

Making Magic

An Interview with Tayari Jones

By Gyasi Byng



Tayari Jones is the author of *Leaving Atlanta*, *The Untelling*, and *Silver Sparrow*, which was chosen by *Slate*, *Salon* and *O, The Oprah Magazine*, as among the best novels of 2011. *Silver Sparrow* was also nominated for an NAACP Image Award, as well as the 2013 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. For *Leaving Atlanta*, Jones received the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Debut Fiction. Writer in Residence at FAU for 2014, Jones has led workshops in Ghana, Brazil, and Portugal. Currently, she is working on her fourth novel, *Dear History*.

Coastlines: I just have a few questions for you today, and hopefully they will lead to some other conversations. I don't know. We'll see. My first question is somewhat general. It's mainly about *The Untelling* and *Silver Sparrow*. Fathers play a really crucial role in those two novels, so I guess my first question is, what is the role of the father in your novels?

Jones: Well, I have a good relationship with my father. My daddy's not a bigamist, I promise. He's a political scientist, actually. My father's a political purist. It's such a strange thing. When I was at Harvard last year doing fellowship, everyone was talking about their fathers, and I would say, "He's a political theorist," and it would shut down the conversation right there.

Writing the book, when I'm finished, I read back through the book to see what I think. I don't know what I think until I finish a book. Even in my first book, *Leaving Atlanta*, fathers are very prominent, so when I finished it and looked back on it, I realized that *Leaving Atlanta* is about fathers. All the kids, their relationship with their fathers, really determine what happens with their relationships in the

book. I don't know exactly why I look at it in this way. I am very much interested in the ways fatherhood affects people's lives – more so active fatherhood than absent fatherhood. It's so funny I don't think about these issues when I'm working. I look back on them. I feel like my work is often interrogating accepted cultural tropes.

Coastlines: How so?

Jones: Well, I was just seeing this on Twitter. There's always all this conversation, this idea that black people don't know who their fathers are. They don't know where they are. I tend to write about people who are deeply involved with their fathers. Not in a propaganda way to be like, "fathers are awesome," but in a way that is present and interesting. I don't think that I set out to interrogate the trope of the absent black father. I think also because I know and like my father, and he's a quirky and complicated political theorist type person, I think of fathers as part of my understanding of who I am. I know a lot of other people will feel the same way. These things are very interesting to me.

Also, in my real life, I have this ongoing, running critique of patriarchy. A father is the head patriarch. I love my father to death, I adore my daddy, but I'm aware that patriarchy and fatherhood are the same thing. All the ways that we try to exist within these restrictive paradigms end with the intersection of love and power. I'm interested in the lives of children. All children live under a regime. To be a child is to be a marginalized, powerless person. I don't care how privileged of a child you are – you are a marginalized, powerless person. As a child, someone can bodily pick you up and move you somewhere. You don't get more stripped of power than that. I think that's partly why fathers come up in my work so much: I'm interested in power. I'm interested in people who try to operate outside of systems of power. I think with children you can really explore power. No one can deny that children are under the control of their parents.

Coastlines: Oh, completely.

Jones: When you write about kids, you can say "OK, here is the power, and these are the people resisting it." Being a child is really about living under a regime. Remember what Margaret Atwood said, "Little girls do not find one another to be cute. To each other they are life-sized." Remember that. Write kids as other kids see them. Write how you saw other kids when you were a kid. Remember that children are at the mercy of their parents. You better hope you get a good set.

Coastlines: You definitely see the dynamics of power in *The Untelling*, particularly in the amount of power Ariadne's mother has over her life. Even when Ariadne is an adult, she almost has this childlike fear of her mother, and actually fear isn't even the right word.

Jones: She has a reverence for her mother.

Coastlines: Yes, reverence is a much better word.

Jones: We all do. For most of our lives our parents own us. Like I said, you better hope you get a good set. Although, even if you have a good set, they still own you.

Coastlines: You never stop being your parents' child.

Jones: And growing up you're told, "This is not a democracy!"

Coastlines: It's a dictatorship.

Jones: Better hope you have a benevolent dictator.

