



The Known World

By Edward P. Jones
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Introduction

Henry Townsend, a black farmer, bootmaker, and former slave, through the surprising twists and unforeseen turns of life in antebellum Virginia, becomes proprietor of his own plantation -- as well as his own slaves. Following his untimely death, Henry's widow Caldonia succumbs to profound grief, and their carefully-maintained plantation starts to come undone: slaves take to escaping under the cover of night, and families who had once found love and loyalty under the weight of slavery begin to betray one another. Beyond the Townsend household, the known world also unravels: low-paid white patrollers stand watch as slave "speculators" sell free black people into slavery, slaves and their masters chafe at the social confines of their relationships, and rumors of slave rebellions set white families against slaves who have served them for years.

The Known World seamlessly weaves the lives of the freed and the enslaved, whites, blacks, and Indians, and allows all of us a deeper understanding of the enduring multidimensional world created by the institution of slavery.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is the character of Moses significant to the novel? How would you characterize his relationship with Henry and Caldonia Townsend? What about with his wife and child?
2. What is the significance of the title, *The Known World*? What "known world" is charted in John Skiffington's map in the jail? What world is charted in The Creation described by Calvin in his letter to his sister Caldonia? What role does the land and its borders play in this book?
3. Who is William Robbins and how does he impact the lives of blacks on neighboring plantations? Did you find his relationships with Henry, Augustus, and Mildred Townsend, and Philomena, Dora, and Louis compelling?
4. What is the significance of the Augustus Townsend character? In what ways is Augustus a victim of attitudes about slavery in the South? In what ways is he a victor? How did you respond to his captivity and its outcome?
5. How would you characterize Jebediah Dickinson? What explains his sudden appearance at the Elston farm? When Fern says of Jebediah: "With him there ... I feel as if I belong to him, that I am his property," what does she mean?
6. Were relationships between parents and children notably different during the era of slavery than in the present day? Consider Caldonia, Calvin, and Maude; William Robbins, Patience, and Dora; and Augustus, Mildred, and Henry in your evaluations.

About the Author

Edward P. Jones was born and raised in Washington, D.C. A recipient of the PEN/Hemingway Award, a Lannan Foundation Grant, and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, Jones was educated at Holy Cross College and earned his MFA at the University of Virginia. He has taught fiction at Princeton University, George Mason University, and the University of Maryland. His first book, *Lost in the City*, was short-listed for the National Book Award. Jones's work has appeared in numerous journals and magazines, including *The Paris Review*, *Essence*, and *Ploughshares*. He lives in Arlington, Virginia.