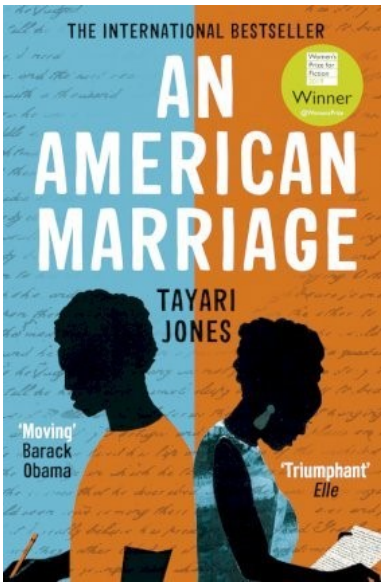
An American Marriage

Tayari Jones



«

Jones has said that *An American Marriage* is a novel in conversation with *The Odyssey*, the story of a man trying to get back home to a waiting wife and a wife unsure of the extent to which she is permitted to rebuild her own life.

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[https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/02/an-american-marriage-tayari-jones-review]

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Tayari Jones: brief author biography

Tayari Jones (born November 30, 1970 in Atlanta, Georgia) is the author of four novels, most recently ***An American Marriage***, which was a 2018 Oprah's Book Club Selection, and won the 2019 Women's Prize for Fiction. Jones is a graduate of Spelman College, the University of Iowa, and Arizona State University. She is currently a member of the English faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences at Emory University, and recently returned to her hometown of Atlanta after a decade in New York City.

Jones was raised in Cascade Heights, Atlanta, by her parents Mack and Barbara Jones who both participated in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Both of her parents went on the obtain PhDs in social sciences and became professors at Clark College. Jones recalls growing up following the civil rights movement and becoming acutely aware of her race after being given books featuring black children and playing with black dolls. Jones, whose name, Tayari, means 'she is prepared' in Swahili, has two brothers and two half-sisters from a previous marriage of her father's. Jones grew up during the Atlanta Child Murders (she was eight when the murders began) and describes it as "the most significant event of my childhood." Two of her classmates at Oglethorpe Elementary were murdered: Yusuf Bell and Terry Pue.

After graduating from Benjamin Mays High School, Jones attended Spelman College, a historically black women's college in Atlanta. Jones' desire to be a writer was fostered at Spelman by influential mentors and her reading of authors that would shape her world view and inspire her own personal expression. She studied with Pearl Cleage, who after graduating from Spelman in 1971 joined the faculty as a writer and playwright in residence. As a sixteen-year-old self-described "little whippersnapper," Jones attended arts gathering at Cleage's house dubbed "Live At Club Zebra". These gatherings inspired Jones' desire to pursue an artistic life. Johnetta Cole, the first black female President of Spelman, also served as a role model for Jones: "The day I arrived on campus as a first-year student was the day that our Sister President, Johnnetta B. Cole, stepped into her historic position. Before this, I don't think I had ever seen a black woman in a significant leadership position. I had never considered that possibility." It was also at Spelman that Jones first read Toni Morrison's ***Song of Solomon***: 'in college I started to see that so many of the theories of power I understood about race also applied to gender. It changed me. I would never be the same. And ***Song of Solomon*** was a big part of that epiphany." Jones graduated from Spelman in 1991 and went on to complete a master's degree in English from the University of Iowa in 1994 and a Master of Fine Arts in fiction from Arizona State University in 2000. She has received many fellowships, including from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Radcliffe Institute, and United States Artists.

