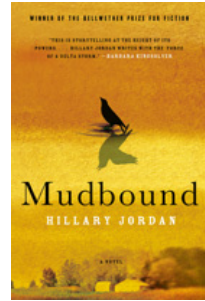


2010 Summer Reading Discussion Questions

Mudbound, by Hillary Jordan



Mike Wade and James Goff, History

The Delta

- James Cobb has called the Mississippi Delta “The Most Southern Place on Earth.” Where and what is the Delta? How does the Mississippi Delta as a place seem to play into the novel geographically and socially?

Historical Context

- How does this particular time (historical moment—the immediate aftermath of World War II) intersect with the previous history (race relations, agriculture) of the Delta?
- In what ways is *Mudbound* concerned with racial etiquette, i.e., the rules (both written and unwritten) about how black people are supposed to behave in the presence of white people? When and why did this concern first manifest itself? What purpose did it serve?
- How do you explain white male fears about miscegenation? When did these fears originate, and why? How do these fears influence white male treatment of women, both black and white? Why are these fears so central to the community’s treatment of Ronsel and, by extension, toward black males generally?

Historical Perspective

- How does Hillary Jordan use fiction to illuminate the immediate postwar history of race relations in the rural South? What does this novel offer to a person seeking a deeper understanding of the Delta’s racial history?
- To what extent do you think this episode in the Mississippi Delta might have been replicated in other regions in the South?

David Bruner, Economics

- The book *Mudbound* takes place during in the American South during the 1940’s. The McAllen family lives on a farm in Mississippi and employs the practice of sharecropping for their agricultural production. For a time, sharecropping was a widely used system of agricultural production in the American South. The system typically assumed the form of a contract between a landowner and a tenant. In exchange for use of the land and a residence, the cropper agrees to give the landowner a share of the crop that is produced. There are several advantages and disadvantages associated with such a system. The following questions deal with these various costs and benefits associated with sharecropping.
- The practice of sharecropping first began in the United States during the Reconstruction era (1865–1877) after the American Civil War. What was the major form of agricultural production before the war? Henry McAllen makes reference to his grandfather’s use of this practice to clear the family land (pg 73). Why would sharecropping become an attractive option for agricultural production after the American Civil War?
- The practice of sharecropping benefits both the cropper and the land-owner. What are the benefits to the cropper? Why would the Jackson family prefer this contingent contract (i.e.

- they pay based on what is produced) over a flat fee (i.e. a wage)? What are the benefits to the land-owner? Why would the McAllen family prefer this contingent contract over a flat fee?
- When Henry McAllen decides to purchase a tractor, he decides to expand his farming to half his land (p. 75). Why does this make sense? Are there any downsides to Henry's use of technology?
 - When Henry McAllen decides which tenants to keep on the farm, after purchasing a tractor, he points out that Hap Jackson is a tenant farmer (pg. 75). What is the difference between a tenant farmer and a sharecropper? Even though Hap is the most productive tenant, why should Henry be concerned that Hap is a tenant farmer? Does Henry face a tradeoff?
 - After Hap breaks his leg, the Jackson family is concerned that Henry McAllen will force them to use his mule (p. 112). The landlord often had a monopoly on farming supplies, forcing tenants to purchase their supplies (like seed, mules, plows, etc.) from their landlord at a price the landlord chose. Furthermore, tenants often had no means of getting their crop to market. Thus, they were forced to sell to their landlords at a price the landlord chose. Hap raised related concerns regarding this issue, that his previous landlord had paid him less than his crop was worth (p. 76). This relationship often resulted in tenants becoming perpetually indebted to their landlords. Does this relationship resemble a previously employed agricultural practice? How so? Discuss how such a relationship resembles slavery and thus served as a close substitute for slavery.

Teresa Johnson, Veterans Affairs

- Laura and her family seem to accept that she will be an "old maid" since, at the novel's beginning, she is 30 years old and not yet married. Discuss how important it seemed for Laura and her family that she may have a potential prospect for a husband in Henry and why.
- Laura's courtship with Henry seems brief. She meets Henry's brother, Jamie, who seems to catch Laura's eye. Jamie leaves town and then Henry leaves for a period of time with his work. Laura doesn't expect to see Henry ever again. Without prior notice, Henry arrives and asks Laura to be his wife. Discuss the social expectations during this era regarding this circumstance. Does Laura "settle" for marriage with Henry? If Laura "settles" for Henry as a husband, why?
- A couple of days prior to her wedding, Laura meets Henry's family and sees Jamie again. There is an implied difference in social class between the two families. Discuss the differences between the two families socially, educationally and politically. Why would Henry's family feel "superior?"
- Laura adjusts to the role of wife and mother. Henry's sister's circumstance is the beginning of many hardships to come for Laura — Pappy's arrival, moving away from her family, unexpectedly not living in town but in a shack on the farm. Laura's acceptance of her circumstances seems to be a strong point in the book. Discuss Laura's role as the "obedient" wife and mother as it relates to the time period. Is Laura deceived by Henry, the man with a good job "in town?" How would she have known they may become farmers in the Delta?
- Laura's father says she is a "fighter" since she survives Rubella as a baby. Laura encounters times when she has to be strong, especially when Henry is away from the farm. Discuss Laura's inner strength when dealing with the Atwoods. What risks does Laura take when she is able to get a doctor for Hap? Discuss the emotions Laura might have felt regarding the loss of her baby. Discuss the fact that drama always seems to happen when Henry is away from the farm. Why would the author want the reader to view Laura's strength in dealing with difficult issues without Henry's assistance?
- Discuss Laura's subtle prejudice and her relationship with Hap and Florence. How does Laura's and Florence's relationship impact Laura's ability to cope with life on the farm?
- Jamie suffers from what we now know is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of his military service in World War II. Laura deals with stress on a daily basis from

