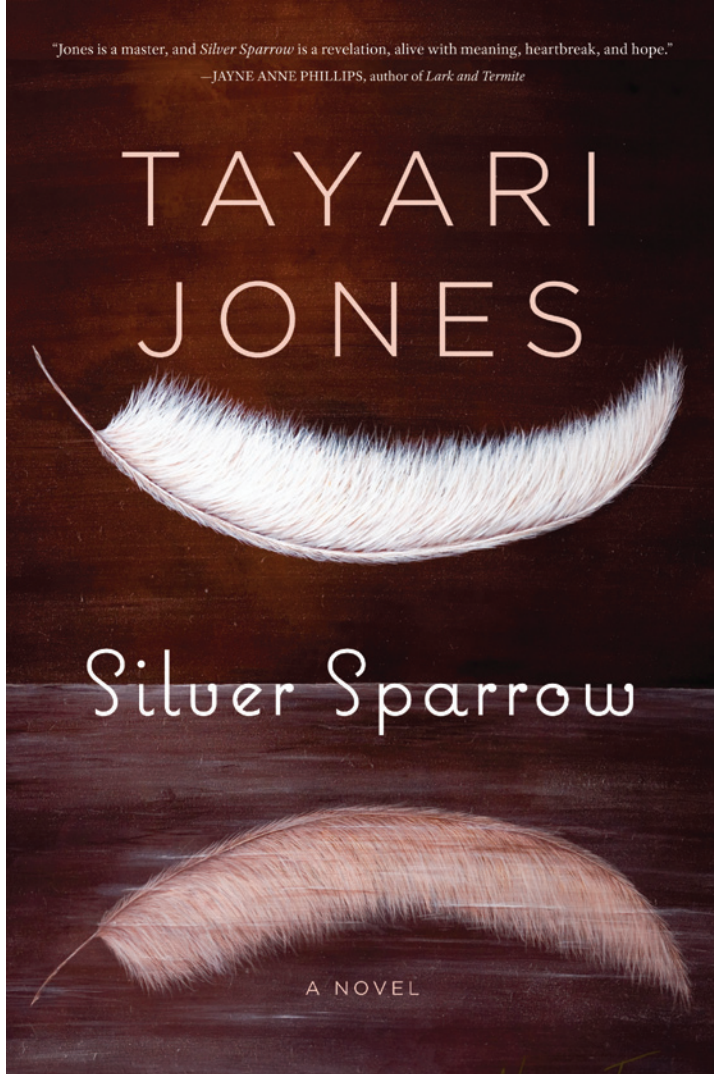


READER'S GUIDE TO *SILVER SPARROW* BY TAYARI JONES



With the opening line of *Silver Sparrow*, “My father, James Witherspoon is a bigamist,” Tayari Jones unveils a breathtaking story about a man’s deception, a family’s complicity, and the teenage girls caught in the middle.

Set in a middle-class neighborhood in Atlanta in the 1980s, the novel revolves around James Witherspoon’s families— the public one and the secret one. When the daughters from each family meet and form a friendship, only one of them knows they are sisters. It is a relationship destined to explode when secrets are revealed and illusions shattered. As Jones explores the backstories of her rich and flawed characters, she also reveals the joy, and the destruction, they brought to each other’s lives.

At the heart of it all are the two girls whose lives are at stake, and like the best writers, Jones portrays the fragility of her characters with raw authenticity as they seek love, demand attention, and try to imagine themselves as women.

In Her Own Words

Silver Sparrow represents the most honest display of all my obsessions. I consider it the third in my trilogy of Atlanta novels, which began with *Leaving Atlanta* and moved to *The Untelling* and is now complete with *Silver Sparrow*. This is not to say that I will not write about Atlanta again, but these three stories fit together and tell a layered story of a southern girlhood.

I am my parents' second child, their only daughter. I grew up in a sort of picket fence life, full of post-civil rights promise and optimism. My father is a wonderful man, and he is not a bigamist. But at the edges of my life have always been my two sisters—we share a father, but we have different mothers. I grew up in Atlanta; they grew up in my father's small hometown in Louisiana. As the "only" daughter in a house full of boys, I always longed for these sisters who lived so far away from me. I saw them seldom and they loomed large in my imagination. If you read my other novels closely, there is always a sister out there that the character can't quite reach. This issue is always there for me, a pot simmering on the back burner, that sometimes boils over.

This novel is mostly talked about as a book about bigamy, but it's really a story about being a daughter. The idea that Gwen and Laverne share a husband is titillating—and I will admit that Gwen's rationales really intrigued me. However, all siblings must share their parents. Although there is all the deception and mind games that shape Chaurisse and Dana's relationship to James, who hasn't felt that uneasy sense that she may not be the chosen child? In my fiction, I try and take real life emotions and cook them until all the water is gone and we are left with a certain raw truth.

The truth of this story is that everyone in it wants to be loved. All the characters want a home and security. The real question is how far will a person go to be secure and can you want security so badly that you destroy any chance of achieving it? And the final question is how can this be healed?

There are many Silver Sparrows out there—unacknowledged daughters and sons. If this novel opens up the conversation or eases some of the shame, then I will be satisfied that this novel is a success.

Discussion Questions

1. Could this story have had a happy ending?
2. Dana and Chaurisse both tell stories of what happened before they were born. What did you think of this technique? Are there stories about things that you cannot possibly remember that you feel almost like you witnessed?
3. There are many moments of truth in *SILVER SPARROW*. What should Gwen have done when she discovered her pregnancy?
4. Gwen tells Dana that they have an advantage over Laverne and Chaurisse because they know the truth. Is this true?
5. Should Gwen have married Raleigh when she had the chance?
6. Is it possible to have a healthy relationship that is not monogamous?
7. There is so much talk these days about fatherhood—contrasting the deadbeat dad with the Bill Cosby-type father. How do you evaluate James Witherspoon, who is both?
8. Is Laverne's life better or worse for having married James? What about Gwen?
9. Why do you think Raleigh is so loyal to James? Is this devotion warranted?
10. Tayari Jones often writes about the way real people interact with history, for example Gwen's feelings about the death of Martin Luther King. What do you think of this technique? Have you interacted with history? How did it affect your personal story.
11. In the chapter, "Love and Happiness" there is an appearance of an actual historical figure—the woman who threw the grits on Al Green. Were you familiar with this story? If you were, did this chapter change your understanding of it?
12. Which of the characters was your favorite? Who would you like to know more about?