Coastlines: Ariadne's name in *The Untelling* immediately recalled Greek mythology for me. So, I wanted to know if that was something you had in mind as you were writing, or if it was one of those random, serendipitous things that happen when you write. And, if her name did come from the myth, were there any other aspects of the story or plot that were inspired or influenced by mythology?

Jones: I adore mythology. In the second grade I had an individualized curriculum – basically I did the second grade through independent study with a teacher I adore to this day. I read all the Greek myths. I read the book *Twenty-Five Greek Myths* where I would read the myth, write a response, and get a little check mark. I'm always thinking of mythology. One thing I thought about when I was working on *Silver Sparrow* was how the entire foundation of Western literature, which is Greek mythology, is all about Zeus having all these outside kids. That's what the whole thing is about. With the book I'm working on now, I'm thinking about *The Odyssey* and Penelope and how women are supposed to wait. They are rewarded for waiting.

Coastlines: That idea of absolute faithfulness?

Jones: Yes, and how that works literally and metaphorically. I adore Greek mythology. I think about the people in it all the time.

Coastlines: I didn't even consider how mythology might have played into *Silver Sparrow*. This next question takes us in a slightly different direction. James is complex. He's complicated, and you can't

put him into one category. With the first line of the novel, “My father is a bigamist,” you want to assume certain things about him, but you break all of those stereotypes throughout the book. When you were developing the plot for *Silver Sparrow*, what was your goal? What were you trying to convey through Dana and Chaurisse’s interactions with James?

Jones: You know, I don’t really have a goal. It’s more of my read on it. I’m completely in the zone when I’m writing. I don’t puppet-master my characters. I puppet-master more in my revisions, but when I’m writing, I’m just letting my subconscious take it. I’m not a person who says, “My characters have a mind of their own.” When it comes to writing a book, I can say to my characters, “This is not a democracy,” but at the same time I give them wiggle room. I let them have freedom, but they’re not running away with the book.

Thinking about James and his daughters: James lives in a world where he did not know that he had an obligation to Dana. He believes himself to have gone above and beyond. Gwen believes him to have gone above and beyond. He believes himself to be doing the right thing in his own head. He has a moral code, and he listens to that moral code. He’s not an immoral or amoral person.

Our ideals on fatherhood and parenthood have changed a lot, but what haven’t changed are children’s needs. So even though at the time it was acceptable for people to have secret children like this, children have never found it acceptable. Even so, other adults would say, “Well, what’s he supposed to do? He made a mistake, he’s trying to do right,” which is how James sees himself. Which is how Raleigh sees him. Which is how everyone sees James, but children’s needs have never changed. All children need the daddy that wears the baby in the sling on the front, but they haven’t gotten it.

I do think that because James has this moral code he doesn’t come off as a despicable person. He feels as though if everyone stays in their lane, then things will be fine. He believes himself to be a good person. He thinks, “Every time a woman has told me she is having my baby, I have married her. I have left nobody out in the cold.”

Coastlines: I would agree. Great system.

Jones: Yeah. What I thought about when I was doing my revisions was, if there were no such thing as Chaurisse, would Dana believe herself to have had a decent father? If her parents were divorced and she saw her dad once a week like a lot of people do? If there were no such thing as Dana, would Chaurisse have a good dad? She had a very good dad. She has never once in her life felt unloved. So even when she finds out that he’s had this whole other life, it doesn’t change the fact that never in her life has she known what it’s like to feel unloved. Never. Dana says, “Everyone had loved you your whole life.” Dana

is like, “She needs to just shut up because everyone has always loved her.”

Coastlines: Dana is the one to introduce that element of doubt to Chaurisse. She’s the one that causes Chaurisse to look back on everything once she knows that she’s had a sister her entire life, but she didn’t know it.

Jones: Yes. Chaurisse feels lied to, but she’s never known that dark feeling of “you are not important.” Chaurisse has never known that, and Dana has never known anything but.

Coastlines: Very true.

Jones: I also think – and this is not in James’ defense – we think of Laverne as being trapped, but James was trapped in the marriage, too. He was a teenager, too. James and Laverne both had to marry a stranger. Nothing in the story would have happened, though, if people had access to contraception. All of these people’s lives are set in motion by the cruel randomness of reproduction.