- hardships on the farm. What was the catalyst which brings them together as lovers? What is the significance of the “gift” he leaves for her when he leaves *Mudbound* for Hollywood? How does Laura’s carryage of Jamie’s child affect her emotional well-being?
- Laura and Henry finally move away from the farm into a house 10 miles away with running water, electricity and indoor plumbing. Henry still works on the farm each day. Laura survives the hardships on the farm. As she thinks back on all her experiences on the farm, do they seem real to her? How will Laura’s transition from “farm” wife to “house” wife affect her and her relationship with her family?

Bob Gibbard, Academic Advising

- The book *Mudbound* takes place as the veterans of one of the greatest wars this nation has ever fought comes to an end. Many of the returning veterans had never been out of their counties, let alone their states prior to entering the military. In order to pull together a fighting force capable of winning, every bit of available manpower was mobilized. Old conventions and prejudices were seen as obstacles to victory by many. Some, though not all, of the barriers of race and gender were set aside in order to win the war. Individuals were about to experience events that would forever change them and how they saw the world. The following questions deal with the issues facing the military and individuals who fought in faraway lands and returned home.
- The practice of forming race-based units was common throughout the Army during World War II. The exploits of all black units such as the 761st Tank Battalion, the “Black Panthers” in which Ronsel was a member, the all-Japanese decadent 442nd Infantry Regiment and units such as the Tuskegee Airman are well known. Discuss what it might have been like to be a soldier assigned to one of these units. What do you think the individuals in those units thought about their role in the war? What ways did it affect their perceptions of themselves as individuals, either positively or negatively?
- Jamie fights with the Air Force bomber corps, which was largely credited for the destruction of Germany’s ability to feed and supply its war machine. Many missions were flown and many crews and aircraft were shot down. Discuss how Jamie’s war time experience is different from Ronsel’s or his brother Henry’s, who fought in the trenches of World War I. Why does Jamie quickly form a bond with Ronsel, and not his brother, who is also a veteran?
- Many of the young men and woman who left small rural communities to fight in World War II were seeing the world outside for the first time. Many returned from seeing great battles, operating modern war machines, visiting large cities, seeing other cultures, and holding positions of great responsibility. They returned to their home towns to step off buses and trains into communities that had not changed noticeably either physically or culturally over the three or four years they had been gone. Discuss how you might feel in a similar situation as Jamie or Ronsel. Take into account that each character comes very different social, economic and cultural experiences in the American south. Describe what you believe their individual experiences might have been like returning home.
- In 1944, the GI Bill of Rights was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. This provided veterans various benefits, including paying for a college education, creating a housing construction boom for veterans. Although the author doesn’t speak to this specifically in the book, these benefits would have been available to the characters with prior military service. Discuss whether you believe the author wants the reader to have hope that Ronsel obtains a degree from Fisk University, for example, using the GI Bill.

Joseph Bathanti, English

- Why does Hilary Jordan choose to foreground Pappy's death by opening her novel with his burial? How does the overwhelming irony that he ends up sharing his grave with the remains of a black man shed light on the ultimate message of *Mudbound*?
- *Mudbound* won the 2006 Bellwether Prize for Fiction, "in support of a literature of social change." The prize is awarded biennially to a novel that addresses issues of social justice. However, according to prize guidelines, "the mere description of an injustice, or of the personal predicament of an exploited person, without any clear position of social analysis invoked by the writer, does not in itself constitute socially responsible literature." How specifically does Hilary Jordan invoke "a clear position of social analysis?"
- Late in the novel, Jamie lists a number of the Ten Commandments that begin with "Thou shalt not." Then he goes on to say that " ...the Bible's absolute when it comes to most things. It's why I don't believe in God." Within the context of Jordan's portrayal of Jamie throughout the novel—as the prodigal son, if you will—what is at the heart of Jamie's inability to believe in God?
- There are myriad definitions of Southern Literature. A thumbnail profile might be that it is bound up in a common history heavily influenced by slavery and the Civil War, an abiding sense of family and community, an abiding love as well as bondage to the land, an often hardheaded allegiance to fundamentalist Protestantism, ongoing issues of social castes and racial tensions, as well as its own idiosyncratic vernacular and customs. Given this definition, and/or any others that might be collapsed into it, how does *Mudbound* fit into the continuum of Southern Literature?
- Ronsel is a decorated soldier who has willingly risked his life for his country in Europe during World War II. He is a man who also finds true love with a German woman while away at war, and fathers a child with her. Yet, when he returns to America, his patriotism and bravery are of no consequence. He is vilified for his skin color and literally muted because he has dared to romance a white woman. How is Ronsel's silencing a metaphor for the racism that permeates the novel and infiltrates nearly every relationship in the novel? How does Hilary Jordan break that silence with *Mudbound*?