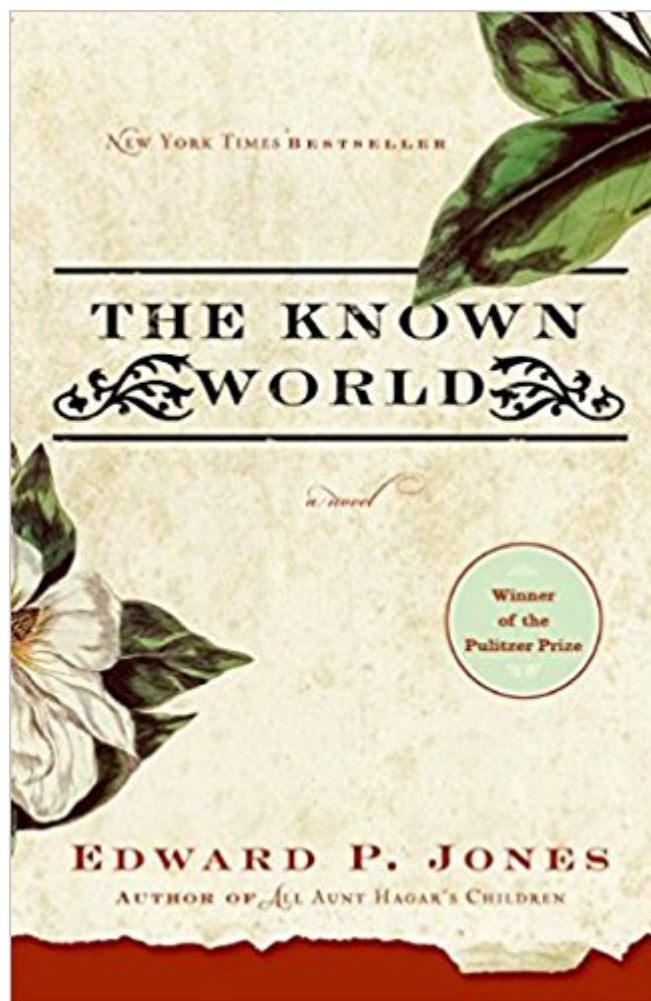


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The Known World



Synopsis

One of the most acclaimed novels in recent memory, *The Known World* is a daring and ambitious work by Pulitzer Prize winner Edward P. Jones. *The Known World* tells the story of Henry Townsend, a black farmer and former slave who falls under the tutelage of William Robbins, the most powerful man in Manchester County, Virginia. Making certain he never circumvents the law, Townsend runs his affairs with unusual discipline. But when death takes him unexpectedly, his widow, Caldonia, can't uphold the estate's order, and chaos ensues. Jones has woven a footnote of history into an epic that takes an unflinching look at slavery in all its moral complexities.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Set in Manchester County, Virginia, 20 years before the Civil War began, Edward P. Jones's debut novel, *The Known World*, is a masterpiece of overlapping plot lines, time shifts, and heartbreaking details of life under slavery. Caldonia Townsend is an educated black slaveowner, the widow of a well-loved young farmer named Henry, whose parents had bought their own freedom, and then freed their son, only to watch him buy himself a slave as soon as he had saved enough money. Although a fair and gentle master by the standards of the day, Henry Townsend had learned from former master about the proper distance to keep from one's property. After his death, his slaves wonder if Caldonia will free them. When she fails to do so, but instead breaches the code that keeps them separate from her, a little piece of Manchester County begins to unravel. Impossible to rush through, *The Known World* is a complex, beautifully written novel with a large cast of characters,

rewarding the patient reader with unexpected connections, some reaching into the present day.

--Regina Marler --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

In a crumbed, powerful follow-up to his National Book Award-nominated short story collection (*Lost in the City*), Jones explores an oft-neglected chapter of American history, the world of blacks who owned blacks in the antebellum South. His fictional examination of this unusual phenomenon starts with the dying 31-year-old Henry Townsend, a former slave-now master of 33 slaves of his own and more than 50 acres of land in Manchester County, Va.-worried about the fate of his holdings upon his early death. As a slave in his youth, Henry makes himself indispensable to his master, William Robbins. Even after Henry's parents purchase the family's freedom, Henry retains his allegiance to Robbins, who patronizes him when he sets up shop as a shoemaker and helps him buy his first slaves and his plantation. Jones's thorough knowledge of the legal and social intricacies of slaveholding allows him to paint a complex, often startling picture of life in the region. His richest characterizations-of Robbins and Henry-are particularly revealing. Though he is a cruel master to his slaves, Robbins is desperately in love with a black woman and feels as much fondness for Henry as for his own children; Henry, meanwhile, reads Milton, but beats his slaves as readily as Robbins does. Henry's wife, Caldonia, is not as disciplined as her husband, and when he dies, his worst fears are realized: the plantation falls into chaos. Jones's prose can be rather static and his phrasings ponderous, but his narrative achieves crushing momentum through sheer accumulation of detail, unusual historical insight and generous character writing. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