I also think this whole story wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for this idea that working class women of color were expected to work in rich white people’s homes to the neglect of their own homes. This whole thing happened because Ms. Bunny could not be at home. This whole entire mess happened because of that. I really did think about that purposely. When I wrote this, everybody was goo-goo-ga-ga over *The Help*. It’s very difficult to be nostalgic about your maid or nanny if you factor in the fact that she has her own kids. That’s why in *The Help*, Abilene’s kid is dead.

Coastlines: She wouldn’t have been able to mother these other children if she were taking care of her own.

Jones: You cannot reconcile how it is that this woman is telling you that you are smart, kind, and important when her own child is home alone, eating cold sandwiches brought over by the neighbor. You know? That’s a story that is grossly under told.

Coastlines: Nobody talks about that. We hear the stories about the wonderful nannies and the great *au pairs*, but not their children.

Jones: Even in African-American literature that hardly ever comes up. That storyline is hardly ever developed. You have a little bit of it in *The Bluest Eye*, but that situation is so pathological you can’t even pull it apart to figure out what really went wrong in the Breedlove house. When I was a child, Bill Withers, my daddy, used to play his album, [which] had a song about a man recounting his life story.

He talks about being a child, at home, hungry, while his mother cooked steak for someone else. As a child I didn't get it. I was confused by this. My mother is an economist, so she wasn't cooking steak for anybody, including us. That Bill Withers song – it's called "Harlem" – left an impression on me, especially because it's set in the North.

Coastlines: So even still these things persist – it doesn't really matter the region.

Jones: Yes. The line says "I'm five years old/surely I'm cold/my mom's out cooking steak for someone else."

Coastlines: That's actually a great springboard to my next question about influences. I read an interview you did with NPR where you mentioned that Toni Morrison was one of your influences.

Jones: I think about Toni Morrison every single day. I'm not even exaggerating.

Coastlines: How could you not? I've read *Beloved* multiple times, and even still I finish that book and my heart feels like it's going to collapse.

Jones: And I think her most powerful characters are in *Song of Solomon*. Even though I'm much younger than Morrison, I think about *Song of Solomon* because I grew up in a very insular black neighborhood, so I think about the pressure of responsibility. The idea of the son being Jesus and Moses all rolled into one. I know that world. I'm deeply influenced by Morrison, and I'm always giving her little shout-outs that no one notices. I hope one day when I'm dead people will say, "You know she shouts out Morrison all the time."

Coastlines: Well, I feel horrible now because I've read your books and never noticed. It wasn't until I read the NPR interview that I wondered how much Morrison influenced you.

Jones: In the beginning of *The Untelling*, in the prologue Ariadne says, "Names that fit us like oversized coats, trimmed in seed pearl, gold braid, and the ideas of baby seals." Remember Jadine had that baby-seal coat in *Tar Baby*?

Coastlines: I missed that.

Jones: I'll spare you because there are a million of them. I just want her to know my love one day. All these books are evidence of my love.

Coastlines: We'll map them out one day. We'll find all the Toni Morrison Easter eggs.

Jones: That's exactly how I think of them. Can I just say one thing? I try to revise Morrison in some ways. *The Bluest Eye* is so important to me. Also, with *Silver Sparrow* and *Leaving Atlanta*, I wanted the dark girl to have a life. You can be dark and have a life. It's not the end of the world. You may get teased, but it won't be a soul-crushing teasing.

Coastlines: It's interesting that you bring up the dark girl because I noticed a parallel between Ariadne and Rochelle in *The Untelling*. Ariadne constantly compares herself to Rochelle. Aria is the dark one, Rochelle is the light one to the extent that Rochelle has white hair. Do you consider those relationships when you're writing?

