
The Known World by Edward P. Jones

Personal Information: Born October 5, 1950. Education: Attended College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, and University of Virginia. Addresses: Home: 4300 Old Dominion Drive, No. 914, Arlington, VA 22207.

Career: Fiction writer. Columnist for Tax Notes.

Awards: National Book Award finalist, and Ernest Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, both 1992, both for *Lost in the City*; Lannan Foundation Literary Award and fellowship, 2003; National Book Award nomination for fiction, 2003, and National Book Critics Circle award, and Pulitzer Prize for fiction, both 2004, all for *The Known World*; O. Henry Prize, 2005, for the short story "A Rich Man."

"Sidelights"

Called "a poignant and promising first effort" by Publishers Weekly, Edward P. Jones's first book, *Lost in the City*, was greeted with critical and popular acclaim. The work was nominated for the 1992 National Book Award, an honor last granted to a short-story collection six years earlier. The appeal of the fourteen-story collection lies in the realness of the people and the experiences that Jones presents. Each of the stories profiles African-American life in Washington, D.C. The characters are all lost in the nation's capital, some literally, others figuratively. They are black working-class men and women who struggle to preserve their families, communities, neighborhoods, and themselves amid drugs, violence, divorce, and other crises. Jones's assortment of characters include a mother whose son buys her a new home with drug money, a husband who repeatedly stabs his wife as their children sleep, and a girl who watches her pigeons fly from her home after their cages are destroyed by rats. They are all stories that "affirm humanity as only good literature can," remarked Michael Harris in the Los Angeles Times Book Review. "There's no secret to it, or only the final, most elusive secret: Jones has near-perfect pitch for people. . . . Whoever they are, he reveals them to us from the inside out."

Washington Post writer Mary Ann French noted that in *Lost in the City* Jones "creates sympathy through understanding--a sadly needed service that is too seldom performed." Washington Post Book World reviewer Jonathan Yardley commented that the assembled stories are set in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, "so there is little sense of the drug-and-crime haunted place that the inner city has become." Nevertheless, Yardley added, "danger and death are never far in the background." While the stories usually convey a sense of hope despite some bleak settings and horrible events, "Jones is no sentimentalist," according to the critic. Rather, he is "a lucid, appealing writer. He puts on no airs, tells his stories matter-of-factly and forthrightly, yet his prose is distinctive and carries more weight than first impressions might suggest."

The Known World, Jones's first novel and second published book, generated even more critical acclaim than his short-story collection. In 2004 the work won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle award for fiction, both on the heels of a National Book Award for fiction nomination in 2003. *The Known World* begins with the antebellum story of African-American Henry Townsend, a farmer, bootmaker, and former slave. Townsend, an intelligent man with a fondness for John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, has taken an unusual adviser: William Robbins, a powerful man residing in Manchester County, Virginia. Under Robbins's guidance, Townsend rises economically to become a landowner and, ironically, a slave owner. When he dies, his widow, Caldonia, cannot carry on alone and things at the Townsend plantation begin to deteriorate: slaves run off in the night, and families with once-strong bonds start to turn on one another. Outside the farm, everything else, in other words, "the known world," is falling apart, too: free black people are sold into slavery and rumors of slave rebellions circulate widely, setting white families on edge and destroying their trust in the blacks who have worked for them for years.

The Known World by Edward P. Jones

According to Champ Clark, writing in *People*, readers of *The Known World* “will be rewarded many times over by Jones’s masterful ability to convey even the most despicable aspects of the nation’s history with humanity and poetic language.” In *Booklist*, Vanessa Bush described the novel as “a profoundly beautiful and insightful look at American slavery and human nature.” “Jones moves back and forth in time,” she explained, “making the reader omniscient, knowing what will eventually befall the characters despite their best and worst efforts, their aspirations and their moral failings.” *Newsweek* reviewer Susannah Meadows was less enthusiastic about the novel, writing that while “The human mystery that drives the narrative is the question of how a freed man could own another, . . . Jones never quite solves the puzzle of Henry’s odd spiritual kinship with his former master.” Mark Harris, reviewing the book for *Entertainment Weekly*, cited the “difficulty and occasional randomness of Jones’s storytelling.” This “doesn’t seem accidental,” Harris maintained. Jones “is writing about a landscape in which families, identities, and the very notion of self can be destroyed in the course of a casual business transaction--and he doesn’t want you to get too comfortable tracing a single life across a tidy narrative line.”

