

# Washing the Wounds

This novel draws upon the 1927 Mississippi River flood and the death of Emmett Till.

BY JESMYN WARD

NOVELISTS writing about traumatic historical moments face a particular challenge: how to bring the event to immediate, visceral life without overpowering the characters or their experiences. In "Gathering of Waters," her eighth novel, Bernice L. McFadden recreates not just the Mississippi flood of 1927 (one of the most destructive ever in the United States) but also the brutal mur-

## GATHERING OF WATERS

By Bernice L. McFadden.  
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der of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955. It would be easy for her characters to recede in the glare of these events, but McFadden works a kind of miracle — not only do they retain their appealing humanity; their story eclipses the bonds of history to offer continuous surprises.

"Gathering of Waters" opens in the

Jesmyn Ward's most recent novel, "Salvage the Bones," won the 2011 National Book Award for fiction.

early 20th century in Oklahoma, with a girl named Doll possessed by the spirit of a dead woman. But after an unsuccessful exorcism and a decision by Doll's mother to put her up for adoption, the story shifts to Money, Miss., where Doll grows up under the influence of the bitter, vengeful spirit that inhabits her. She steals, she has sex with near strangers and she eventually gives birth to a daughter who comes to despise her. After the flood of 1927, the novel's attentions jump to that daughter, Hemmingway, just until her own daughter, Tass, falls in love with Emmett Till during the summer he will die. Then the story follows Tass, who marries and moves to Detroit with Emmett's spirit at her heels.

McFadden makes some unconventional choices, but she pulls them off. The town of Money itself narrates the novel, providing a roving, close perspective and complementing the book's magic realism, its premise that matter is finite and spirit eternal. "For a time I lived as a beating heart, another life found me swimming upstream toward a home nestled in my memory," Money says. "Once I was a language that died." In this world, spirit lives in an object until its host dies or grows useless, then it moves on. The diction



Money uses to describe spirit is beautiful and evocative, in contrast to the spare, urgent voice elsewhere, as in this description of the flood: "At the church, someone looked down and saw that water was rising up through the seams of the floorboards. Another member spied it seeping in from beneath the door. The choir continued to sing."

"Gathering of Waters" isn't long, but it brings three generations urgently to life. Doll is irascible and voracious, untrustworthy and sometimes surprisingly vulnerable, while Hemmingway is her polar opposite: respectable, upstanding and aloof, even with her own daughter. Tass is the novel's most tender character. Although she marries and has many children, she remains naïve and compassion-

ate, traits that draw Emmett's spirit to her in death as in life. Indeed, McFadden's conception of Emmett is very human — here, the boy sheds the pall of his death, the history of slavery and segregation and cultures and continents colliding that coalesced at the moment of his murder and burned and blazed and could not be contained afterward, and instead, assumes the identity of the adolescent he might have been: funny, sensitive, rakish and, in the end, devoted.

This is where the real power of the narrative lies: not in the Mississippi River flooding 23,000 square miles, killing some 250 people in April 1927, and not in the awful, brutal death of a boy who later became a symbol of the civil rights movement, but in the richness and complexity of the characters, of the women of the Hilson family and the men, Emmett among them, who love them. While they inhabit these pages they live, and they do so gloriously and messily and magically, so that we are at last sorry to see them go, and we sit with those small moments we had with them and worry over them, enchanted, until they become something like our own memories, dimmed by time, but alive with the ghosts of the past, and burning with spirits. □

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