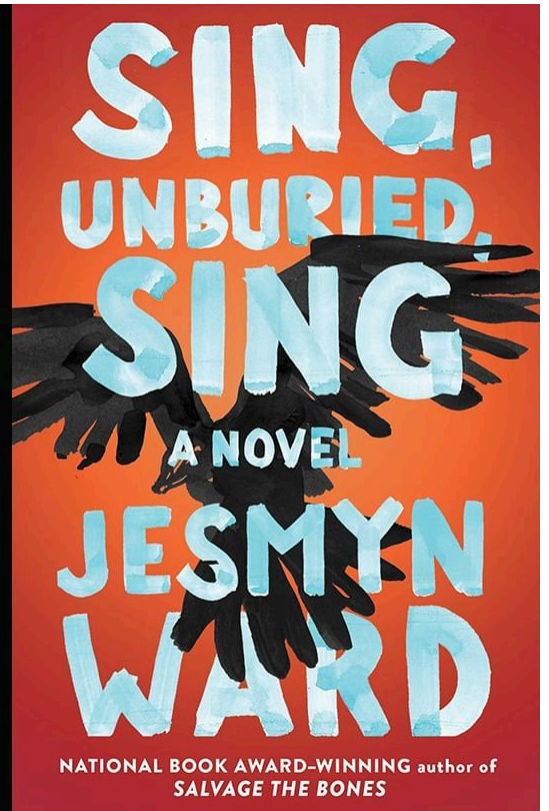
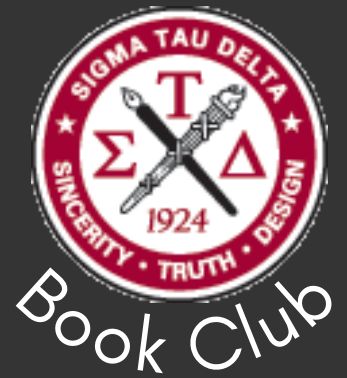


Sing,
Unburied,
Sing

Jesmyn
Ward



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How to use this kit

This kit contains a variety of sheets to be used for discussion. It begins with an introduction to Jesmyn Ward and a discussion of the novel's context to jumpstart book club conversations. Then there are four pages that focus on one theme or element. You can discuss all four or pick which ones you would like to use. Each of these sheets includes discussion questions, interactive activities, and sparks to inspire service-related conversations. At the back of the kit, there is a list of community resources for chapters interested in pursuing service projects related to the collection's themes. Once you've completed your book club experience, don't forget to share it on social media with Sigma Tau Delta!

Introduction

Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) is a powerful, multi-layered story that follows a family in rural Mississippi. The novel focuses on 13-year-old Jojo, his troubled mother Leonie, and the haunting presence of past generations. Bouncing between points of view, we get to read details of events from all perspectives. Exploring the complexities of love, loss, and survival, this novel is notable for its exploration of the enduring legacy of racism in America.

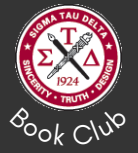
Context

Discussion of the context surrounding the story inside of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, is a great way to dive into the text and the deeper themes, symbols, and motifs. One of the most prominent pieces of contextual history inside of this novel is the presence of Parchman State Penitentiary (or Parchman Farm) and the discussion of racism and slavery in the United States. Keeping that in mind, use these questions to jump start conversations:

1. What do you know about the history of slavery in the United States?
2. Do you know anything about Parchman Farm? What makes this prison so notorious in history?
3. Why do you think Ward would use a real place like Parchman in a fiction novel? Would you say this makes the novel creative non-fiction?
4. If you have read this novel before, how will you read it this time? Are there any themes, symbols, or motifs you plan on looking for?
5. How do the memories of Parchman in the story lend a hand in a pseudo-history lesson for the readers? What do these memories teach us about Parchman and the treatment of the prisoners?
6. Why do you think the character perspective changes each chapter? How does that affect the way the story is told?
7. If you have finished the novel, what was the most impactful part of the story and the history inside? Have any of your views or ideas changed because of the novel?

Sing, Unburied, Sing

Intergenerational Trauma



Introduction

Intergenerational trauma, a main theme in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, explores how the unresolved pain of past generations—particularly related to racial violence and family loss—continues to impact future ones. Ward's characters grapple with this inherited trauma, shaping their identities, relationships, and ability to heal.

Questions

1. How does Jojo's relationship with Pop reflect the weight of inherited trauma?
2. What role do ghosts, such as Richie, play in illustrating the trauma passed down through generations? If you have finished the book, how do you interpret the ending within these contexts?
3. How does Leonie's struggle with addiction relate to her inability to cope with the trauma of her past and the loss of her brother?
4. In what ways do the characters attempt to break the cycle of trauma, and are they successful?

Activities

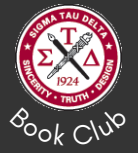
1. Spend a few minutes writing about your own family. How have your ancestors' experiences affected your life today? What have you inherited from them?
2. Use FamilySearch or Ancestry to find information about your ancestors. Consider sharing one thing you learned with each other.

