

Salvage the Bones by Jesmyn Ward

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Salvage the Bones*, a searing novel about one family's struggle to survive Hurricane Katrina.

About this book

Esch's daddy knows that a hurricane is coming and that it's going to be a big one, but on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, where hurricanes blow through every year, it's hard for his family to get excited about this one. They don't know it will be a category 5 storm named Katrina. With their Mama dead for seven years, fourteen-year-old Esch and her two older brothers, Randall and Skeetah, have to watch over their youngest brother, Junior, while their largely absent father drinks and mourns. Randall has his eye on a basketball scholarship as a one-way ticket out of town, and Skeetah is busy helping his pit bull, China, give birth to her first litter—a potential goldmine, if the puppies live long enough to be sold.

But Esch is weighed down by her own problems. She is in love with Manny, an older boy who sleeps with her but won't look her in the eye. Esch finds out that she is pregnant, and when she finally tells Manny, he turns on her and her brothers. After Daddy has a terrible accident while trying to fix his truck and as the hurricane makes landfall, Esch and her siblings have to pull together to get their ramshackle house ready. When Katrina finally hits, it is worse than anyone could have imagined. Skeetah, who has guessed Esch's secret, must choose between saving his beloved dogs and helping his family—not all of them can make it out of the storm alive.

For discussion

1. *Salvage the Bones* opens with China giving birth to a litter of puppies in the shed. What do we learn about Esch and the rest of the Batiste family during this scene? How does each of Esch's brothers react to the puppies' birth? What will Esch learn about motherhood from watching China with her puppies?
2. Esch's summer reading assignment, *Mythology* by Edith Hamilton, includes the story of the tragic romance between Jason and Medea. How does the myth of Jason and Medea relate to Esch's relationship with Manny? In the end, does Esch betray her family for love, as Medea did?
3. Chart Esch's attitude toward her pregnancy through the twelve days of the novel. How does Esch first realize that she might be pregnant, and how does she react when her suspicion is confirmed? When do we see Esch in stages of denial, fear, and acceptance? How do Skeetah and Daddy respond when they discover Esch's pregnancy?
4. Discuss the nature of Skeetah's bond with his pit bull, China. Why is Skeetah so committed to China and her puppies? How does Skeetah negotiate his responsibilities to his family and to his dog?

5. How does Daddy seem to know that a storm is coming before anyone else? How do his children and neighbors react to his early preparations? Why do Daddy's precautions fail in the face of Katrina's destruction?
6. Esch wonders "if Daddy will feel his missing fingers the way we feel Mama, present in the absence" (247). Discuss the presence of Mama in the novel, even though she has been dead for seven years. How does Mama live on in her children's memory?
7. The fifth chapter has the same title as the novel, "Salvage the Bones." Review the chapter and discuss what the title means. How does the title fit the chapter as well as the novel as a whole?
8. Discuss the depiction of violence in *Salvage the Bones*. What do scenes of violence—including Daddy's loss of his fingers, China's brutal killing of her puppy, and the dogfight between China and Kilo—add to the novel? How do violence and tenderness coexist in this troubled setting?
9. Consider how Manny betrays Esch and her brothers. How does Manny treat Esch before and after he learns of her pregnancy? Why does Manny turn on Skeetah and China and support Rico and Kilo in the dogfight?
10. Randall tells Skeetah, "You just like Daddy. Always crazy for something" (157). Discuss the similarities and differences between Skeetah and Daddy. How do the similarities between father and son create conflict between them?
11. Discuss the setting of *Salvage the Bones*. How does the Pit—the lot where the Batiste family has lived for generations—look and feel? What is it like to grow up in the town of Bois Sauvage? What are race relations like in this rural Mississippi area?
12. Review the scenes of the hurricane, in which Esch, her brothers, and Daddy scramble from their attic to their roof to Mother Lizbeth and Papa Joseph's house in order to escape the rising water. How do these family members help each other survive these treacherous conditions? Why does Daddy throw Esch into the water, and how does he later express regret?
13. Skeetah lets go of China in order to save Esch from drowning in the storm. Does Skeetah seem to regret his choice of sister over dog? What is the mood at the end of the novel, as Skeetah waits by the house for China to return to him?
14. Big Henry tells Esch, "This baby got plenty of daddies" (255). Name the "daddies" who will help Esch raise her child. What assistance does each of these boys and men have to offer?
15. Compare the portrayal of Katrina in *Salvage the Bones* to what you saw of the hurricane in the news. Which aspects of the storm's devastation does this novel bring to life? What does Esch's perspective add to your understanding of Katrina's impact?

Suggested reading

Jesmyn Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*; Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun*; Chris Rose, *I Dead in Attic: After Katrina*; Danzy Senna, *You Are Free*; Danielle Evans, *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*; Tayari Jones, *Silver Sparrow*; Victor LaValle, *Big Machine*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Sapphire, *Push*; Junot Díaz, *Drown*

Jesmyn Ward grew up in DeLisle, Mississippi. She received her MFA from the University of Michigan, where she won five Hopwood awards for essays, drama, and fiction. A Stegner Fellow at Stanford from 2008 to 2010, she was also the 2010–2011 John and Renée Grisham Writer in Residence at the University of Mississippi. She is currently an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of South Alabama. Her debut novel, *Where the Line Bleeds*, was an *Essence* Magazine Book Club selection, a Black Caucus of the ALA Honor Award recipient, and a finalist for both the Virginia Commonwealth University Cabell First Novelist Award and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award.