My daughter was reading this book in her high school English class and I decided to reread it so that I could discuss it with her while she was planning her paper. I listened to this on tape when it first was published, which was a few years ago. I was stunned all over again by how great this novel is. The sections are not chronological, but follow certain thematic arcs, often going back over information we already have gleaned from other chapters. I did not find this confusing at all, but felt rather that I was getting different versions of the same tale, as if from different points of view. If anyone has a doubt about the insanity of the institution of slavery, this is the book to read. The narrative approaches the subject in a totally neutral and objective way, quoting the laws of the time and describing events without judgment, much the same way as Primo Levi approached his descriptions of Auschwitz. The calm and even-handed prose makes the reality of slavery all the more appalling. Here's something I didn't know: Northern insurance companies insured slaves. This

was horrifying to me.

This is not a book that "grabs you" or "pulls you along"; it was tedious work to navigate the text, but part of that was due to its depth and the richness of its characters and setting. To give it a lower rating would be unfair, as my own personal difficulty reading it was perhaps a product of my current state as a reader: needing hooks/wittiness, rather than prepared to do the necessary work this book required. Still, the work paid off--the injustices resonate more and more as the book continues on, and it's historicism lends it a gravity that does indeed matter. Most importantly, it is a reminder that history is not simple, and that people are not simple, and that far too often the world is not just. I cannot say that the entire reading experience was enjoyable, but I am glad that I continued to the finish line.

Reading this felt like sitting down and listening to someone telling me a story about the old ways and people in an old town. As if I asked, whatever happened here, and the answer came from a rambling but good story teller with great factual knowledge of the times. The perspective of sharing the story of free black who owned slaves was unique and provided a different lens on this terrible part of American history. It was a story about a small town and what happened to it and those who were there. Imagery was good and the characters were well developed. The only critique is that it was sometimes difficult to track where in time the story was, but that underscored the telling of it--like listening to an old relative tell you that family history. If it were linear it wouldn't be as good.

*****The Known World was unique among fiction books I have read in the last twenty years or so. It was a thoroughly enjoyable read. I would not call it an easy read, because it was some work to keep track of all of the different characters, but nevertheless, so very well worth it. Despite the work, it was entertaining. Like other reviewers, it kept me up at night, and kept me reading. The book caused me to wonder how I would behave had I the same cultural background as the various characters in the book---the white slave owners, black slave owners, the black slaves. I had always thought before that I "of course" would be against slavery, would fight for rights for all races, and absolutely never do anything so repulsive as to own slaves. I wondered how anyone ever could! The Known World opened my eyes to how this could happen, and how easily one of those slaveowners---black or white---could have been me. Or how easily I could have been a slave. It also provided insight into the psychological world of the slave. All of this was done by showing, not telling, so the reading was more of a powerful emotional experience rather than an intellectual experience. What made this so

different for me is that I picked this book solely upon the reviews and rankings. I had no inherent interest in American history or race relations or the Civil War era, but this book GOT me interested. I think that the only person who would not enjoy this book would be the person who is not open or interested in challenging themselves, not interested in thinking, or afraid to find out about or explore the dark side of the human experience. Because of the complexity of the book, as far as the feelings of the characters, the layers of meaning, and the strong impact, I know that I will read this book again and again, and am therefore glad that I spent the money to get it in hardback. It is well worth the money, and is a beautiful "rough cut" book. I have thought about its message again and again since reading it; I would call it haunting, thought-provoking, disturbing, and honest.

This was an educational read. It does a great job of letting the reader know about what it was like to be a slave slightly before the Civil War. Interestingly, one of the key characters was a slave owner, who was himself a former slave. I was unaware that there was much of that going on. The writer really knows how to write in a way that holds your interest.

This is a well-written story about the slave experience in Virginia. The central plot is a classic "Greek tragedy" in which a likeable character falls victim to some all too human weaknesses. There are several side stories that tie into the main plot in an easy and engaging manner. The harsh realities of slave existence is well delineated without excess violence or ultra-graphic description. There is an edge to this story that the author keeps pushing you with but never lets it get out of control. This is a thought-provoking book not meant to be a "fun" read.

This is an extraordinary book, a unique exploration of the antebellum South. Jones' writing is fluid, thoughtful, gorgeous. I gave away my paperback copy to give me an excuse to buy *The Known World* again, in hardback.

The thought that free black people owned slaves is mind-boggling. There are plenty of stories of the viciousness of this time and place, this examines another one that is beyond belief.

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