

W H E N

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W O K E

An Interview with Hillary Jordan

Questions for Discussion





## AN INTERVIEW WITH HILLARY JORDAN

***When She Woke* is, to say the least, a very different book from your debut novel, *Mudbound*. What inspired you to go in such a radically different direction?**

I actually wrote the first pages of *When She Woke* in the spring of 2000, in the same workshop where I started *Mudbound*. And I didn't know what to do with *When She Woke*, so I wrote *Mudbound* instead. I didn't return to it until the summer of 2007, after I'd finished *Mudbound*. By then, we'd seen profound and disturbing changes in America: a rise in religious fundamentalism, the muddying of the line between church and state, infringements on civil rights in the name of patriotism and national security. *When She Woke* was my response.

**And you've clearly chosen to use an American classic, *The Scarlet Letter*, to tell your story. Can you talk about why you turned to Nathaniel Hawthorne?**

The original story fragment of *When She Woke* centered on a young woman who'd been turned red as punishment for murdering her sister's abusive husband. At first (and unbelievably to me now) I didn't make the connection between my stigmatized heroine and Hawthorne's. And then one day Hester Prynne and her scarlet *A* popped into my mind, and I thought, *Hub, I should reread that book*. And I did, that very afternoon, for the first time since high school, and it sparked all sorts of interesting connections and ideas. Hester is made to stand on a scaffold in front of the whole community and exhibit the mark of her shame. *So what*, I asked myself, *would the futuristic equivalent of a scaffold be?* Reality

TV, of course, only in a more sinister form. Hester is impregnated by a charismatic clergyman, the analogue of which would be . . . a megachurch preacher. And because of *The Scarlet Letter*, my future America ended up being not just cruel and repressive but also essentially a theocracy, as seventeenth-century Boston was. But while the beginning of *When She Woke* owes a lot to Hawthorne, the two story lines diverge sharply after that. I didn't adhere to *The Scarlet Letter* as much as riff on it. Which was a lot of fun because it's a book I truly love.

**How do you think fans of *Mudbound* will react to this one?**

I think it will be love or hate, with very little in between! (Though I'm hoping for more of the former.) But I also think readers will find that the two books have more in common than might be immediately apparent. Both have strong female protagonists whose desire for self-realization leads them to defy the cultural expectations that bind them; both are concerned with discrimination and alienation; both take issue with absolutism. And obviously, they're both perfect, lighthearted beach reads.

***When She Woke* begins with Hannah, who wakes up on a pallet in a prison cell and learns that she is now colored red from head to toe. From that startling opening, the curtain is drawn back slowly to reveal this different America and Hannah's place in it. Why did you choose to start the novel this way?**

I wanted to catapult readers into Hannah's reality from page one, to make them experience what she was experiencing in an immediate and visceral way. And I wanted to create dramatic tension. In that sense I'm pretty traditional, both as a storyteller and as a reader: bring on the drama, and the juicier, the better.

**In this new America, criminals are “chromed” a color to match their crime and reintroduced into society. It’s such a radical idea; what was your inspiration for the concept of “chroming”?**

The idea was sparked by a conversation I had with a family member about the drug problem in America. He said something to the effect of, “I think all drugs ought to be legal and provided by the government; they just ought to turn you bright blue.” Meaning, you get as high as you want, but other people will be able to see you coming and stay the hell away from you. And this conversation, and the idea of what it would be like to be stigmatized in this way, stuck in my mind, and some fifteen years later bore the strange red fruit that became *When She Woke*.

**In *Mudbound* you wrote about racism and sexism in the South, and with *When She Woke* you explore governmental control, faith, crime and punishment, sexual politics, and civil rights. Do you set out to write political fiction, or is that where your books end up taking you?**

I set out to write literature. And I think it’s the job of literature to tackle the really big issues, to say to people, “Hey, you may believe X, but have you ever considered Y, did you know there was a Z?” With *Mudbound* I knew I was going to write about race, but I initially thought it would be secondary to the McAllan family drama. Little did I know where Ronsel (who didn’t even exist for the first several years) and my own deep-seated feelings about racial injustice would take the book. With *When She Woke* I was more cognizant of wanting to explore certain issues that were on my mind at the time, like government invasions of privacy, abortion rights, and the intersection of faith and politics. Having said that, I’m a storyteller, not a polemicist. Very few people outside university political

science departments want to read a 341-page political tract, and I have zero interest in writing one.

