

## The Death of a Jaybird: Essays on Mothers and Daughters and the Things They Leave Behind

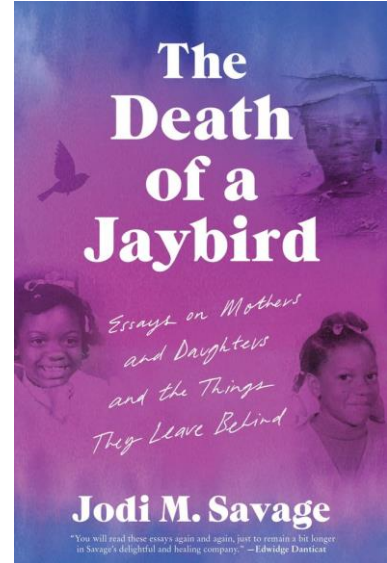
Harper Perennial

By: Jodi M. Savage

ISBN: 9780063276086

### Introduction

Reminiscent of *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Somebody's Daughter*, a deeply empathetic and often humorous collection of essays that explore the author's ever-changing relationships with her grandmother and mother, through sickness and health, as they experience the joys and challenges of Black American womanhood.



Jodi M. Savage was raised in Brooklyn, New York, by her maternal grandmother. Her whip-smart, charismatic mother struggled with addiction and was unable to care for her. Granny—a fiery Pentecostal preacher who had a way with words—was Jodi’s rock, until Alzheimer’s disease turned the tables, and a 28-year-old Jodi stepped into the role of caretaker. It was up to Jodi to get them both through the devastations of a deteriorating mind. After Granny passed away, Jodi spent years trying to reckon with her grief. Jodi and her mother were both diagnosed with breast cancer nearly a decade later, and then Jodi lost her too.

In this searing, candid collection of essays, Jodi illuminates the roles that identity and memory play in preserving those we love. Jodi explores the lives of modern Black women and communities through the prism of her personal experiences. With grace, creativity, and insight, she looks at femininity, family, race, mental illness, grief, healthcare, and faith. Jodi deftly portrays how trauma is inherited, and how the struggle to break a generational curse can last a lifetime.

*The Death of a Jaybird* is a thoughtful examination of complicated family love, loss, and the liberating power of claiming our stories.

### Questions for Discussion

1. In “What If: On Black Lives and Mental Health,” discuss the kinds of experiences Jodi and Granny have with the police after Granny begins experiencing symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease? What kind of encounters do other Black people experiencing psychotic episodes have with the police? How do these encounters differ from Jodi and Granny’s?
2. What do Jodi and Granny’s experiences reveal about how police can improve their interactions with individuals who have a mental illness or diminished mental capacity?
3. Discuss Jodi’s complicated relationship with her Pentecostal upbringing and her evolving faith. How might other Black women and sexual abuse survivors relate to her experiences and perspectives?

4. What role does Granny's Pentecostal faith play in how Jodi grieves after Granny passes away?
5. In "How to Attend a Black Funeral," Jodi writes, "Black folks love pomp and circumstance." Discuss some of the ways Black people honor and celebrate their loved ones at a Black funeral or homegoing.
6. How does Jodi and Cheryl's relationship change after Granny's Alzheimer's disease diagnosis, as Granny is dying, after Granny passes away, and after Jodi's breast cancer diagnosis? How does Cheryl's drug addiction impact the relationship between her and Jodi?
7. What do Jodi, Cheryl, and Granny's relationships teach us about establishing boundaries in familial relationships and second chances?
8. What does the phrase "die the death of a jaybird" mean? What are its origins?
9. Discuss the significance of jaybirds in Southern Black folklore and birds in the Yoruba religion?
10. In "A Laying on of Hands," discuss the significance of hands in healing, prayer, health care, and expressing love and affection.
11. How does Granny honor deceased friends and family members in her writing? Discuss ways of using writing as a way to mourn.
12. What are some examples of how Jodi grieves the loss of Granny and Cheryl before they pass away? How did she process and cope with their illnesses and imminent deaths?
13. How does Cheryl cope with, and prepare for, her imminent death?
14. How is Jodi's grief and anxiety about her breast cancer diagnosis and Cheryl's imminent death represented in her dreams?
15. What documents from Jodi's family archives does she write about? What do these family documents reveal about her family? How do these revelations impact her and her relationships with the women in her family?
16. Granny, Cheryl, and Jodi were all raised by someone other than their mothers. How does this legacy of maternal abandonment and child loss impact: 1) the three women individually; 2) their relationships with their mothers; 3) their relationships with each other; and 4) their relationships with Aunt Jennye and Aunt Lil?
17. Jodi, Cheryl and Granny were all sexually abused as children. How does this trauma impact their relationships with each other, their mothers, and other family members? What do their experiences tell us about how sexual abuse is oftentimes addressed in families?

18. Jodi writes that she does not want to be a mother. What factors and life experiences do you think influenced her decision to remain childfree? What are some societal pressures for women to have children and how does Jodi counter them?
19. In “I’m Not a Slut in the Street,” Jodi writes: “A Black woman’s primary objective when obtaining medical care is to avoid being treated like a slut in the street.” What does she mean by this? What are some challenges and health disparities often experienced by Black patients, particularly Black women, when seeking medical care? What challenges do Jodi and Granny encounter when seeking medical treatment and what role do stereotypes related to race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, religious faith, and other factors play in those medical interactions?
20. What are some things Black people often do to avoid being treated like “a slut in the street” when seeking medical care?
21. Discuss some perceptions about mental illness that exist within the Black community. Do Jodi and Granny share these beliefs? How do their experiences with, and beliefs about, mental illness change over time and why?
22. In “The Things She Left Behind,” how does Jodi’s anticipatory grief and grief after Granny’s death contribute to her hoarding? What is the connection between grief, memory, and hoarding?
23. In “Some Useful Advice for Going to Meet Your Dead Loved One and Other Tragedies,” Jodi writes, “I have never been more aware of my singleness than when Granny was dying.” What experiences made her more aware of her singleness?
24. In “Some Useful Advice for Going to Meet Your Dead Loved One and Other Tragedies,” Jodi quotes an excerpt from June Jordan’s essay “Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan”: “This is the love of women. This is the mighty love that is saving my life.” Like Jordan, Jodi experiences the mighty love of women during her breast cancer journey. How does Jodi’s view of feminism, the Strong Black Woman trope, the need for community, and the importance of female friendships evolve? What influenced her understanding of these concepts and her evolution?
25. How does Jodi demonstrate radical acceptance of the women in her family? How can practicing radical acceptance benefit us and those we love?