

# Award-winning author Jesmyn Ward delivers tender treatise on grief, art at ASU lecture

By Scott Bordow, ASU News  
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Jesmyn Ward glanced at the words she had written, on the pages she had carefully laid out on the lectern, and then looked up at the audience.

“I want to ask you for a little grace,” she said, “because I actually wrote this today.”

No one could imagine what came next.

The audience had settled in at Armstrong Hall on the Tempe campus to listen to Ward, the featured speaker of the Jonathan and Maxine Marshall Distinguished Lecture Series, the keynote event of [Humanities Week](#) at Arizona State University.

Many in the room knew her as the first woman and the first person of color to win two National Book Awards for fiction. They knew that in 2024, three of her books — “Men We Reaped,” “Salvage the Bones” and “Sing, Unburied, Sing” — were listed among the 100 best books of the 21st century by the New York Times.

But they didn’t know that over the next 20 minutes, Ward would lay herself bare, speaking unsparingly and poetically about the death of her husband, Brandon Miller — her “beloved B” — in 2020, and how his passing nearly broke her.

In late 2019, Ward was about 30 pages into her novel “Let Us Descend,” a fictional work about an enslaved teenager living in the South in the 1830s. She had spent two years filling a notebook with notes, reading about formerly enslaved people, researching the institution of chattel slavery and thinking about her family who lived through slavery, through Jim Crow, through the Civil Rights Movement and “every lurching step towards justice” in her beloved Mississippi.

Then “B” got a cold. Here’s how Ward described it:

“There isn’t much I can say in front of you about his dying that wouldn’t make me weep, nothing much beyond this: He had a cold and then it got worse and then he slept and his whole body hurt,

and it got even worse, and he saw a doctor and took prescription medicine, but two days later he couldn't breathe."

They went to the hospital, where they admitted him to the ICU. Despite the doctors' attempts to save his life, he didn't make it.

"After hours, there was only this, his still chest, his body, a husk on the table, ashen and that which made him gone. My world unmade," Ward said.

Tragedy had touched Ward before. As a quiet filled the audience, she talked about her brother, the brother who was quick and funny and told the best jokes and suffered anxiety and died at the age of 19 when a drunken driver hit him, and his car smashed into an oak tree and fire hydrant.

She spoke of surviving Hurricane Katrina, fleeing the storm surge with her mother, her 69-year-old grandmother and her pregnant sister, escaping a car that was headed for a 5-foot ditch, where "it would sink surely, and we would drown."

She told a story of being attacked by a pit bull when she was 6 years old, the dog ripping off a piece of her ear, a chunk of her back and gouging her skull. She survived by punching the dog with her "hanger-thin arms" and kicking with her "bony ankle feet," and her father, at the hospital, saying, "If she didn't fight, she would have died."

But now, B was dead, and her strength was gone. She held it together enough to care for her children and make sure they were fed, bathed and comforted when they cried for their father.

"But when they slept or visited relatives, those threads of necessity loosened and the edges of my life peeled away, and what was left at the center was a wounded animal clipped by the underside of a car dragging its way into the low brush to pant and bleed on a bed of rotting leaves," Ward said.

The pandemic struck. She was trapped in her house with her three grieving children, all under the age of 8. She started to drink and smoke and told herself that if she abstained more nights than she partook, she would be OK, so she drank three nights a week. At her lowest point, she thought about using the gun in her house and ending her pain.

And through it all — surviving her own pain, comforting her children in their loss and fears about what if something happened to her — she also had to reckon with the idea that she had abandoned her writing and her vision.

"Maybe, I said to myself, you've written your last book."

Then a voice spoke to her. The same voice she heard after her brother died. The last thing B would want, she heard, was for his loss to silence her. Perhaps it was delusional, she said, to believe that or to believe in the power of story to help readers feel for others in the real world. And yet, she did.

She continued writing the story in "Let Us Descend," of a young woman facing despair in the world of chattel slavery but finding a community — and her own personhood — in the midst of it.

"In the end, this young woman I was writing into being decided to keep breathing, to keep going in the hopes she could create a world where she could live as a full person," she said.

Stillness filled the room. Ward paused. She was at the end of her story. Now it was time to encourage, to push, to inspire.

"You may be bewildered like I was, like I sometimes still am. You may feel grief in this pandemic-ridden, violent, unpredictable, sorrow-soaked world, and that's OK. Feel it, witness it, reckon with it, and after you have coped in both healthy and unhealthy ways, please listen for that voice, that little voice that speaks inside of you that whispers beyond grief and pain and despairing bewilderment. ...

"Do your soul-driven work. Know that you can envision a better world, one a bit less riddled by pain and violence. ... Know that hope burns in the heart, at the heart of this new shelter you have made this home on a ruined Earth. Know that the night is riddled with stars outside the circle of your light and that the sun and moon rise tomorrow."

Resounding applause met the end of her talk.

Ward's speech was followed by a conversation about craft and the world between the author and Mitchell Jackson, the John O. Whiteman Dean's Distinguished Professor in the Department of English.

Jackson asked how she saw the sensibility of her own work. Ward said much of her writing was working against the sense of erasure she had felt for much of her life.

"I think that it (her work) encourages people to feel *with* and feel *for* the characters," Ward said. "And so I hope that it's doing some work in the world to like increase a sense of empathy."

Jackson pointed out that Ward has worked in many forms, including poetry and nonfiction, and asked whether there was a form that felt most comfortable or urgent to Ward. She said fiction, particularly the novel, feels most natural to her and that she often processes and engaged with the world through fiction.

They spoke about the legacy of chattel slavery in the United States and how it reverberates through lives today.

"When you are aware of that history, you can easily become, like I said earlier, sort of mired in shock and bewilderment and despair," Ward said. "But I think one of the things that I have learned ... is that the reason that we are here today is because those — the people that came before us did not despair. They pushed through it. They pushed through it. They lived in spite of, they thrived in spite of, over and over and over again, over the centuries, through generations.

"... The writing that I've done and the reading that I've done has sort of like taught me about the fact that resistance ... has many different forms. And that part of my job, part of doing what I do, in doing that, it is resistance."

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## Humanities Week

Humanities Week events run through Friday evening. Find the full schedule on [the website](#).

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Award-winning author Jesmyn Ward (left) delivered the 2025 Jonathan and Maxine Marshall Distinguished Lecture on Tuesday, Oct. 21, at Armstrong Hall on the Tempe campus during ASU Humanities Week. After, she participated in a fireside chat with Professor Mitchell Jackson (right) from the ASU Department of English. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News