**Your use of *The Scarlet Letter* might lead some to conclude that you think we're moving toward an increasingly puritanical society. Do you?**

I think there's a small, loud group of people who would have us move in that direction, but really they're no different from any of the other extremists in our history who have sought to impose their morality on the rest of us. The problem with the religious fundamentalist political agenda—besides the fact that it's unconstitutional—is that it's fundamentally un-American. Like all extremist movements, its success depends on making people afraid of each other. And while we've certainly seen periods in America when fear and paranoia have won out over reason and compassion—post-9/11, the Cold War, and Jim Crow are just a few of the more recent examples—they've never lasted. I believe that's because most of us want to find our own way to happiness. We're here for such a short, precious time; we want to choose how we live, how we love, how we worship; and because we want that freedom for ourselves, we have to see the justice in giving it to our neighbors. This is who we are as a people. *When She Woke* is about the consequences of letting fear and paranoia make us forget who we are.

**A subplot running through the novel is how Chromes are broadcast live on TV 24/7, which seems an extension of a culture obsessed with reality TV, a culture where the notion of Big Brother is fully and openly embraced. In what ways do you think a surfeit of reality TV changes how we see (and treat) others?**

People don't always want to be in their own lives, their own realities. I certainly don't, which is why I'm grateful for literature and theater and art and music and film. The difference I see with reality TV is that so much of it seems to be about humiliation, about showing people at their smallest and meanest, their lowest and most abject. It turns human life into a cheap spectacle and serves it up for mass consumption. And by devouring it as mindlessly as a bag of potato chips, we, the audience, end up being willing participants in our own cheapening.

**What was the hardest part about writing *When She Woke*?**

Sticking so close to just one character. With *Mudbound* I had six voices to choose from; when I got tired of being an educated middle-aged white mother of two, I could become a young black soldier or an illiterate farmer or a charmer with a drinking problem. With *When She Woke* there was no escaping Hannah, and her head was often a very dark place to be.

**What do you hope readers will take away from the novel?**

An increased respect for the beliefs of other people, however different. And a strong desire to read more fiction!



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *When She Woke* is a riff on *The Scarlet Letter*. What similarities do you see in Jordan's near-future America and Hawthorne's late-seventeenth-century Boston? Is Hannah Payne a faithful re-imagining of Hester Prynne, or do the two characters differ in important ways? Why do you think Jordan chose *The Scarlet Letter* as a jumping-off point for her story?
2. Jordan's novel explores a lot of big, thorny issues: abortion, faith, governmental control, sexuality, discrimination. Would you call this primarily a political novel, or is it more a coming-of-age story about one young woman's personal journey?
3. Discuss the different ways religion and abortion are depicted in the book. Do you think these portrayals are fair? Did you feel the author was advocating a particular point of view?
4. How is the phrase "It's personal" used in the book? Do you agree? Are there other things, for you, to which that statement applies?
5. Hannah's character arc—from sheltered, obedient Evangelical Christian to frightened fugitive to independent woman with her own notions of faith and sexuality—is enormous. Did you find it credible? How do you think such stigmatization, hardship, and fear would transform you?
6. Do Aidan's flaws prevent him from being a sympathetic character? Did your feelings about him change over the course of the book, and if so, how? Were any of the important characters in *When She Woke* completely unsympathetic?

7. *When She Woke* presents many competing views of a woman's proper role in society. How does the author reveal the female characters' views of themselves to the reader, and how do these self-images shape their interactions with others? How do the men's views differ from the women's, and from one another's, and how do these differences play out in the story?
8. Discuss the cost of rebellion in *When She Woke*. Do women pay a higher price than men for breaking society's rules, and if so, why do you think that is?
9. Compare the reaction to (and treatment of) Chromes in the novel to the treatment of people of color both historically and in the present day.
10. Did you ever think, even for a moment, that melachroming might actually be a good solution to the enormous problems of our criminal justice system? What are other examples, both in the book and in the present, of laws or policies that sacrifice individual freedom for the collective good? When are such policies justified, and when do they go too far?

MICHAEL EPSTEIN



**Hillary Jordan's** first novel, *Mudbound*, was the winner of the 2006 Bellwether Prize for Fiction, awarded by Barbara Kingsolver, and an Alex Award, from the American Library Association. It was named the NAIBA Fiction Book of the Year and was chosen as a Barnes & Noble Discover title, a Borders Original Voices selection, and an Indie Next pick. Jordan grew up in Texas and Oklahoma. She lives in New York City. Find her online at [www.hillaryjordan.com](http://www.hillaryjordan.com)

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