen a 10th-grade narrator who uses highly metaphorical, and even mythical, language (Esch has read Edith Hamilton's *Greek Mythology* and often refers to the story of Jason and Medea as events unfold) to describe the terrible deprivation of a working class community in the days before a natural and social disaster stuck. The novelist's intuition that these events and lives deserve the richest possible literary treatment is a healthy one.

Unfortunately, neither Esch's metaphors nor her references to Greek mythology help us see more deeply into the emotions and the objective circumstances that condition the latter in Bois Sauvage. They are simply not enough by themselves, and they tend to detract from the book's force.

On balance, however, the author's sincerity and feeling for her characters tend to overcome the problems of the narrative voice. Descriptions of certain events stand out: the father's wounding, a dogfight in the woods, the pit bull's behavior and Hurricane Katrina itself. In fact, these last two are central, almost elemental sources of the novel's power, which perhaps tells us something about the world view of the author: the hazards and successes of life, like nature, cannot be controlled.