A major theme in Jones' writing is family, as seen in ***Leaving Atlanta***, ***The Untelling***, and ***An American Marriage***. Her novels portray the relationships, often fractured relationships, between parents and their children and married couples. Tina McElroy Ansa has written about the success that Jones has found in accurately portraying the character of families. Jones' novels portray African-American experiences in the Southern United States, specifically how their lives are impacted by the unjust systems they live in. ***Leaving Atlanta*** portrays how the black community of Atlanta was failed by its government during the Atlanta Child Murders of 1979-81, and the novel ends with no justice served. ***An American Marriage*** was written as a result of Jones researching the problems surrounding mass incarceration in the United States, and its impact on black men and women.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tayari_Jones]

If I Can't Cry, Nobody Cries: An Interview with Tayari Jones

Tayari Jones is the author of four novels; ***An American Marriage*** is her latest. I first came to her work through her novel ***Silver Sparrow***, about a man and his two families—one public, one private. Jones writes about people and the trauma they carry. She unpacks what it took to get them to their current moment and what it might take for them to be able to let go of the past. I found myself enthralled by how deftly she captures the emotions of her characters. In ***An American Marriage***, Jones introduces us to a man who has been wrongfully incarcerated and examines how he, his wife, and their families deal with the ensuing fallout. Jones renders her characters humanely, and none of them are above reproach.

In conversation, it is clear that Jones thinks deeply about who her characters are and how they appear on the page, as well as how they would exist in the real world and not just her fictional ones. "Look at you, just right on time!" she exclaims when I call her. The same can be said about ***An American Marriage***.

QUESTION: This is a book about mass incarceration, but in some ways, it's really a book about the intricacies of human relationships—a snapshot of a couple who gets caught up in the system and how it affects those around them. How did you come to this picture?

TAYARI JONES: When I first started writing, I was thinking of it as a book about mass incarceration, and mass incarceration is not a plot. It's not a story. It's not a character. I was at Harvard doing research on this subject, and I felt like I had a lot of information, but I had not yet found my story because I had to realize that I am a novelist. I'm not a sociologist. I'm not a documentarian. I'm not an ethnographer. And I found the story, actually, through eavesdropping. I overheard a young couple arguing in the mall in Atlanta. The woman, who was splendidly dressed, and the man—he looked okay. But she looked great! And she said to him, "You know you wouldn't have waited on me for seven years." And he shot back, "This shit wouldn't have happened to you in the first place." And I was like, You know, I don't know him, but I know she's probably right. I doubt very seriously that he would wait on her for seven years, and he is probably right that this wouldn't have happened to her. And I realized that they were at an impasse because she's talking about the potential for reciprocity and he's saying this is a moot point. I was intrigued by them, and so I integrated this very personal conflict with the research I had done.

Q: What role did the research play in the final product?

TJ: I feel like I left so much of the research on the cutting-room floor, and I think it's because the research, while horrifying, wasn't, for me, inspiring. I don't want to say that it wasn't interesting because I was interested. The thing about novels to me is that novels take place in a space of ambiguity. Almost all the research I did on mass incarceration, let alone wrongful incarceration—there was no ambiguity there. If you arrest and convict an innocent person and subject them to the penal system, there is no second side to that story. I realized I had to write kind of to the left and to the right of the issue. The research that I found most helpful was the oral histories of people who are in prison. I read this really great oral-history compilation from McSweeney's called ***Surviving Justice***, and what I found so compelling was that most of the men who were wrongfully incarcerated, their issue was about the wrongness of incarceration more so than the wrongfulness of their particular incarceration. And that was really fascinating to me because you can say, And look, this person doesn't even belong there, but most of the men in this compilation were rather explicitly making the case that no one deserves this. That was surprising to me, and when I have a surprising bit of information, that inspires me.

Q: In ***An American Marriage***, you focus on who these characters are and who they can become as the circumstances change. Roy may not have committed the crime that lands him in prison, but he is capable of violence. Celestial may have thought that she could stand by

her husband, but she learns that love is not always a static thing. And even Celestial's father, who cheated on his first wife and started a new family, consistently tells Roy that Celestial is her own person and not his to give away. Can you talk about this?

