

Jesmyn Ward on writing and resilience

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Jesmyn Ward, an associate professor of English at Tulane, talks about her book, *Men We Reaped*, to the incoming class. Each member of the Class of 2019 received a copy of the book from the Tulane Reading Project. "To me, reading was water for my soul," Ward said during the Tulane Reading Project's keynote lecture in Dixon Hall on the uptown campus. (Photo by Guillermo Cabrera-Rojo)

In 2002 Tulane University created the [Tulane Reading Project](#) with the goal of facilitating campuswide dialogue on issues surrounding the university. This year the featured book, *Men We Reaped* by Tulane associate professor of English [Jesmyn Ward](#), not only introduced students to the complexity of world issues discussed in

college classrooms, it also showed them how a community and its members have an interdependent relationship.

In *Men We Reaped*, Ward contrasts the lives, deaths and hardships of five men in her community with her own life, including the obstacles she faced as the only black woman in an all-white school.

"I wanted to insert my writing into the weave of history," said Ward during the Reading Project's keynote, the Kylene and Bradley Beers Lecture, on Wednesday (Sept. 8). She emphasized the importance of a vivid and powerful setting in writing. Her home state of Mississippi is an integral part of her story; to Ward the state is not just a place but an actual presence.

This presence shaped its communities; in turn, those communities shaped people. Her goal as a writer is to help readers understand how people relate to the places they are from and how setting affects a story, Ward said.

The Tulane Reading Project hosted discussion dinners for students to reflect after the lecture and to talk about the book.

"New Orleans is itself resilient; it is an area that has withstood much," one student commented, comparing Ward's writing about her painful past to the city that also faced many hardships.

"In everything I write, I am committed to the truth," said Ward, the recipient of the first Paul and Debra Gibbons Professorship at Tulane, with which, in addition to teaching within the English Department, she works closely with the [New Orleans Center for the Gulf South](#) and the [Newcomb College Institute](#).

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