Jones: I feel like Rochelle is an extremely strange-looking person, but the thing with her is that she grew up with love, and she's not anxious. That's the thing. If you were not made to feel anxious about your looks, then you just look at the world differently. I have a friend who grew up with such anxiety that even though she has what people call "light-skinned privilege," it's not doing anything for her because she doesn't have that in her heart. If you look at *Silver Sparrow*, Dana and her mother are stone cold foxes. Dana has a lot of problems, but not knowing she's a stone cold fox isn't one of them. I'm interested in the ways women come to understand themselves. Rochelle is a strange-looking person, but she feels good about herself. I don't think she thinks she's pretty. People misunderstand feeling pretty with self-esteem, and it's not the same thing. There's so much more to how you think about who you are.

Coastlines: Teach your daughter to value herself as a person not based on what she physically looks like.

Jones: Right. Dana believes herself to be a stone cold fox, but she has low self-esteem. She doesn't value herself. In my first book, the very dark girl is teased mercilessly by her peers, but her mama loves her, and she values herself as a human being. She doesn't think she's cute, she says that several times. People often say to me, "Octavia thinks she's ugly." Yes, Octavia thinks she's ugly as a lot of us do in the fifth grade, but that doesn't mean she thinks she's worthless. Pecola believes herself to be worthless. Octavia believes herself not to be cute. Two different things.

Coastlines: Two very different problems, and two problems that probably aren't even on the same level.

Jones: Yet people think it's the same. People really think it's the same thing. People think you should buy your daughter the proper Barbie doll to make her feel better about herself.

Coastlines: I don't think it's based on the Barbie.

Jones: Even so, if your daughter is affirmed by a Barbie doll, I don't think that's what you want to aim for. Those are the questions that I often look at. Self-esteem is very interesting to me. I'm interested in looking at different methods of self-worth.

Coastlines: Do you think these ways of valuing yourself, learning how to value yourself, are constructed and developed during childhood and your interactions with your parents?

Jones: Absolutely! Certainly. I always tell people to look at it the opposite way. Surely you know someone, probably a dude, whose mother has given him the impression that he is not God's gift to women, but God's gift to God. And regardless of the experience he may have to the contrary that he is not God's gift to God, he knows that he is God's gift to God because his mama told him he was God's gift to God. We see people with unreasonable self-regard, and they got it when they were little. They cannot be shaken of this unreasonable self-regard even though all evidence shows them that they may be mistaken.

I believe the same thing happens to people with low self-regard. Wonderful things happen to them, but they don't sink in. That's why you meet very famous and successful people who feel terrible about themselves. They're not right in the heart. They can win all the prizes and awards, but they're going to be a hot mess until they go to therapy. You can't achieve your way into self-esteem. You can't earn it.

Coastlines: You do need a level of self-awareness to recognize your faults, but that knowledge that you're valuable, that you are worth something as a person, does need to be instilled by your parents.

Jones: You can get it later, but you have to work for it. You're not going to stumble on it later.

Coastlines: Your parents are definitely that first interaction you have with the outside world, with something outside of yourself.

Jones: And they own you.

Coastlines: And they own you, so there's that. If the person who has ownership of you doesn't even see value in you, what good are you?

Jones: Like I said, you better hope you get a good set.

Coastlines: You better hope the parents you have like you.

Jones: Yes.

Coastlines: I'm curious about your writing process. What does writing look like for you? Do you sit down every day and write? Do you have set days where you say, "OK, I'm going to sit down and write"? Do you brainstorm?

Jones: I don't write every day. I just don't have something to say every day. I write frequently. When the story is going good, I write obsessively. When the story's not going good...eh. I will say this: I don't believe in writer's block. Everyone I know who says they have writer's block, they say they sat down to write once, and it wasn't going well, so they sat down and watched *Law & Order*. That's not writer's block. If you're watching *Law & Order*, you don't know if you have writer's block because you're not writing, you're watching *Law & Order*. This coming from a person who's watched a lot of *Law & Order* in the last six months, but I wouldn't describe it as writer's block. I would describe it as me avoiding the story.

There are two kinds of problems: there are writerly problems, and there are personal problems. A writerly problem is when you have a structural problem, or you don't know how to convey this. A personal problem is when there's something in the story that you don't want to mess with. And your writing teacher can't help you when it's a personal problem.

