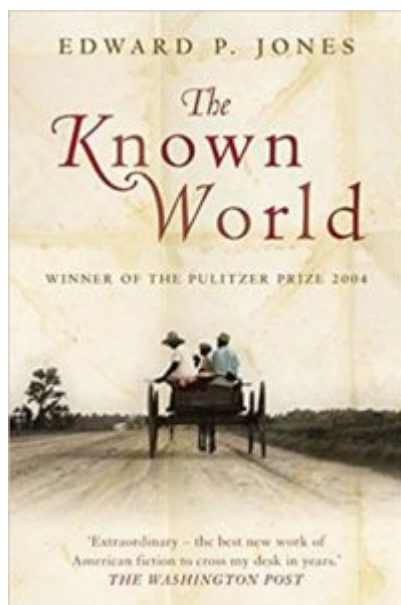
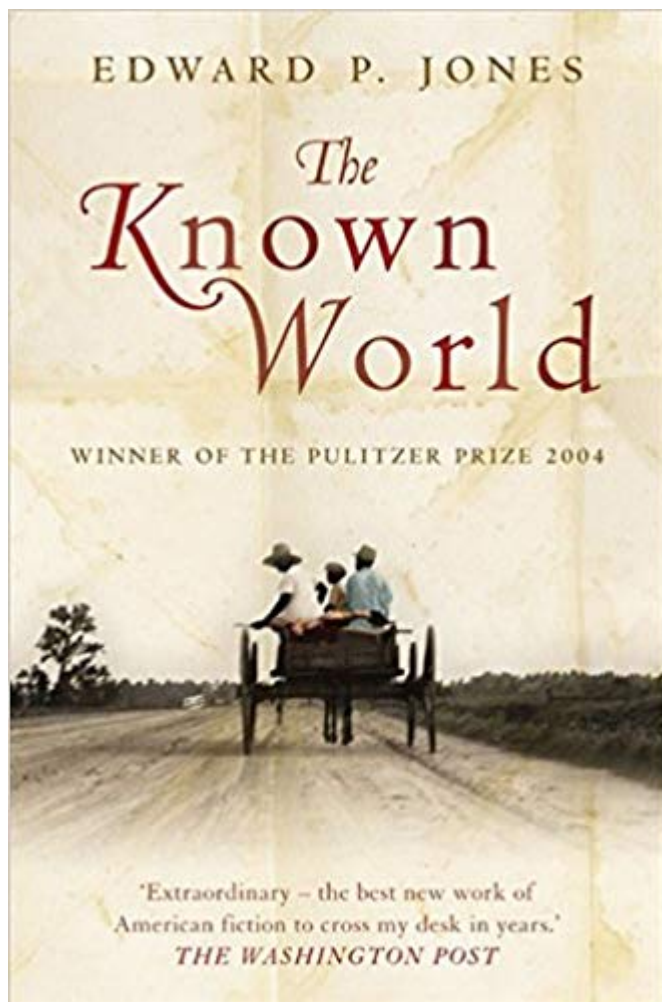


# Exploring the Known World



The Known World

Who would have thought that what may be the best novel ever written about American slavery would be about slaveholders who were black? Never more than a few percent of the antebellum South's free-black population, or a few thousand people, this group included African Americans who owned their relatives—especially in states where manumission was prohibited. Moreover, their experiences are almost as sparsely documented as they are unrepresentative.

So it is a wonder to see Edward P. Jones conjure up a whole world around a black slave owner in *The Known World*, the winner of this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction. That world is Manchester County, Virginia, a fictitious place with its own history, mythology, and cast of characters—like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. But unlike Yoknapatawpha County, where the power relations are organized around the color line, Manchester is a place where the relationship between race and power is further complicated by the fact that some of the slaveholders are black.

Most prominent among them is Henry Townsend, the richly imagined African American slaveholder whose life and early death are the center of this dazzling novel's diachronic narrative. An exploration of the messy heart of slavery itself, *The Known World* does not just tell Henry's story: it maps his whole social world, free and enslaved, black, white, and Indian. The novel makes little pretence of strict historical accuracy. Indeed, Jones claims to have done virtually no historical research. Instead, he uses the idea of black slaveholders, a group he first heard about in college, to explore the social and legal relationships that structured slavery. In doing so, he offers an unparalleled meditation of the master-slave relationship.

