

## Hillary Jordan PV Intern Journal

By Heather Tufford

Winter With the Writers 2018 began with the opening reception and movie premier of the adaptation of Hillary Jordan's 2008 book *Mudbound* at the Enzian Theatre in Maitland. Carol Frost, Director of the Rollins College Winter With the Writers program, introduced Hillary Jordan, kicking off Professor Frost's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Festival. The Interns and guests were excited to meet her and learn about her journey writing such an acclaimed book about the Jim Crow Mississippi life of two families in the Delta during the 40's. Quoting Director Dee Reece, Hillary Jordan expressed society's need for socially conscious films depicting racial issues that still prevail today. Jordan believes that it is through our identification with the lives of characters that we are changed.

The movie was graphic and differed from the book which sparked questions around Jordan's experience of letting go. She explained the process of *Mudbound* becoming a movie. Film agent Virgil Williams read the book and was intrigued by the WWII soldiers and the negro army. He told Hillary Jordan he related because of family members with a similar experience of segregation in the army. He wanted to focus in on the two war heroes: Jamie and Ronsel. This was a different focus than Hillary Jordan intended with Laura taking the lead, and expressed to him that her only regret was not having a further scene with Jamie and Ronsel in the saw-mill. Williams made this happen. Jordan revealed that after three years, and more than 150 pages she created the character Ronsel. He would change everything. He had a strong voice for black Americans and gave Jamie a more intense role through their friendship. She knew Ronsel's voice would tell the socially engaging story. Hillary kindly answered each question in depth. The Movie was a big hit, except the ending is more "Hollywood" whereas the book is not.

At lunch with Hillary we learned she writes well in beautiful places, that Pappy had narrated his own burial and she had to "un-voice" him, and that too large portions in a restaurant is just excessive.

Miss. Jordan did a class on "voice" for the interns and guests in the Sun Trust Auditorium. The interns got some practice developing a character in the first person paying attention to using tone, diction, and syntax, as well as punctuation for emphasis. She said *Mudbound's* Laura was the only character that got to use a semi colon in her book because she's a school teacher. We talked about all the advantages of writing in the first person and the disadvantages; such as, characters are harder to write if they are not like you, you can't "know" what others think, you may be stuck with one perspective, and one can tend toward exposition.

In the Bush Auditorium Hillary Jordan did a wonderful reading of her characters. She was thoughtful and gracious in describing the development of characters in her book giving us a better understanding of the work that went into the eight year, and eleven draft process of creating *Mudbound*. "Each chapter," she said, "was revised at least 10 times." And she read every sentence aloud several times in character. Hillary Jordan explained her process to us "I inhabited all the characters. That's my job." She was told that no fiction author has written an African American in first person before. She wanted them to have a voice. "Entrenched bigotry was something I wanted to address," Jordan said Thursday evening. She wouldn't recommend anyone else write their first novel using the voices of 6 different characters (terribly difficult). When it comes to themes she believes *Mudbound* has the theme

of “voice” in the end, but she stated “I don’t write themed books, I write about characters.” Her most loved author is Faulkner though she listed many favorites.

Winter With the Writers 2018 thanks Hillary Jordan for the knowledge and enthusiasm she imparts to us, and we look forward to her sequel to *Mudbound*.