TJ: I feel that we all are rather situational in our choices and the person that we think we are in our heads is not necessarily exactly the person we will be when a situation calls to us. But I think with the matter of Celestial's father, yes, he left his first wife for a new wife, and he insists that Celestial is not his to give away; however, he is very angry at what he perceives as her lack of emotional and sexual loyalty to her husband. I think a lot of people have one set of rules for themselves and one set of rules for other people. But I do think that we judge characters against our imaginary best selves. So I think that we see Roy in prison and we say, If I were in prison, I would be noble, and I would be angry but wiser. But when you see Roy actually in prison, you see that he is angry and anger doesn't improve any of us. He comes out a different man. We see Celestial and we say, Were my husband wrongfully incarcerated, I would be as faithful as Penelope in ***The Odyssey***, and we judge her based on how we imagine we would act. But when characters work, they lay it bare on the page, and they perform in ways that are more human than our imagined ideal selves.

Q: When Roy is on trial, Celestial finds that she is unsure of how to be anything but the well-spoken black woman she has been taught to be. She feels she has to convince the jurors of her husband's character and, by extension, of her love for him. And she feels she fails to convey both of these things. Historically, black women have often been used as the barometer for their men, and intimacies are forced from them for display. Is the failure hers because of her seeming inability, or is it the impossibility of conveying all the nuances of a relationship to outsiders?

TJ: It's too much pressure on her, and yes, I feel like she can't win. She's to be well-spoken and articulate, but that is inherently distancing because there's a reserve in that articulate well-spokenness. But at the same time, were she not to be articulate, then she would be seen as a stereotype and not credible in that way. So could she actually have saved him with her testimony? I don't know. I know she blames herself, but I don't know that she could have saved him.

Q: That's interesting to me. I think narratives are changing a little bit now, but black women are often seen as needing to have the weight of the race and also their men on their back.

TJ: There's also very little room for diverse expressions of black female identity. There is a place in society for a black man who comes off as uneducated but street-smart. That is respected in a certain kind of way. And there's also the Obama model of the black man who's been to the Ivy League. There's a lot of room. But I feel like with black women, when it comes to credibility, that respectability is crucial.

Q: Like the Rosa Parks model.

TJ: Yes. There're so many instances of this. Every black woman who we can think of who is respected follows that model. I would even argue that I think perhaps part of the reason why someone as amazing as Fannie Lou Hamer has been put on the back burner of history is that she was a sharecropper, and you can tell. She doesn't have that bourgeois, well-spoken, well-educated affect. Where, on the other hand, men of that time, during civil rights, if they seemed a little more on the folksy side or angrier, there was room for their expression. But respectability is really around the necks of women, and that is one thing that Celestial pushes back against. But she also, in my opinion, benefits from being this respectable black woman. I don't think her art career would go the way it would if she hadn't gone to Spelman, if she wasn't well-spoken. It's not exactly a golden cage because it's not golden, but it's a gold-plated cage. She is made responsible for Roy's happiness or unhappiness. In this book, I feel almost like she receives more blame than the prison system.

Q: Yeah. From everyone.

TJ: Everyone! I have to tell you, when I was writing this book, I was driven a little crazy because you have your friends who are your readers who read it as you go along, and everyone was just so upset. They all were upset with Celestial for not performing the role in the narrative that they were expecting. This was a huge challenge for me. When I would say, This is a novel about a woman whose husband was wrongfully incarcerated, people would think, This is a novel about the brave fight to free her man. And that's not really my focus, and people would just be really frustrated. It was almost like I sold them a mystery but didn't tell them who'd done it, like it was upsetting the expectations of genre. So then I came back another way. I rewrote the book with Roy's point of view as the anchor because then I could say, This is a novel about a man who is wrongfully incarcerated, and then the reader could say, And this is about his effort to get his life back. And it is, although things don't work out in a typical way. But just having that thrust conformed with reader expectations and allowed me to hug my reader close while still examining the questions that were interesting to me. You never want to write a novel where you feel like you're fighting your reader. It's a losing proposition.

Q: As time passes in the novel, it becomes apparent that feelings change. The dream of Celestial becomes Roy's world in prison, while Celestial continues to live an independent life on the outside. Roy's insistence on their love is in stark contrast to Celestial's hesitance. Do you think Celestial and Roy are operating on different definitions of what it means or should mean to love?

