



Men We Reaped: A Memoir

Jesmyn Ward

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“We saw the lightning and that was the guns; and then we heard the thunder and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped.” -Harriet Tubman

In five years, Jesmyn Ward lost five young men in her life—to drugs, accidents, suicide, and the bad luck that can follow people who live in poverty, particularly black men. Dealing with these losses, one after another, made Jesmyn ask the question: Why? And as she began to write about the experience of living through all the dying, she realized the truth—and it took her breath away. Her brother and her friends all died because of who they were and where they were from, because they lived with a history of racism and economic struggle that fostered drug addiction and the dissolution of family and relationships. Jesmyn says the answer was so obvious she felt stupid for not seeing it. But it nagged at her until she knew she had to write about her community, to write their stories and her own.

Jesmyn grew up in poverty in rural Mississippi. She writes powerfully about the pressures this brings, on the men who can do no right and the women who stand in for family in a society where the men are often absent. She bravely tells her story, revisiting the agonizing losses of her only brother and her friends. As the sole member of her family to leave home and pursue higher education, she writes about this parallel American universe with the objectivity distance provides and the intimacy of utter familiarity. A brutal world rendered beautifully, Jesmyn Ward's memoir will sit comfortably alongside Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*, Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

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