What better way to explore the bare essentials of the master-slave relationship than with the figure of the black slaveholder, who comes to slavery without the delusion of racial difference that divided white owners from their slaves? When the owner and the slave are the same race, slavery becomes a story about people and power rather than race relations—a story about what people can do to each other, and what kinds of social relations slavery fosters, rather than a story about blacks and whites. And so it is in *The Known World*.

Don't get me wrong, this novel barely has a plot; and cannot be reduced to anything as simple and didactic as a lesson. Beautifully written, it tells a series of interconnected stories about Manchester's diverse inhabitants. The book's almost endless cast of characters includes all Henry's slaves; his ex-slave parents, who purchased themselves out of slavery, and then worked to purchase their slave son, whom they finally redeemed from the plantation as a young adult; William Robbins—the richest man in Manchester County—and the white slave owner on whose plantation Henry grows up, long after his parents leave to earn his freedom; and other black slave-owning families in Manchester County, all of whom "knew each one another's business." Additional characters range from Oden, the Cherokee patroller, who is known as the man to go to when you want to cut off a runaway slave's ear without endangering the life of the

property, to a murder victim whose background is evocative, if uncertain. From "Finland or Norway or Sweden" depending on his mood, the deceased always maintained that he was from Sweden when he was "in a foul mood . . . He was Swedish the day he died."

But what ties all these tales together is the story of Henry Townsend and how he went from being a slave to slave owner. As a free man, Henry Townsend rejects the example of the ex-slave parents who bought his freedom. "Thou shall own no one, havin been owned once your own self," was the principle by which they lived. "Don't go back to Egypt after God done took you outa there." When he buys his first slave, Henry tells his father, "I ain't done nothing that any white man wouldn't do. I ain't broke no law." And he is not wrong. Indeed, the most profound lesson that Henry learns about slavery as he becomes a slaveholder is that the slaveholder is a creature of the law.

Not a bad man, Henry aspires to be "a master different from any other, the kind of shepherd master God had intended," but his former owner and life-long mentor William Robbins warns him early on that the law places certain limitations on what the master can be to the slave. "The law will protect you as a master to your slave, and it will not flinch when it protects you . . . it does not matter if you are not much more darker than your slave. The law is blind to that," Robbins tells Henry after observing his young black protégé horsing around with his first slave purchase, a man named Moses.

"But the law expects you to know what is master and what is slave . . . if you roll around and be a playmate to your property, and your property turns around and bites you, the law will come to you still, but it will not come with the full heart and all the deliberate speed you will need. You will have failed in your part of the bargain. You will have pointed to the line that separates you from your property and told your property that the line does not matter . . . You are rollin round now today, with property you have a slip of paper on. How will you act when you have ten slips of paper, fifty slips of paper? How will you act, Henry, when you have a hundred slips of paper? Will you still be rollin in the dirt with them?"

Henry does not live long enough to own a hundred slaves, but he does acquire thirty-three, and in so doing, Henry takes Robbins's advice without ever grasping that the demands of slave ownership have foreclosed his dreams of being "a better master than any white man he had ever known." "He did not understand," as his free-born wife Caledonia observes, "that the kind of world he wanted to create was doomed before he had even spoken the first syllable of the word *master*."

Meanwhile, slavery is even more mystifying to the slaves, especially when the slave owner is black. Henry's slave Moses takes "more than two weeks to come to understand that someone wasn't fiddling with him and that indeed a black man two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made . . . it was already a strange world that made him slave to a white man, but God had indeed

set it twisting and twirling when he put black people up to owning their own kind. Was God even up there attending to business anymore?"

A player in the crisis that unfolds on Henry Townsend's plantation after he dies, the "world stupid" Moses never really understands the line that separates the slaveholder from the slave—and suffers tragic consequences as a result. But readers of *The Known World* have a chance to look at the line. They also get to know a place where the dividing line between slave and master is crisscrossed but never entirely redrawn by color and race, and obscured but never erased by love, sex, violence, and friendship. These messy and powerful human connections wove across both color and property lines in the antebellum South, as they do in Edward Jones's fictional world. At bottom, Edward Jones's book tells an America still obsessed with slavery as a racial problem that slavery's many paradoxes begin with just one and have nothing to do with race. It is the paradox of anybody "owning their own kind."

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