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Sing, Unburied, Sing
By Jesmyn Ward
Bloomsbury Publishing
305 pp.

William Faulkner, perhaps Mississippi's greatest author, famously wrote, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.' Jesmyn Ward, one of the state's great current literary stars, carries on this idea in her National Book Award winning novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. In a tale both uniquely Mississippi in nature and universal in scope, Ward explores how family dynamics are molded by past tragedies that affect the present in unexpected ways.

At the heart of Ward's novel is a family broken by multiple tragedies. The primary character the action follows is Jojo, a thirteen year old boy who is caught between multiple worlds. His mother, Leonie, is African American and often absent from his life, working long hours and constantly using drugs with her friend Misty. Meanwhile, Michael, his father, is white and imprisoned in Parchman for cooking crystal meth. Leonie's brother Given, a football star, was murdered by a white classmate in a supposed hunting accident. For Jojo, his African American grandparents serve as his main parental figures. He looks to his grandfather, who goes by Pop, to teach him about manhood and how to survive in a harsh world defined by poverty and neglect. Also, his grandmother, who goes by Mam, serves as a tie to an older time of spirituality, home remedies, and even magic. Ward intricately weaves this uncertain world, one where Jojo is forced to grow up faster than he could anticipate.

With his parents largely absent, whether it be physically or mentally, Jojo is forced to take care of both himself and his little sister Kayla. This is best portrayed in the pivotal middle section of the book when Leonie takes them to Parchman to pick up Michael, who is being released from prison. During this trek, Kayla becomes violently ill, and Jojo is the only character that responds with any kind of sympathy. The two actual 'grown-ups' present, Leonie and Misty, react with either disgust, neglect, or abuse. This represents a constant theme throughout the book: the adults often act immaturely in the face of hardship and leave the children to fend for themselves. This is only exacerbated by the reintroduction of Michael into the family's lives. He and Leonie immediately backslide into bad habits, which leads to a harrowing encounter with a police officer in which Jojo is handcuffed and Kayla is traumatized as she watches her brother and protector face cruelty that he does not deserve.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Ward's tale is the exploration of both the past and the supernatural. In her narrative, time becomes a very fluid thing through the use of flashbacks and storytelling, mostly by Pop concerning his time in Parchman when he was younger. The entire family is haunted by ghosts both metaphorical and literal. Leonie is plagued by the silent apparition of her dead brother whenever she uses drugs, which is often. This leaves her angry and confused during her sober moments, which may explain her abusive behavior towards her children. Upon arrival in Parchman, it is revealed that actual spirits exist in Ward's world. The ghost of a young boy named Richie, whom Pop had watched over while in prison, clings to Jojo and returns with him on the trip home. Both of these ghosts, of Given and Richie, force the other characters to come to terms with the dark secrets and violent pasts that trouble their present.

Sing, Unburied, Sing sees its characters thrust into situations that they are often not ready for. The driving force behind this is the chaotic nature of the families portrayed and a fluid notion of what family actually means. Jojo not only experiences unreliable parents in life, but must become a de facto parent himself, a burden that forces him to develop into an adult before his time. Michael's racist parents refuse to even acknowledge the existence of their grandchildren, much less be a part of their lives. Leonie's parents are weighed down by their own personal tragedies and shortcomings. Thus, Ward's novel is one defined by absence and family disarray. Some of the characters, like Jojo himself, overcome while others, like Leonie, fall apart in the face of suffering. Ward harnesses these themes to ultimately create a beautiful and, yes, haunting tale of dealing with hardship that feels both harshly real and compassionate.