

1. “China’s turned on herself. If I didn’t know, I would think she was trying to eat her paws. I would think that she was crazy. Which she is, in a way. Won’t let nobody touch her but Skeet. When she was a big-headed pit bull puppy, she stole all the shoes in the house, all our black tennis shoes Mama bought because they hide dirt and hold up until they’re beaten soft. Only Mama’s forgotten sandals, thin-heeled and tinted pink with so much red mud seeped into them, looked different. China hid them all under furniture, behind the toilet, stacked them in piles and slept on them. When the dog was old enough to run and trip down the steps on her own, she took the shoes outside, put them in shallow ditches under the house. She’d stand rigid as a pine when we tried to take them away from her. Now China is giving like she once took away, bestowing where she once stole. She is birthing puppies.

What China is doing is nothing like what Mama did when she had my youngest brother, Junior. Mama gave birth in the house she bore all of us in, here in this gap in the woods her father cleared and built on that we now call the Pit. Me, the only girl and the youngest at eight, was of no help, although Daddy said she told him she didn’t need any help. Daddy said that Randall and Skeetah and me came fast, that Mama had all of us in her bed, under her own bare burning bulb, so when it was time for Junior, she thought she could do the same. It didn’t work that way. Mama squatted, screamed toward the end. Junior came out purple and blue as a hydrangea: Mama’s last flower. She touched Junior just like that when Daddy held him over her: lightly with her fingertips, like she was afraid she’d knock the pollen from him, spoil the bloom. She said she didn’t want to go to the hospital. Daddy dragged her from the bed to his truck, trailing her blood, and we never saw her again.”

Wow! What an opening. These are the first two paragraphs in *Salvage the Bones*. Let’s talk about how this opening sets the scene for the rest of the book. You have read the story, but from just these two paragraphs, what would you deduce. Who are they? Where do they live? How much money do they have? How well educated are they?

2. There are three main female characters in *Salvage the Bones*: Esch, China, and Mama. Only one of them is a living human. What do you think of this as a literary device? Do you think the fact that Esch’s mother had already died and China is a dog softens the tragedy that occurs to both?
3. Speaking of tragedy. Did you look up the references about Medea? The story of Medea is considered a Greek tragedy. According to Aristotle, a Greek tragedy “is a drama which depicts the downfall of a basically good person through some fatal **error** or misjudgment, producing suffering and insight on the part of the **protagonist** and arousing pity and **fear** on the part of the audience.” Do you think Jesmyn Ward wrote a modern day Greek tragedy?
 - What error or misjudgment did each of the three main female characters make?
 - In this sort of tragedy, the protagonist usually has a fault or flaw that leads to their downfall. Do you think Esch had a serious flaw or fault? Do you think Esch suffers because of a fatal error or mismanagement?
 - China was also a central character; do you think China had a flaw? Let’s assume China’s flaw is her unwavering love for Skeetah. Do you think Esch’s main flaw could be characterized as unwavering love for Manny (at least for most of the story)?

- Did Esch suffer? Did she gain insight?
 - Did you feel pity or fear for her?
 - How did Esch's family react to her pregnancy?
4. Greek tragedies end with a tragedy. Medea kills her children to get revenge on Jason. Is the ending a tragedy, happy, sad, or a mix? In an interview, Ward said that one of the characters represents Medea. Which one do you think it is and why?
 5. It sounds like Ward wrote a Greek tragedy, doesn't it? Or did she? A quest is a story where the hero searches (quests) for something. Usually the hero leaves home. It seems that Esch is on a quest to feel loved. Does she find it?
 6. How does what Esch is going through compare to what is happening with Hurricane Katrina?
 7. A foil is a character who contrasts with another character. What character is the foil to Esch? Is she important to the story? Does this character affect the outcome?
 8. What male character did you find the most compelling? Why?
 9. What do you think of Big Henry?
 10. Here are two short articles that are worth reading either after or before reading *Salvage the Bones*.
 - http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_medea.html
 - <https://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Mortals/Medea/medea.html>