I write on manual typewriters. I love my typewriters. I have ten, and I want more. I love making all that racket. I love getting to the end of a line and being rewarded with that little "ding!"

With the computer it's very easy to delete. With a typewriter not so much, so if you encounter a wave of self-loathing on the typewriter, you won't throw away a day's work.

Coastlines: When you encounter those waves, do you keep the bits that might not make it into the novel?

Jones: I keep a lot of it, but I'm not obsessed about it. Once I finish the book I finish the book. I don't go hunting for a lost gem. I'm kind of relaxed about it. I love being a writer. I enjoy writing, so I just do it. I try to do it with a certain sense of pleasure, which keeps me from being overly anal about anything. The typewriter helps with that sense of play. You know I'm making all that noise, and it's fun. It's a little joyous thing.

I think when you're writing your first draft you should have fun, and when you're revising you should be serious. I revise intellectually, and I write through instinct, impulse, and intuition. I revise like a scholar. At one time in my life I was in a Ph.D. program in literature. I didn't finish it, but I know that type of thinking. I analyze my work in the late revisions. If I see something that could be interpreted problematically, I'll change it.

Coastlines: So at the end you turn a critical eye on your work?

Jones: At the end of the process I read the book like I'm not the one who wrote it. I changed the end of *Silver Sparrow*. At first I had a dark, kind of flat ending where nobody blamed James. And a friend of mine read it and she said, "Do you really want to say that? Do you really want to say that? Do you really imagine a world where nobody sees this as wrong? I get what you're saying that the general cultural belief is that Dana and her mother are wrong. But nobody has any sense?" I thought, OK, and I did a lottery: who gets to have some sense? It added texture, but it didn't change the overall ending. That's the stuff I do at the very end.

Coastlines: Before it goes to print, you sit down and analyze.

Jones: Before it goes to my editor. When I write, I write what my head tells me to write. I don't worry about whether someone has done it before. I don't think, "Hasn't that story been told?" Also, every story sounds bananas when you describe it. Can you imagine? Let's say you meet a woman on the bus, and she says she's writing a book. You ask, "What's that book about?" She answers, "Oh, it's about this woman who killed her baby, and the baby comes back and tries to take her man." You'd go, "That's insane."

All books are crazy. All plots sound crazy. It's the execution of the plot that makes it worthwhile. Every good book sounds insane.

Coastlines: If you try to boil down the plot of the greatest novel, it'll sound ridiculous.

Jones: She kills her baby, and it tries to steal her man. But no. But yes.

Coastlines: But there's so much more, I swear.

Jones: You have to be careful telling people what your new book is about because sometimes they'll try to discourage you. You got this. You can handle it. Although they're not exactly discouraging you because it sounds insane. They're all insane. If it's not insane, it's not going to be a good book. A good

book should be able to perform a magic trick.

Coastlines: What do you mean by that?

Jones: Let's go back to *Beloved*. Morrison took that crazy plot and turned it into a great work of literature that you're forever changed by. I [once] read the description of a short story, and I thought, "This isn't for me." It's about these two men, one of them is a ne'er do well, the other is an almost ne'er do well. One of their fathers dies, they go to the dead father's house to collect some things, and there's an alligator in the backyard. I thought, "I am not here for alligators!" Fifteen minutes later, I'm in Starbucks sobbing.

Coastlines: That's the magic trick.

Jones: It's just like any magic trick. The magician shows you the card and asks, "Is this your card?" Next thing you know, he's pulling it out of your ear. That's why we read. The magic trick is in the execution.

When I was a child, Judy Blume sucked me into those stories. If someone walked up to me as a child and said, "I'm going to tell you a story about a girl trying to get her bra," I would have said, "Get in line." I didn't know they would be such enduring stories for me, and I would remember Margaret for the rest of my life.

Coastlines: These characters become friends and people you care about and root for.

Jones: As a writer, you take your imaginary friends and make them other people's imaginary friends.

Coastlines: That's pretty accurate.

Jones: That's the magic trick!

Coastlines: I'm going to make my imaginary friend your imaginary friend, and you're going to like it.

Jones: That's magic – to make your imaginary friend real to someone else.