

## Books Across the Miles (BAM!) Discussion Questions

The votes are in! The next “Books Across the Miles” selection is the memoir *Men We Reaped* by Jesmyn Ward. You should receive this book in January. If you haven’t already.

In five years, Jesmyn Ward lost five young men in her life—to drugs, accidents, suicide, and the bad luck that can follow people who live in poverty, particularly Black men. Dealing with these losses, one after another, made Jesmyn ask the question: Why? And as she began to write about the experience of living through all the dying, she realized the truth—and it took her breath away. Her brother and her friends all died because of who they were and where they were from.

Here are some discussion questions to think about while you read:

1. The title “Men We Reaped” comes from a quote by Harriet Tubman that is at the beginning of the book. Why do you think the author chose this title? What does it mean to you? [To **reap** means to gather (a crop), to harvest, to bring in, to receive]
2. When Jesmyn looks at the memorial t-shirt for Rog, many things about it trouble her. What are your thoughts on this tradition? Have you ever been bothered by the way someone was remembered or memorialized?
3. What were some of the stories of Jesmyn’s childhood that she chooses to detail in the book and why do you think she shares them? If you were writing a memoir, what is one key scene from your life that you would include? Why?
4. What role do alcohol and drugs play in the lives of Jesmyn and her sisters and their friends? How can a person know if they are self-medicating? Do you think they all knew, or was it only later, as Jesmyn looks back? (see page 68) [**Self-medicating** is an attempt to alleviate the emotional pain of depression, anxiety, grief, or other mental health issues, without the supervision of a medical professional through the use of drugs and/or alcohol]
5. How are the lives and the roles of men and women different in DeLisle, Mississippi? What explanation does Jesmyn come up with for the reason the men in her community were womanizers? (See pages 83-84) Do you agree with her? If not, what are the reasons you think men become womanizers? What is a womanizer?

Next Issue's Theme: **Healing** (Volume 8, Issue 2)

For the next issue, we're going to be reflecting on what it means to **heal**—physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually...all forms of healing. I recently learned about an idea called **moral injury** that refers to the way a person's conscience (their sense of right and wrong) can be injured after a traumatic experience. I read about this in an article about military veterans experiencing moral injury after serving in war. When we've experienced a physical injury, we go to a doctor. But what about other kinds of injuries? Injuries to our mind, heart, or spirit? In what ways do you heal yourself from emotional wounds (incarceration, loss of a loved one, breakup of a relationship, experiencing traumatic events)? Some people meditate, some people exercise, some people talk it through with other people, some people read, write, or create art. Have you been part of helping someone to heal their emotional wounds? If so, can you describe the experience? Do you have any suggestions for how we as a society can heal ourselves and each other?

Send us a poem or essay of your own, or try our prompts!

**A Walk By Myself With My Own Thoughts**

by \_\_\_\_\_

Today, I took a walk with my thoughts  
To get to know myself  
And I asked my body and mind  
about its aches and pains.  
Physical afflictions and emotional pain  
are things we all feel,  
Instead of ignoring the hurt,  
we must confront what makes us ill

(an idea, person, thing, place...)

My body told me \_\_\_\_\_ is giving me pain  
But don't worry because the cure is \_\_\_\_\_

(an action, activity, a person, place...)

A person starts to heal by \_\_\_\_\_

I can heal from my wounds by \_\_\_\_\_

My medicine is \_\_\_\_\_

My medicine \_\_\_\_\_

When I am not able to heal, I \_\_\_\_\_

Because I know that \_\_\_\_\_

Now that I know what I have to do,  
I can help others, too, by \_\_\_\_\_

The world can help me to heal by \_\_\_\_\_

I can help the world heal by \_\_\_\_\_

**My Mind is a Rainbow**

by \_\_\_\_\_

My mind is a brilliant place  
filled with all the colors of the rainbow  
even if I don't always show them on my face

Today, my thoughts are \_\_\_\_\_ (choose a color)  
\_\_\_\_\_ (color) thoughts feel like \_\_\_\_\_  
These thoughts sound like " \_\_\_\_\_ "  
When I have \_\_\_\_\_ (color) thoughts, I \_\_\_\_\_

But tomorrow, my thoughts might be \_\_\_\_\_ (color)  
\_\_\_\_\_ (color) thoughts are like \_\_\_\_\_  
These thoughts feel like \_\_\_\_\_  
These thoughts sound like " \_\_\_\_\_ "

I have \_\_\_\_\_ (color) thoughts when I think about \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (color) thoughts make me feel \_\_\_\_\_

I have \_\_\_\_\_ (color) thoughts when I think about \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (color) thoughts make me feel \_\_\_\_\_

I wish I had more \_\_\_\_\_ (color) thoughts  
Those \_\_\_\_\_ (color) thoughts are like \_\_\_\_\_  
Those thoughts make me want to \_\_\_\_\_  
Those thoughts sound like " \_\_\_\_\_ "  
Those thoughts \_\_\_\_\_

But I accept that my mind is a brilliant place  
filled with all the colors of the rainbow  
each one with a special role to play

**Example:**  
*Today, my thoughts are brown.  
Brown thoughts feel like bad coffee,  
bitter and burnt.  
These thoughts sound hopeless.  
When I have brown thoughts, I add milk  
and sugar to make everything better.*

**Another prompt instead:** Imagine that each of your thoughts and feelings is a different color. What colors match each one of your feelings? Why do those colors represent those thoughts and feelings? What colors do you want to see more of? What colors do you have too much of? Write a poem using the ideas you come up with.