

Writing on race, pain and hope in the rural South

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Author Jesmyn Ward, who holds the Gibbons Professorship of English at Tulane, discusses her love for reading and writing, and what she hopes to add to the field with her own stories. Ward gave the 4th Annual Sylvia Frey Lecture on Thursday (March 19). (Photo by Ryan Rivet)

When [Jesmyn Ward](#) spoke it was impossible not to listen. Her voice was deep yet soft and her pauses spoke as much as her words. Ward was discussing her development as a writer during her talk at the [4th Annual Sylvia Frey Lecture](#) at Tulane University on March 19.

To Ward, writing honestly is painful yet essential. She talked about how she faces

the stories of her past through writing.

“I confronted reality in *Men We Reaped*, I think I cried every day writing that novel,” Ward admitted when discussing her writing process. “Besides all the pain in the stories there was something else woven in — beauty. Beauty is what makes me love stories.”

[Ward](#) holds the Paul and Debra Gibbons Professorship of English at Tulane. She is new to the creative writing faculty, and has brought with her a unique writing style to share with her students. In her talk she emphasized that her writing draws on reality for inspiration. Her stories are a blend of fiction and memoir.

“A writer must inhabit the imagination and cultivate it, but a writer must also try to put the real world into the story,” she said.

Ward certainly did this in her book, *Salvage the Bones*, which won the 2011 National Book Award. Shaped by real lives, it is a story about what it means to grow up poor, black and female in the rural South.

“I like to write about social groups that have been marginalized,” she told the Tulane audience, “so those who have marginalized us will see that our lives are as full and rich as theirs.”

Ward discussed how it is at once painful and rewarding to write about such realities. At times she thought about giving up, but she realized her stories needed to be told. She encouraged young writers to keep at their writing as well and to remember that getting published can be a long but rewarding process.

The [New Orleans Center for the Gulf South](#) at Tulane sponsors the annual lecture in honor of Tulane historian Sylvia Frey.

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“Writing requires ingenuity and narrative ruthlessness.” —Jesmyn Ward, author and associate professor of creative writing