

**“She’s Mine, and She Fights”:  
Intimacy and Identification with the Canine Companion in *Salvage the Bones***

For the American South, hurricane season looms as a threat to normalcy and, sometimes, to life itself. In light of the recent devastation wrought by hurricanes, the reality of trauma and violence resulting from these storms impels us to consider how hurricanes are employed in literature for young adults, especially in trauma narratives. In her Alex Award-winning novel *Salvage the Bones*, Jesmyn Ward places a bildungsroman in the context of preparing for and surviving Hurricane Katrina.

I will explore how Ward’s novel couches a boy-and-his-dog narrative within the greater traumatic experience of Hurricane Katrina. In his chapter “A Boy and His Dog,” Tribunella examines just how the “indispensable family pet” found its way into its own subgenre of trauma tales: the boy-and-his-dog narrative (29). These coming of age tales, he argues, serve as primers for adulthood, guiding the child through pleasurable attachment and tragic loss of a beloved pet as a traumatic initiation (31). Ward, however, presents the typical idyllic, white, and suburban family’s “Spot” in the shape of a sharp-toothed, gleaming white, fighting pitbull named China. China, with sixteen-year-old Skeetah as her boy counterpart, becomes a focal point of Ward’s novel. China’s family is neither idyllic, nor white, nor suburban: Skeetah’s siblings and their alcoholic father live in coastal Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. Within the frame of the impending storm, the novel centers around China, Skeetah, and his sister Esch, from whose point of view the story is told. Both Skeetah and Esch experience identification with and desire for China, but in markedly different (gendered) ways. Skeetah’s relationship with China shares some characteristics of canonical boy-and-his-dog tales, but it rejects the typical trajectory of dog’s loss and boy’s maturation. Esch, in what becomes a girl-and-her-dog narrative, looks to China for identification and even motherly guidance in the place of her own deceased mother as she negotiates her pregnant body and her relationships with those around her. Through both of these relationships with China, I hope to argue that Ward’s text yields a new breed of child-and-their-dog tale as it upends the classic narrative and centers a Black consciousness.