

MUDBOUND

An Interview with Hillary Jordan

A Reading and Discussion Guide



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AN INTERVIEW WITH HILLARY JORDAN

What inspired you to write *Mudbound*?

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

Though they only lived there for a year, my mother, aunt, and grandmother spoke of the farm 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 inevitably elsewhere.

To my mother and aunt, the year they spent at Mudbound was a grand adventure; and indeed, that was how all their stories portrayed it. It was not until much later that I realized what an ordeal that year must have been for my grandmother—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 grad school. I had an assignment 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."

So, your grandmother's voice was the one that came to you first as you started writing this?

Yes, hers was the first, and only, voice for some while. My teacher liked what I wrote and encouraged me to continue, and I tried to write a short story. My grandmother became Laura, a fictional character much more fiery and rebellious than she ever was, and the story got longer and longer. At 50 pages I realized I was writing a novel, and that's when I decided to introduce the other voices. Jamie came next, then Henry, then Florence, then Hap. Ronsel wasn't even a character until I had about 150 pages! And of course, when he entered the story, he changed its course dramatically.

But you never let Pappy speak.

Nine drafts ago, Pappy actually narrated his own funeral (the two scenes at the beginning and end of the book). And people—namely, my editor and Barbara Kingsolver, who read several drafts of *Mudbound* and gave me invaluable criticism—just hated hearing from him first, or in fact, at all. Eventually I was persuaded to silence him. The more I thought about those two passages, the more fitting it seemed that Jamie should narrate them.

Still, even without having his own section, it's clear that Pappy really struck a chord with readers. Why do you think that is?

Yes, people really do seem to hate him! Which is as it should be—he's pretty detestable. He embodies not just the ugliness of the Jim Crow era but the absolute worst possibilities in ourselves.

What was the hardest part of writing *Mudbound*?

Getting those voices right—the African American dialect especially. I had a number of well-meaning friends say things to me like, “even Faulkner didn't write about black people in the first person.” But ultimately I decided I had to let my black characters address the ugliness of that time and place themselves, in their own voices.

Your book takes on racism on many levels—the most obvious forms, but also the more insidious kinds, like the sharecropping system, for example.

In researching this book, I was astounded by what I learned about the perniciousness of the sharecropping system. Owning your own mule meant the difference between share tenancy, in which you got to keep half your crop, and sharecropping, in which you got to keep only a quarter. A quarter of a cotton crop wasn't nearly enough for a family to live on, so people went further and further into debt with their landlords. And they were so incredibly vulnerable—to misfortune, to illness, to bad weather conditions. Being a sharecropper wasn't that far removed from being a slave.

The climactic scene with Ronsel is absolutely wrenching to read. I imagine it was equally wrenching to write.

Yes, it was. I'd been unsure for months what was going to happen in that scene. And when it finally came to me, all the hairs on my arms stood up, and I called my best friend James Cañón (who is also an author and was my primary reader during the seven years it took me to write *Mudbound*), and I said, "I know what's going to happen to Ronsel," and I told him. And there was this long silence and then he said, "Wow."

I dreaded writing the scene, and I put it off for a long time. When I finally made myself do it, I cried a lot. I was reading it out loud as I went—which for me is an essential part of writing dialogue—and having to speak those horrific things made them that much more real and terrible.

What books would you recommend to those who want to know even more about the period?

All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw, by Theodore Rosen-
garten. This is a true first-person account of a black Alabama
cotton farmer who started out as a sharecropper and ended up
owning his own land, with many adventures along the way.
Nate was an indelible character, smart (though illiterate) and
funny and wise about people. He was eighty years old when he
told his life story to Theodore Rosen-
garten, a journalist from
New York. And what a fascinating life it was.

James Cobb's *The Most Southern Place on Earth*.

Pete Daniel's excellent books *Breaking the Land* and *Deep'n
as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* and *Standing at
the Crossroads: Southern Life in the Twentieth Century*.

A PBS series of documentaries about black history from *The
American Experience*.

Clifton L. Taulbert's *When We Were Colored*.

And of course, the works of James Baldwin, William Faulkner,
Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and Richard Wright, among
others.

Have you begun working on another novel?

Yes, and it's absolutely nothing like *Mudbound*! After seven
years of working on it, I was extremely ready to leave the Deep
South, the past, and the first person. My second novel, *Red*, is
set in a dystopian America roughly thirty years in the future. It
begins in Crawford, Texas, and ends—well, who knows?

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A READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

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. Why do you think the author chose to have Ronsel address you, the reader, directly at the end of the book? 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?