

Jesmyn Ward's new book inspired by Tulane commencement speech

April 16, 2020 8:45 AM Barri Bronston
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Award-winning author Jesmyn Ward, professor of English at Tulane, delivered words to live by at Tulane's 2018 graduation. (Photo by Sally Asher)

"Real success requires step after step after step after step. It requires choice after choice, it demands education and passion and commitment and persistence and hunger and patience."

Those are just a few of the heartfelt words that two-time National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward shared with the 2018 graduating class at Tulane University. And now those very words – along with the rest of her commencement address – are in book form, just in time for the 2020 graduation season.

[“Navigate Your Stars”](#) features stunning art work by acclaimed illustrator Gina Triplett and is described by Scribner, the book’s publisher, as “essential words of wisdom from one of America’s most beloved writers.”

As the nation struggles to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic Ward, a professor of creative writing in the Department of English at Tulane and author of such award-winning novels as “Sing, Unburied, Sing” and “Salvage the Bones,” said she hopes the book “will serve to light the darkness a bit for readers.”

“We are facing so many individual and collective challenges now,” she said. “I hope the book helps people to understand that success can mean many different things to many different people, and that it is important to be flexible, to be generous with yourself and others, to aspire to learn lessons in these lives we've been given.

“And whatever your idea of achievement — whether it is keeping the lights on, getting through another day of isolation, finishing school, writing a novel — be patient. Be kind to yourself. Take a step, know that life delivers challenges, and if you can, persist.”

Persistence is one of the themes of “Navigate Your Stars” as Ward shares the story of her experience as a Southern black woman and all the challenges she and her family faced – and later overcame with tenacity and determination.

“Weather the setbacks until you meet the gatekeeper who will open a door for you,” she writes. “Sometimes you are 20 when you stumble upon an open doorway. Sometimes you are 30. Sometimes you are 40 or 50 or 60. I remembered this when I felt like giving up. When I thought I’d pack all my notebooks and stories into plastic bins and put them away, when I thought I would resign them to the recycling bin.”

Ward’s persistence undoubtedly paid off, as is evidenced by the numerous readers and awards she has amassed over the past decade, including the 2017 National Book Award for “Sing, Unburied, Sing” and the 2011 National Book Award for “Salvage the Bones,” which takes place in the days leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina.

Ward joined the Tulane faculty in 2014 and is currently professor of English in the School of Liberal Arts.

“Jesmyn Ward is one of the most important and compelling writers of fiction working in America today,” said Brian Edwards, dean of the School of Liberal Arts.

“This moving text is destined to be a classic. In form, it takes the form of the graduation address to show us the subtle interplay between individual ambition, persistence and the profound support of community,” said Edwards, who is also a professor of English.

“With its sensitivity to the unpredictability of life, ‘the irrefutable fact of death,’ and Ward’s own powerful narrative about constantly adapting to changed circumstances, this gorgeous address has haunting resonances in our current moment,” he said.

A native of DeLisle, Mississippi, Ward was the first in her family to attend college, earning a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Master of Arts in media studies and communication from Stanford University. In 2005, she received a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from the University of Michigan. That same year she was stranded in a farm field with her family after the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina destroyed their DeLisle home. This experience informed Ward’s first novel “Where the Line Bleeds.”

Though it would win multiple awards and acclaim, including an Essence magazine Book Club Selection, the novel was rejected numerous times by publishers, causing Ward to consider giving up writing to enroll in a nursing program. After “Where the Line Bleeds,” Ward published four more works, including “Men We Reaped” (2013) and “The Fire This Time” (2016). Collectively, the works have earned her a place as one of the nation’s most powerful and eloquent literary voices.

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YOUR STARS



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