Sparks for Service

1. Which groups in your community may experience intergenerational trauma? What could you do to help?
2. What does breaking the trauma cycle look like in action?

Sing, Unburied, Sing

Family & Parenthood



Introduction

Family and parenthood are central themes in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, as characters navigate complex relationships, love, and neglect. We see the deep bonds between parents and children, while also exploring how trauma and personal struggles can complicate those connections.

Questions

1. How does Leonie's role as a mother differ from her own mother, Mam? What challenges does Leonie face, and how do they impact her parenting?
2. How does Pop's relationship with Jojo serve as a model of fatherhood? What does he provide for Jojo that Leonie cannot?
3. What does Jojo's protective relationship with Kayla reveal about his sense of responsibility and what he believes parenthood should be?
4. How does Michael view parenthood? How might he have gained this view?

Activities

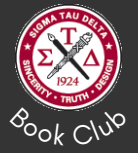
1. Choose a member of your family and write a short poem about them.
2. Write a letter to a parent or family member. Consider giving it to them.

Sparks for Service

1. How do you think your community could better support parents who are struggling, like Leonie, and prevent cycles of neglect and trauma?
2. What resources exist in your community to help families strengthen their bonds, and how could you contribute to making those resources more accessible?

Sing, Unburied, Sing

Stories & Memories



Introduction

Memories and stories are huge parts of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Stories about Parchman are told throughout the book and memories of loved ones are both pleasant reminders of the past and ghosts of unresolved grief and trauma.

Questions

1. We're told that Pop can't seem to tell his stories straight, always the beginning with no end or missing context altogether. Why do you think that is?
2. Jojo recounts stories Pop told him about Richie throughout the novel, did these stories make Richie "real" to Jojo? Or do you think Richie was truly a ghost?
3. Do you think the stories Pop tells about Parchman are a way of coping for him?
4. Why do you think Leonie only "sees" Given when she is using substances?

Activities

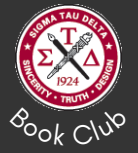
1. Are there any stories passed down in your family? Take a few minutes to write one down--or an outline if it is a longer story.
2. Pick a favorite memory and write it down. What themes, symbols, or motifs do you see in your own memory?

Sparks for Service

1. Are there any assisted living homes near you? Consider volunteering to listen and write down their stories--many of these people may have no one to talk to.
2. Look for ways to shine light on your town's "memories," especially if you are from a small town. Can you work with your local newspaper to do a feature story?

Sing, Unburied, Sing

Illness & Healing



Introduction

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, several of Ward's characters deal with illness and healing, and in some cases, both. Illnesses range from cancer to substance abuse, proving to be challenges for the whole family, and the healing comes from generations of knowledge and freedom from the past.

Questions

1. Substance abuse is a prevalent issue for Leonie and Michael in the novel. What situations do they put Jojo and Kayla in that would have been prevented if substance was not in the picture?
2. Do you see differences in how anxiety manifests in Jojo and Kayla? Think physically and emotionally.
3. Though Leonie did not gain Mam's magic healing abilities, what are other ways she tries to help other characters in the novel?
4. Various "healing" herbs, mixtures, and substances (charcoal) are used in the novel-- can you think of scenes where these items were helpful and when they were unhelpful?

Activities

1. Do you have any experience or interest in healing herbs or medicine? Look online or at local wilderness classes to learn more about what plants can help in a bind.
2. Write letters of encouragement and send them to various healing facilities-- substance abuse, cancer rehabilitation, or even a children's wing of a hospital.

Sparks for Service

1. Are there any resources in your area for those affected by drug addiction? Consider ways to become involved there (volunteer work, advocacy, etc).
2. Are there any local services for cancer patients in your area? Consider ways to become involved.

Community Resources

Exploring the following websites will provide valuable resources for how to better understand many of the issues addressed in contemporary literature. Chapter members should consider the many ways that researching these sites may inspire individual or chapter actions. Remember: no project and no action is too small! Volunteering time and skills is also a valuable resource. Hosting open discussions about issues raised in Book Club is a way of serving individuals, groups, and communities. Service through words is an important part of raising awareness.

NAACP: <https://naacp.org/>

National Parent & Youth Helpline:

<https://nationalparentyouthhelpline.org/>

Narcotics Anonymous: na.org

Nar-Anon Family Groups: <https://www.nar-anon.org>

Alcoholics Anonymous: <https://www.aa.org>

Al-Anon Family Groups: <https://al-anon.org>

National Domestic Violence Hotline: www.thehotline.org

American Cancer Society: <https://www.cancer.org/involved.html>

Ronald McDonald House Charities: <https://rmhc.org/>

St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital: <https://www.stjude.org/get-involved/send-virtual-cards-online-to-childrens-hospital-patients.html>

You might also consult various Literacy Programs and Literacy Councils in your community. Valuable resources can also be found by visiting the websites of some of our Society's sponsors and partners, including:

League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC): lulac.org

Lambda Literary: <https://lambdaliterary.org/>

National Council of Teachers of English/National Center for Literacy Education (NCTE):

<https://ncte.org/contact-us/>