TJ: I think that what love costs them is different. Roy believes in love, but it costs Roy nothing to continue to be devoted to Celestial. Not only does it cost him nothing, it gives him his emotional anchor. But for her to continue to be devoted to him, it costs her a lot. Sometimes people say to me, I just think Celestial is selfish. If Celestial is selfish, then Roy's selfish. Is it more selfish to want someone to give you their life, or is it more selfish to want your own life? I think they're equally self-interested. I just think that Celestial's self-interest is kind of shocking in a way that Roy's is not. As a matter of fact, sometimes I ask people, So what is Roy presenting to her in these negotiations? And most people had never considered that something should be offered to Celestial. They'd never considered it. Never.

Q: In the novel, Roy is subject to a form of domination when he enters into the system of mass incarceration. There is a scene toward the end—I'm not going to say what it is—where it seems that maybe Roy wants to subject someone else to the domination that he feels he experienced. Without giving too much away, can you talk about this?

TJ: I will say that I do think that Roy has been completely subjected to the power of the state. And there are moments when he's angry and he wants to assert his dominance over another. He wants to assert his dominance over his wife, whom he believes he has a right to. And he wants to assert his dominance over his rival. He thinks freedom is having his life back. He thinks freedom is the ability to be dominant over others. But I think what real freedom is, what he and all of them come to realize, is that you are free when you understand that empathy is not a luxury, that it is an expression of your humanity that cannot be taken from you. And that is what switches in his paradigm. It switches from a desire for dominance to a desire for empathy and humanity.
It was really important to me to have Roy be a likable character. I feel like a lot of times in novels, particularly by black women, that interrogate the idea of marriage, part of the way that they give their heroines the right to be free is to make the husband a bad guy. So it has the feel of "save yourself from this man; you deserve more than this bad man." I'm thinking of ***The Color Purple***. But what if the man is good? Do you have a right to your own life only because the man has somehow disqualified himself? Or is your life your own just because it's yours? Even if he's nice, even if he's cool.

Q: This is a book of people constantly being forced to make hard decisions. Again and again,

the concept of duty comes up. With a vow, love becomes duty. That shift is really interesting to me because certain characters feel that duty should come above all else, but would Roy and Celestial really want duty if there was no love?

TJ: Nobody wants duty if there is no love. The reason this is complicated is that there is some love. There is some love and some duty—it's a question of the ratio. It's like making your perfect martini. How much vermouth? How much vodka? I feel that most of these characters have a very strong sense of duty for Celestial Davenport. I don't see much talk of duty for anybody else. There is an expression, "dutiful daughter." They even sometimes put it on people's tombstones. I don't think I've ever seen "dutiful son."
This is one of the serious challenges of black feminism. When I was writing this book, I started reading novels and short stories by white women about marriage, and I noticed that they were able to critique marriage more because the man isn't in any trouble. Everyone in the story has about the same level of crisis and material comfort. For example, I read this really awesome story by Antonya Nelson. In it, the woman is getting older, and her husband isn't attracted to her, and in the course of that story, it feels like the end of the world. You feel like, No, no, how could he? How is life so cruel? But I realized that the reason the story works is that everyone in the story has about the same level of comfort or discomfort. Now with Celestial, her husband is in prison for a crime he did not commit. If Celestial wanted to fret about getting older and not being as beautiful, it would seem petty or vain. Then I extrapolated that to think of the condition of not just black women but also black people as a whole. In black lives, poverty and injustice are always in the story, so there is less room to fret about small things and be respected for it.
There's that great scene in ***The Bluest Eye*** with Pecola's mother, who works as a maid and just has this horrible life. Her employer, the white lady, is upset because she had sent her brother to dental school and then he didn't invite her to his party. And that would hurt anyone's feelings. But having Pecola's mother in the same scene makes this betrayal by the brother to the employer just seem silly and slight. It is actually worth feeling bad about, it's just that when Pecola's mother is in the scene, you can't feel bad. It's kind of like how Roy's mother says to Celestial, "If I can't cry, nobody cries."

Q: Toward the beginning of the book, Celestial says, "I fully believed that I would leave the court room with my husband beside me. Safe in our home, we would tell people how no black man is really safe in America." Can you talk about this?