In an interview with Robert Fleming of *Publishers Weekly*, Jones explained his use of a dispassionate voice when describing the brutal episodes that take place in *The Known World* by noting that he wanted “to highlight the inhumanity of the whole situation of slavery.” “I didn’t want to preach,” he added. “It was my goal to be objective, to not put a lot of emotion into this, to show it all in a matter-of-fact manner. But still I knew I was singing to the choir. In a case like this, you don’t raise your voice, you just state the case and that is more than enough.”

Sarah Anne Johnson, in an interview with Jones for *the Writer*, asked the author where he found his inspiration for *The Known World*. “You just wake up one morning with some image or some words in your head, and you go from there,” Jones replied. “The first thing that set me off with *The Known World* was the image of Henry Townsend on his deathbed in the first few pages. You have to figure out how he got to be in the bed and who’s in the room with him. Then you branch out further and further until finally you have all the pages that are in the book right now.”

Despite praising Jones’s award-winning novel, several critics have noted that *The Known World* is not an easy read. A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* described the first hundred pages as “daunting,” saying, “The reader struggles to sort out initially quickly glimpsed characters and absorb Jones’s handling of historical background information.” But then the novel gains “overpowering momentum,” the critic added, and becomes “a harrowing tale that scarcely ever raises its voice.” “By focusing on an African-American slaveholder,” Edward B. St. John noted in *Library Journal*, “Jones forcefully demonstrates how institutionalized slavery jeopardized all levels of civilized society so that no one was really free.” The novel, St. John continued, is “a fascinating look at a painful theme.” “Everyone in *The Known World* exhibits good, bad, and every other shade of humanity inside their actions,” added Carroll Parrott Blue in *Black Issues Book Review*. “Jones uses his hard-won mastery of craft to gently entice us to stare directly into the face of our universally human quest for freedom.”

WRITINGS

- *Lost in the City* (short stories), photographs by Amos Chan, Morrow (New York, NY), 1992.
- *The Known World, Amistad* (New York, NY), 2003.
- *All Aunt Hagar’s Children* (short stories), HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor of short fiction to periodicals, including the *New Yorker*.

The Known World
by Edward P. Jones

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS

- Contemporary Literary Criticism, Yearbook 1992, Volume 76, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1992.

PERIODICALS

- Black Issues Book Review, November-December, 2003, Carroll Parrott Blue, review of The Known World, p. 50.
- Booklist, September 15, 2003, Vanessa Bush, review of The Known World, p. 211.
- Entertainment Weekly, August 22, 2003, Mark Harris, review of The Known World, p. 134.
- Kirkus Reviews, July 15, 2003, review of The Known World, p. 928.
- Library Journal, August, 2003, Edward B. St. John, review of The Known World, p. 131.
- Los Angeles Times Book Review, July 12, 1992, p. 6.
- Newsweek, September 8, 2003, Susannah Meadows, review of The Known World, p. 57.
- New York Times, June 11, 1992, p. C18; August 23, 1992, section 7, p. 16.
- People, September 29, 2003, Champ Clark, review of The Known World, p. 45.
- Publishers Weekly, March 23, 1992, p. 59; August 11, 2003, Robert Fleming, interview with Jones, p. 254.
- Washington Post, July 22, 1992, pp. G1, G4; October 6, 1992, p. B4.
- Washington Post Book World, June 21, 1992, p. 3.
- Writer, August, 2004, Sarah Anne Johnson, interview with Jones, p. 20.

Source:

Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2006.