

# A WORLD STRANGE, MARVELOUS, AND TERRIBLE

by Hillary Jordan

EDITOR'S NOTE: When Barbara Kingsolver chose *Mudbound* as the winner of the prestigious Bellwether Prize, she was looking to honor a manuscript that spoke to issues of social justice. But what



Hillary Jordan,  
author of  
*Mudbound*

grew up on stories about the farm.

*We got our water from a pump in the front yard. In the wintertime the pump would freeze, and Daddy would thaw it by wrapping it in rags soaked in kerosene and lighting them on fire. . . .*

*"It had a river running through it, and whenever it flooded we'd be stranded. That's how the farm got the name Mudbound. . . ."*

My mother, aunt, and grandmother spoke of it often, laughing and shaking their heads by turns, depending on whether the story in question was funny or horrifying. Often they were both, as southern stories tend to be.

*"One spring our sow birthed her litter too early, and I found the poor piglets lying frozen in a ditch. I put them on a baking sheet and popped them into a warm oven. And do you know, four of those six piglets survived? At least, until they were old enough to be turned into bacon. . . ."*

was foremost in Hillary Jordan's mind as she was writing was to come to terms not just with a moment in Southern history but with her own family history as well.

These stories were a peephole into a strange and marvelous world full of contradictions, and terrible beauty. They revealed things about my family, especially about my grandmother,

who was the heroine of most of them for the simple reason that whenever calamity struck, my grandfather was invariably elsewhere.

My grandmother was not a country girl. She was forced to become one in 1946 when my grandfather decided—without bothering to consult her beforehand—to move the family from Dallas to a farm in Podunk, Arkansas. Like Henry in *Mudbound*, he wanted to be near his recently widowed sister, whose husband had committed suicide. And, too, my grandfather yearned to be a farmer. He was a native Mississippian; reverence for the land was bred into his bones.

My grandmother had never seen the property, and she arrived to discover that she would be rearing her two small children in

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a shotgun shack fifteen miles from town, with no electricity, telephone, or running water. But Nana was a woman of her time, obedient to her husband's wishes, and so she made the best of it. My grandfather's brother came to live with them, followed by her cantankerous father-in-law, and she cooked and cleaned uncomplainingly for all of them. Like Laura in the novel, Nana was a singer, and the songs she sang were indicative of her mood. "Rock of Ages" was a frequent refrain on the farm, and—when things got really bad—"Were You There When They Crucified My Lord."

To my mother and aunt, their year on the farm was a grand adventure, and indeed, that was how all their stories portrayed it. It was not until I was in my

thirties that I realized what an ordeal that year must have been, and that, in fact, these were stories of survival.

I began the book (without knowing I was doing any such thing) in graduate school. I had an assignment to write in the voice of a family member, and I decided to write about the farm from Nana's point of view. But what came out was not a merry adventure story, but something darker and more complex. What came out was, "When I think of the farm, I think of mud," which was not my grandmother's voice at all. That realization liberated me to write fiction rather than fact.

As the story grew, I began to want other perspectives. My grandparents had black sharecroppers on the farm and a black maid who helped with the housework. They were usually in the background of the stories, where Afri-

can Americans in the Jim Crow South were thought to belong. My grandparents were products of that time and place; their racism was deeply ingrained. They said "colored," "nigra," and occasionally, "nigger." And yet, they were good people, kind and bighearted. Nana was a devout Christian. That contradiction—the entrenched bigotry of otherwise good people—is a key underpinning of *Mudbound*.

I decided to move the black characters to the foreground, to let them answer the ugliness of Jim Crow in their own voices. I was, frankly, a little afraid. I knew I would be excoriated (and rightly so) if I got it wrong. A number of well-meaning colleagues said things to me like, "You know, even Faulkner didn't

write about black people in the first person." But ultimately, I decided that letting my African American characters speak was the only way to give them a small measure of justice.

My grandparents are long dead, as are the sharecroppers who worked for them. I often wonder what they all would have thought of the story I made from their stories. Certainly Nana would have been horrified by the idea of committing adultery with her brother-in-law; Pappy, who by all accounts *was* a bigoted jerk, would not have appreciated being killed off for it; and my black characters would undoubtedly have wanted to set me straight about a few things. But my hope is that all of them would be proud that I was so captivated by their stories that I had to retell them, and pleased that I've painted a lasting, if fictional, picture of their world. ■

*"I loved listening to these stories. They were a peephole into a strange and marvelous world, a world full of contradictions, of terrible beauty."*

—HILLARY JORDAN