

SUMMER READING STUDY GUIDE

***MUDBOUND* by Hillary Jordan**

About the Author and the Novel:

Hillary Jordan is the author of the novels *Mudbound* (2008) and *When She Woke* (2011), as well as the digital short "Aftermirth," all published by [Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill](#).

Mudbound won the 2006 Bellwether Prize, founded by Barbara Kingsolver to recognize socially conscious fiction, and a 2009 Alex Award from the American Library Association. It was the 2008 NAIBA Fiction Book of the Year and was long-listed for the 2010 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. *Paste Magazine* named it one of the Top Ten Debut Novels of the Decade. In 2010, it was the Freshman Read at Salem College and at Appalachian State University, where Hillary delivered the convocation address. In 2011, it was the "One City, One Story" read for Pasadena, CA and the "Tale for Three Counties" community read in Western New York. *Mudbound* has been translated into French, Italian, Serbian, Swedish and Norwegian.

When She Woke was long-listed for the 2013 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and was a 2012 Lambda Literary Award finalist. It has been translated into French, German, Spanish, Turkish, Brazilian Portuguese and Chinese complex characters.

When she's not scribbling away, Hillary teaches the occasional writing workshop and gives talks at colleges, literary festivals and community libraries. She has a BA from Wellesley College and an MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia University. She grew up in Dallas, TX and Muskogee, OK and currently lives in Brooklyn, along with half the writers in America.

-from Hillary Jordan's website

In the winter of 1946, Henry McAllan moves his wife, Laura, from their comfortable home in Memphis to a remote cotton farm in the Mississippi Delta, a place she finds both foreign and frightening. While Henry works the land he loves, Laura struggles to raise their two young daughters in a rude shack with no indoor plumbing or electricity, under the eye of her hateful, racist father-in-law. When it rains, the waters rise up and swallow the bridge to town, stranding the family in a sea of mud.

As the McAllans are being tested in every way, two celebrated soldiers of World War II return home to the Delta. Jamie McAllan is everything his older brother Henry is not: charming, handsome and sensitive to Laura's plight, but also haunted by his memories of combat. Ronsel Jackson, eldest son of the black tenant farmers who live on the McAllan farm, comes home from fighting the Nazis with the shine of a war hero, only to face far more personal—and dangerous—battles against the ingrained bigotry of his own countrymen. It is the unlikely friendship of these two brothers-in-arms, and the passions they arouse in others, that drive this powerful debut novel.

-from Goodreads.com

Questions for Study (Courtesy of the publisher)

1. The setting of the Mississippi Delta is intrinsic to *Mudbound*. Discuss the ways in which the land functions as a character in the novel and how each of the other characters relates to it.
2. *Mudbound* is a chorus, told in six different voices. How do the changes in perspective affect your understanding of the story? Are all six voices equally sympathetic? Reliable?
3. Who gets to speak and who is silent or silenced is a central theme, the silencing of Ronsel being the most literal and brutal example. Discuss the ways in which this theme plays out for the other characters. For instance, how does Laura's silence about her unhappiness on the farm affect her and her marriage? What are the consequences of Jamie's inability to speak to his family about the horrors he experienced in the war? How does speaking or not speaking confer power or take it away?
4. The story is narrated by two farmers, two wives and mothers, and two soldiers. Compare and contrast the ways in which these parallel characters, black and white, view and experience the world.
5. What is the significance of the title? In what ways are each of the characters bound—by the land, by circumstance, by tradition, by the law, by their own limitations? How much of this binding is inescapable and how much is self-imposed? Which characters are most successful in freeing themselves from what binds them?
6. All the characters are products of their time and place, and instances of racism in the book run from Pappy's outright bigotry to Laura's more subtle prejudice. Would Laura have thought of herself as racist, and if not, why not? How do the racial views of Laura, Jamie, Henry, and Pappy affect your sympathy for them?
7. The novel deals with many thorny issues: racism, sexual politics, infidelity, war. The characters weigh in on these issues, but what about the author? Does she have a discernable perspective, and if so, how does she convey it?
8. We know very early in the book that something terrible is going to befall Ronsel. How does this sense of inevitability affect the story? Jamie makes Ronsel responsible for his own fate, saying, "Maybe that's cowardly of me, making Ronsel's the trigger finger." Is it just cowardice, or is there some truth to what Jamie says? Where would you place the turning point for Ronsel? Who else is complicit in what happens to him, and why?
9. In reflecting on some of the more difficult moral choices made by the characters, are there some moral positions that are absolute, or should we take into account things like time and place when making judgments?
10. Why do you think the author chose to have Ronsel address you, the reader, directly at the end of the book? Do you believe he overcomes the formidable obstacles facing him and finds "something like happiness"? If so, why doesn't the author just say so explicitly? Would a less ambiguous ending have been more or less satisfying?

