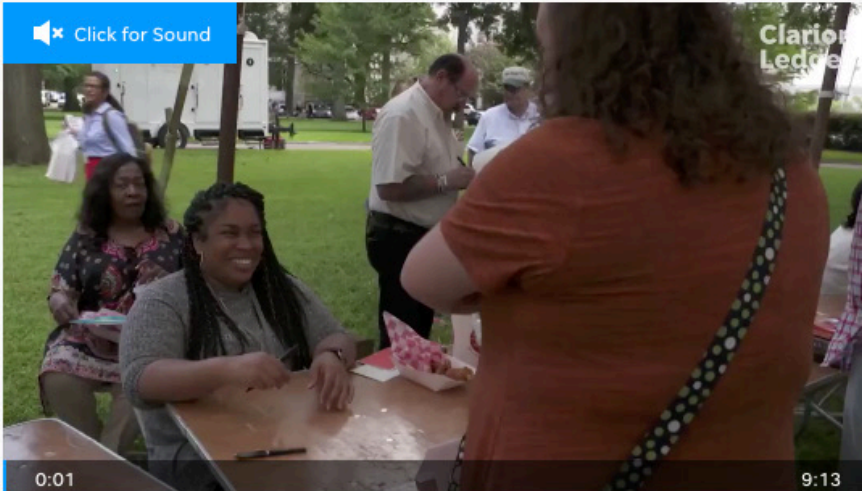


## Jesmyn Ward, Salman Rushdie draw large crowds at Mississippi Book Festival

Emily Wagster Pettus, Associated Press Published 6:52 p.m. CT Aug. 18, 2018 | Updated 8:12 p.m. CT Aug. 19, 2018



Author Angie Thomas at the Mississippi Book Festival. Council for Christian Colleges & Universities



(Photo: Rogelio V. Solis, AP)

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JACKSON, Miss. — National Book Award winner Jesmyn Ward told a home-state audience in Mississippi on Saturday that she's working on two books.

One is a New Orleans-based story about the slave trade. The other is a young adult novel about an African-American girl with supernatural powers.

Ward and another acclaimed author, Salman Rushdie, attracted large audiences at the fourth Mississippi Book Festival. During sessions inside the state Capitol and at a church nearby, dozens of authors spoke on a wide range of topics, including food, sports, politics and civil rights history.

Ward returned home years ago to live and write in the small community of DeLisle (deh-LILL) on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where her family has had roots for generations. The two novels for which she won the National Book Award, "Salvage the Bones" in 2011 and "Sing, Unburied, Sing" in 2017, are set among the bayous and sturdy live oaks of the region.

"Sing, Unburied, Sing," is centered on a family's odyssey to pick up a relative from prison. In writing the novel, Ward said she did research and learned that, decades ago, boys as young as 12 or 13 years old were sent to the notorious Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman for minor offenses.

"The pain that they had suffered had basically been erased," she said.

She said a "school-to-prison pipeline" echoes that situation today.

Ward teaches creative writing at Tulane University in New Orleans. She said she came upon the idea of writing about the slave trade while driving and listening to a public radio report about the city's tricentennial. An historian said there were once dozens of "slave pens" in New Orleans where black people were held until being sold.

"I felt like all the misery that the enslaved people had endured ... that had all been erased in some way," Ward said. "And so I thought, 'I have to write something about this.'"



### Mississippi Book Festival 2018: Humor, politics and big-name authors

Rushdie, born in India and educated in England, won the 1981 Man Booker Prize for his novel "Midnight's Children."

Rushdie recalled once having lunch in London with writer Eudora Welty, who invited him to visit her in at her home in Jackson, Mississippi. She died in 2001, but Rushdie started Saturday by saying, lightheartedly: "Here I am, Eudora."

A collection of Welty's autobiographical work was once published as "One Writer's Beginnings." Rushdie, who was brought to the book festival by the Eudora Welty Foundation, spoke about his own beginning as a writer.

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Before publishing a novel, Rushdie worked for a London advertising agency, writing commercials for cat food and cigarettes. He said he has four unpublished texts from his early years as a serious writer.

"I am now immensely grateful that those texts did not get published," Rushdie said. "They really were awful."

