

Tulane professor Jesmyn Ward becomes first woman to claim two National Book Awards

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Tulane professor Jesmyn Ward won her second National Book Award with her new book, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, and became the first woman to win the award on multiple occasions. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

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Tulane University's Jesmyn Ward become the first woman to win multiple National Book Awards as her latest novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, was named the 2017 National Book Award winner in fiction on Wednesday night in New York. Ward previously

collected the fiction award in 2011 for her novel *Salvage the Bones*, a gripping family saga that takes place in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The National Book Awards were established in 1936 and re-established in 1950. Since then, eight men have won the fiction award multiple times, including the likes of legendary authors William Faulkner, John Cheever and John Updike. However, no woman had ever received the award more than once until now.

Ward, an associate professor of English, is also the first woman to capture the award since 2012 (Louise Erdrich) and is just one of only 17 women to receive the fiction award in nearly 70 years. Seven women have won the National Book Award in the last 16 years, including Ward twice.

Sing, Unburied, Sing, which critics compared to works by Faulkner and Toni Morrison, was released in September 2017 and chronicles a black family on an odyssey of sorts in rural Mississippi. The story features a 13-year-old boy named Jojo, whose drug-addicted mother takes him and his toddler sister on a road trip to pick up their white father when he is released from prison.

The National Book Award judges called the book “a narrative so beautifully taut and heartbreakingly eloquent that it stops the breath.”

According to *Entertainment Weekly*, Ward spoke frankly and emotionally about the restrictions she’s faced as a female writer of color, and the thrilling change she’s starting to experience.

“Throughout my career, when I have been rejected, there was sometimes subtext, and it was this: People will not read your work because these are not universal stories,” Ward said. “I don’t know whether some doorkeepers felt this way because I wrote about poor people or because I wrote about black people or because I wrote about Southerners. [But] you looked at me, at the people I love and write about, you looked at my poor, my black, my Southern children, women and men — and you saw yourself. You saw your grief, your love, your losses, your regrets, your joy, your hope.”

Last month, Ward received the 2017 MacArthur Fellows “genius grant” from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Ward is the author of five critically acclaimed books, several of which have been reading selections by groups and universities.

A native of DeLisle, Miss., Ward joined Tulane in 2014 and received the Strauss Living Award for literary excellence in 2016 from the Academy of Arts and Letters.