

DISCUSSION GUIDE

- 1 The title *Men We Reaped* comes from a Harriet Tubman quote, which opens the book. Tubman was reflecting on the battle between the Union Army's 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry and Confederate forces in 1863. The battle devastated the black military unit from Massachusetts. Tubman stated:

We saw the lightning and that was the guns and then we heard the thunder and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped.

Consider the quote's relevance to Ward's memoir. How does the book's title convey themes of loss, inequality, and community in the book? *

- 2 The memoir chronicles the deaths of five young men: Roger, Demond, C. J., Ronald, and Joshua. What do these five tragedies have in common? What are the differences among them? What do these deaths say about the experience of black masculinity today? *
- 3 Artist **Doris Salcedo**'s artwork tells stories to recognize people who have been lost to violence and war. If her sculptures of chairs are a memorial to someone (or some persons) now lost, what part of their memory is kept by this work? How is the trauma that inspired the work translated in the artist's art making process? What other trauma(s) might be captured in this work?

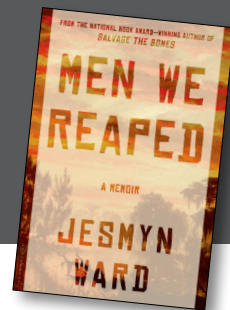


- 4 Consider the intricate structure of *Men We Reaped*, which commemorates the men in reverse order of their deaths, from 2004 to 2000, while also relaying the story of the author's upbringing. What happens when "the past and the future meet" in Ward's final chapter? What is the effect of delaying this initial experience of loss until the end of the memoir? *

Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 2004-2005. Stainless steel. Gift of Barbara Lee, The Barbara Lee Collection of Art by Women. Courtesy Alexander & Bonin. Photo by Charles Mayer. © Doris Salcedo

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5 Artist **Josiah McElheny**'s hypnotic, reflective sculpture at the ICA encourages viewers to consider a spectacle of infinitely reflecting perfectly composed forms—a world without individuality or flaws. What are the limits of this kind of utopia in art, life and literature? Why does the viewer struggle to see their own reflection in this mirror construction? How do we understand a work of visual art or literature when we are not reflected in it? In what ways does the past intersect with the present in this work and how does it connect with *Men We Reaped*'s own construction?

6 Cornelia Parker's *Wedding Ring Drawing*, on view at the ICA, is one in a series of *Wire Drawings* made by mounting spools of "drawn" wire, in this case deconstructed wedding rings, between pieces of glass. To whom might these wedding rings have belonged? What new narrative is created when the artist transforms and displays rings in this way?

7 Discuss the setting of DeLisle, Mississippi, originally named "Wolf Town" by its early settlers. What wolf-like wildness persists in DeLisle, even today? How does Ward bring the sights, sounds, smells, and despairs of DeLisle to life?*

8 Look at one of **Walid Raad**'s artworks on view at the ICA from the series *Secrets in the Open Sea* and determine the subject of the photograph. Who or what is being represented? How does the story that accompanies the work influence our interpretation?

9 Discuss the gender roles that men and women play in Ward's family and community. What are some of the freedoms—and risks—of being a black man in Mississippi? What are the unique challenges of being a girl, a woman, a wife, and a mother in this community? How do the men and women in Ward's life fight and succumb to these gender roles?*

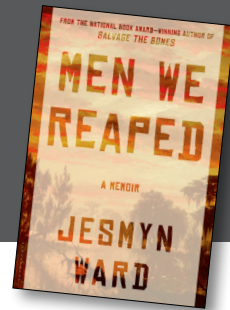
10 Although Ward confronted overt racism at school every day, "Joshua faced a different kind of racism, a systemic kind." Compare the two siblings' experiences of discrimination during their school years. What survival mechanisms did each child develop in order to ward off these types of racism?*



Josiah McElheny, *Czech Modernism Mirrored and Reflected Infinitely*, 2005. Mirrored glass case with hand-blown mirrored glass objects. Purchased through funds provided by Bridgitt and Bruce Evans, Kimberly and James Pallotta, Beth and Anthony Terrana, and Nancy B. Tieken in honor of Jill Medvedow. © 2016 Josiah McElheny

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- 11 Revisit the story of Joshua's death in 2000. What regrets does Ward still have about her final conversations with her brother? What injustices followed Joshua's death, and how did Ward's family and community cope with their grief and anger?*
- 12 Ward writes, "I thought being unwanted and abandoned and persecuted was the legacy of a poor southern Black woman. But as an adult, I see my mother's legacy anew." Compare both ways of evaluating Ward's mother's life: as a series of burdens, and as a series of victories over those burdens. How has Ward made peace with her mother's legacy? What maternal lessons does Ward hope to pass along to her own young daughter?*
- 13 Ruminating on what Joshua's life is worth, Ward writes, "It is worth more than I can say. And there's my dilemma, because all I can do in the end is say." Discuss the conflict between silence and speech in *Men We Reaped*. When have words failed Ward? In what ways are words inadequate in measuring her losses? How might writing this memoir have helped Ward combat feelings of inadequacy in the face of loss? How can art, visual art in particular, continue to speak when words fall short?*
- 14 Agreed-upon facts and events make up our history and our collective memory—powerful narratives that bind people together while imposing a sense of order on the past. Whose responsibility is it to tell history, to choose which facts and events to include—or leave out? What are the histories that have not yet been told? How can people with opposite points of view share a collective history?
- 15 What can be the role of art and artists in creating and sharing history?

This discussion guide was developed by the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. Questions identified with * are adapted from a discussion guide created by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. Additional questions can be located on [Bloomsbury.com](https://www.bloomsbury.com)

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