

Book Reviews edited by Joshua Parker

***Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays*. Edited by Sheri-Marie Harrison, Arin Keeble, and Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo. Edinburgh UP, 2023, 368 pp.**

Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays (2023) is a meticulously researched and thought-provoking anthology of literary criticism which takes a multifaceted approach to exploring the works of the critically acclaimed US-American and Mississippi-based author Jesmyn Ward. The collection of twenty critical essays is edited by three scholars: Sheri-Marie Harrison, an Associate Professor of English at the University of Missouri, Arin Keeble, a lecturer in Contemporary Literature and Culture at Edinburgh Napier University, and Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo, a trade union organizer based in Edinburgh.

Blending exciting new scholarship from twenty authors from across mainland Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, the volume provides comprehensive analyses of the first three of Ward's novels, her memoir, and her essays. At the same time, it delves into topics and themes in Ward's writing, some of which have not yet been properly considered by critics, let alone published in an anthology of this length.

Harrison, Keeble, and Torres-Quevedo open the volume by commenting on Ward's heartbreaking essay "On Witness and Repair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic" (2020) in which, among other things, Ward describes losing her husband, the father to her children, one of many tragic losses in the writer's personal life. This introductory commentary on Ward's essay stresses how she considers her inner and outer world as interconnected – after Ward experiences this personal loss at the beginning of 2020, the world is forever changed by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the worldwide protests resulting from continuous police brutality in the United States and other countries. As Harrison, Keeble, and Torres-Quevedo aptly highlight in their introduction, Ward seamlessly weaves these personal narratives with significant public events.

Based on this introduction and the editors' knowledge of Ward's work, it should not be surprising that this anthology of literary criticism takes a multifaceted approach to analyze Ward's works. While the editors rightfully acknowledge the

significant role of trauma studies and poverty realism in terms of the existing body of critical volumes examining Ward's fiction and nonfiction, the collection of essays contained in this volume offers much more diverse perspectives on Ward's literary works. Examining various aspects such as Ward's portrayal of community and family relationships, the role of nature and the environment in her novels, as well as the historical and intertextual elements of her writing, the essays provide insightful perspectives on how Ward's work reflects on the human experience, from the dynamics of human relationships to the connection between humanity and nature.

Not only does the range of approaches included in this volume deserve praise, but also the range of different scholars and works by Ward that are evaluated in individual essays is worthy of accolades. While the first chapter in this collection, Wendy McMahon's "Bois Sauvage as Biotope in the Novels of Jesmyn Ward," offers an introduction to Ward's fictional and recurring community and natural landscape of Bois Sauvage by interpreting the environment of it as a biotope, Jay N. Shelat's essay, "Wayward Kinship and Malleable Intimacies," focuses on the human relations in Bois Sauvage by proposing that family and community play a crucial role in Ward's literary works by being instrumental in the characters' survival. The third chapter, "Determination in the Wake of Dispossession: Jesmyn Ward's Literary Depiction of Black Resistance to Outmigration," is written by Donald Brown, whose attention is drawn towards Ward's portrayal of Black farmers, the concept of land ownership, and how these concepts are connected to the Great Migration and the ongoing efforts of the civil rights movement.

I specifically name these first three chapters to showcase that the editors' choice in the order of their chapters is not accidental. On the contrary, this first quarter of the book works well as a follow-up to the editor's introduction and the notional "welcome" not only to Ward's fictional and personal life and history but to key themes in Ward's works and to the existing criticism of her work – such as Ward's strong connection to nature, US Southern history, and Southern American literature written about and for Black communities living in the South. This manner of careful and above all knowledgeable editing then weaves through the entire volume.

Ward's often overlooked first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2008), is analyzed in several essays from various perspectives. In the fifth chapter, "Mapping the 'Ungeographic' in Jesmyn Ward's *Where the Line Bleeds*," Beth Beatrice Smith highlights the (albeit often forgotten) significance of Ward's first introduction of Bois Sauvage to the world and examines how Ward brings together the components of the old and the new South while striving to tackle issues of injustice and discrimination.

Other essays explore Ward's other novels, namely *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), as well as her memoir *Men We Reaped* (2013). These

include Zsuzsanna Lénárt-Muszka's "The Weather and the Wake: Maternal Embodiment and Peril in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*," which explores the protagonist's pregnancy and motherhood, and Michelle Stork's "Experiencing the Environment from the Car: Human and More-than-Human Road Trippers in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*," which offers an ecocritical and social evaluation of Ward's third novel. Maria Elena Torres-Quevedo's essay, "'Life had promised me something when I was younger': Biopolitics and the Rags to Riches Narrative in Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*," is one of many essays in this volume which focus on Ward's memoir. It puts forth the argument that Ward challenges the typical pattern found in US-American autobiographies where the author is seen as an independent entity. Instead, as Torres-Quevedo discusses in her essay, Ward introduces a biopolitical subject that is posthumanist in nature.

Overall, *Jesmyn Ward: New Critical Essays* greatly expands the field of literary criticism as well as the existing scholarship on Ward's works, both fictional and non-fictional. The essays are meticulously researched, thoughtfully written, and provide readers with a deeper understanding of Ward's work, offering unique insights into the complexity of Ward's writing and exploring both the already uncovered and for the first time unearthed meanings that emerge from it.

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***Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric.* By Virginia Jackson.
Princeton UP, 2023, 304 pp.**

Virginia Jackson's most recently published book, *Before Modernism: Inventing American Lyric* (2023), is widely praised as a vital re-examination of American poetics' origins and development. This appraisal is based on the fact that the author, the Endowed Chair of Rhetoric at the University of California, Irving, argues for the visibility of female Black US poets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More precisely, Jackson discusses how Phillis Wheatley Peters significantly shaped the development of modern American poetics by inventing so-called *deep design*. Besides intentionally including several lesser-known poets in her book, another important Black