TJ: I think that before then, this idea of the peril of black men was there, but she didn't think it would happen to them. She was fully aware that this happens to people. She just thought it was going to occupy a rhetorical space for them, not an actual experience. We do have this idea that all black people are equally at risk, but it's really not true. Class mitigates that risk a lot, and since Celestial is from a more upper-class family—upper-class for black people—she knew about this fear as a matter of theory. Have you seen those stats about black men living in certain parts of New York, that each one has been stopped and frisked something like forty times? Being stopped and frisked is a part of their lives. For black men from different backgrounds, the fear of being stopped and frisked is a part of their life, but it's not the daily violation that it is for working-class people. Or Philando Castile (1) in Minneapolis, they said he had been stopped by the police hundreds of times. I would say everyone is vulnerable, but some people are more vulnerable than others.

Q: Like a daily lived terror versus the perceived threat of terror.

TJ: Right. And it's hard to talk about that because I do think that part of what gives us as black Americans a unified feeling is that we are all endangered. What is a danger to one is a danger to all. And that's very important, particularly for activism. But the way that these things play out is very much

influenced by class. I always say Skip Gates was humiliated, but Michael Brown (2) and Philando Castile, they're dead. There's a difference.

Q: Who do you write for?

TJ: I never was a mystical kind of writer. You know those writers who say their characters come out the closet and talk to them? I have never been that person, and I am not that person. However, with this book, when I had so much trouble with my readers, I stopped having people read for me. I started to imagine that I was writing the book for an audience that actually was the characters. The idea that if Celestial were to read this book, she would say, Yeah, that's about how it went down. Roy would say, Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's what I did. I'm glad you understand me. I started imagining that I was writing for them, and I reread the book several times, subjecting the book to their critique. Because I wrote them, I know how they think, and so I changed some things to make it do right by them. And so I guess my biggest hope is that anyone who's had an experience that resonates with the book in any way feels that I got it right.

[https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/02/08/cant-cry-nobody-cries-interview-tayari-jones/]

(1) On July 6, 2016, Philando Castile, a 32-year-old African American man, was fatally shot during a traffic stop by police officer Jeronimo Yanez of the St. Anthony police department in the Minneapolis–Saint Paul metropolitan area.
Castile was driving with his girlfriend, Diamond Reynolds, and her four-year-old daughter when at 9:00 p.m. he was pulled over by Yanez and another officer in Falcon Heights, a suburb of Saint Paul, Minnesota.

After being asked for his license and registration, Castile told Officer Yanez that he had a firearm (Castile was licensed to carry) to which Yanez replied, "Don't reach for it then", and Castile said "I'm, I, I was reaching for..." Yanez said "Don't pull it out", Castile replied "I'm not pulling it out", and Reynolds said "He's not..." Yanez repeated "Don't pull it out". Yanez then fired seven close-range shots at Castile, hitting him five times. Castile died of his wounds at 9:37 p.m. at Hennepin County Medical Center, about 20 minutes after being shot. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Philando_Castile]

(2) On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown Jr., an 18-year-old black man, was fatally shot by 28-year-old white Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in the city of Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. Brown was accompanied by his 22-year-old friend Dorian Johnson. Wilson said that an altercation ensued when Brown attacked Wilson in his police vehicle for control of Wilson's gun until it was fired. Johnson said that Wilson initiated a confrontation by grabbing Brown by the neck through his car window, threatening him and then shooting at him. At this point, both Wilson and Johnson state that Brown and Johnson fled, with Wilson pursuing Brown shortly thereafter. Wilson stated that Brown stopped and charged him after a short pursuit. Johnson contradicted this account, stating that Brown turned around with his hands raised after Wilson shot at his back. According to Johnson, Wilson then shot Brown multiple times until Brown fell to the ground. In the entire altercation, Wilson fired a total of twelve bullets, including twice during the struggle in the car; the last was probably the fatal shot. Brown was struck six times, all in the front of his body. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Michael_Brown]

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