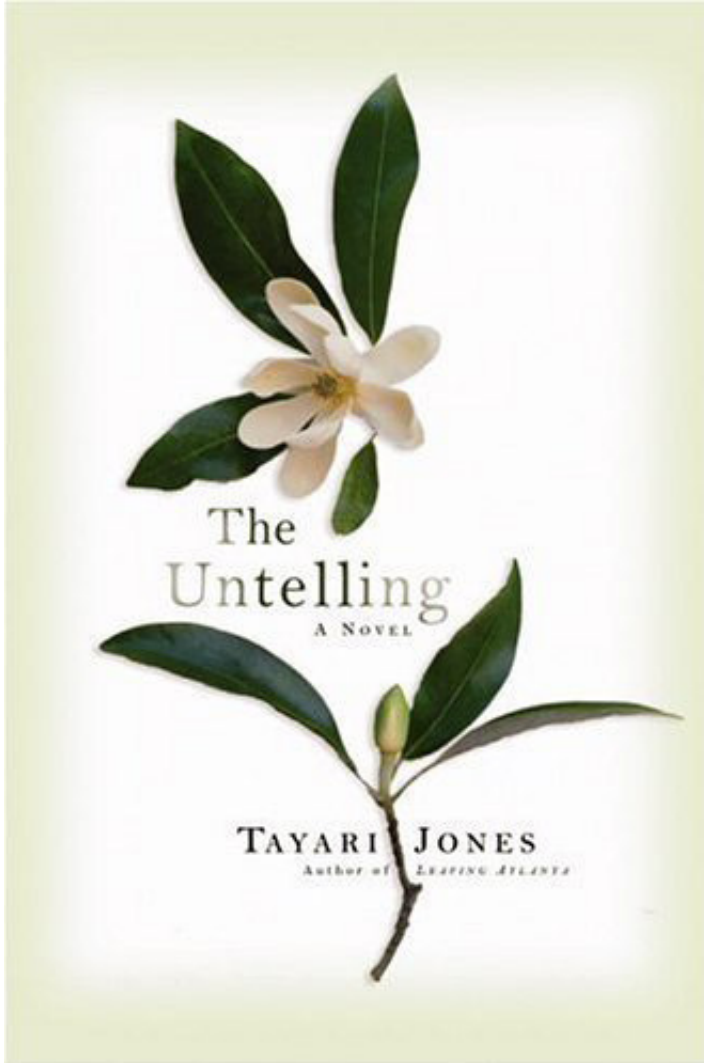


READER'S GUIDE TO *THE UNTELLING* BY TAYARI JONES



Tayari Jones paints a vivid, unforgettable portrait of a woman seeking to overcome the trauma of her past.

When nine-year-old Ariadne Jackson loses her father and baby sister in an auto accident, her life in a black middle-class Atlanta neighborhood changes forever. Her eccentric mother grows more erratic, locking Aria and her surviving sister, Hermione, out of the house on Halloween or serving them raw chicken as a punishment for bad behavior. These little cruelties push Hermione to distance herself from the family, leaving Ariadne to fend for herself.

Years later, at 25, Aria believes she has surmounted the traumas of her youth, until she thinks she is pregnant but instead finds that she is infertile. Her life becomes layered with lies and half-truths as she fears she will lose the promise of family and a normal life. It is the untelling of these tales that leads her finally to accept the odd turns a life may take. Teens will appreciate Ariadne's dilemma as she wrestles first with the implications of a child out-of-wedlock and then the more difficult truth that she will never bear her own children. They will also understand how she must unravel the untruths she has told, just as her namesake in Greek mythology unrolled a length of string to rescue her lover from a deadly maze.

In Her Own Words

This is a novel which I wrote three times before I finally got it right. Each time, I'd finish a draft, I would sit back and say, "That's it. I'm finished." But the story still gnawed at me. One thing I have learned about writing stories, if the characters are still haunting me, then I am not finished yet. Deadlines came and deadlines went, but the story wasn't yet complete, there was some clasp that was not yet fastened, some string left dangling. So I returned to my writing table again and again until the book was finished.

Sometimes I wonder if this novel was so hard to write because this time, the subject matter is family and the challenges of this story are questions of courage and forgiveness. For me, kinship has always been a baffling concept which has become more baffling as I have become a woman, contemplating the idea of my own family. Forgiveness has not been my strong suit either. I am not exaggerating when I say that I until quite recently, I still held a grudge against a second grade teacher who did me wrong. So, in order to write a book about forgiveness, I had to figure out how to forgive. To write about family, I had to embrace my own relatives. And to write about courage, I had to learn to be brave.

Aria Jackson, the main character of this book, is a black women whose life isn't turning out quite the way that she had hoped. Writing her character was difficult. I kept wanting to take the easy way out—to make her an exceptional person, a role model on paper. But instead, I worked hard to be honest, to keep her true to what I know about human nature: that we are all vulnerable; that we lie and feel bad about it; and that many of the terrible things that happen to us are not our fault. Like all of us, Aria wants what she cannot have. She is more wounded that she would ever admit. But like all of us, she has the tools to change her life. The only question is whether she will be brave enough to try.

Discussion Questions

1. At the heart of *The Untelling* is the question of how to deal with the past. Aria tries to choose between her mother's approach that a traumatic even can never be overcome and her sister's idea that a person has to put the past behind her. In this novel, which way of dealing with the past is more effective?
2. For much of the novel, Aria is afraid to tell Dwayne her terrible secret. How do you think he would have reacted if she had told him the truth, right up front?
3. Aria and Rochelle live in a neighborhood that is in the middle of urban-renewal. Are there such neighborhoods in your community? What are the pros and cons of such projects?
4. Aria and her sisters were all given unusual names by their parents. Keisha, the young mother, has her own ideas about the best way to name a child. What are your thoughts about this subject?
5. Keisha becomes very angry when she thinks that Lawrence may want to adopt her baby. Who do you think would be the better parent?
6. Whenever Aria's mother becomes angry with her, she says, "This is not what Dr. King died for." What is the role of history in this novel? What historical event "haunts" your own life?
7. At the end of the story, Aria's mother confesses her own terrible secret. Does this make you feel more sympathetic to her? Does it justify her behavior toward her daughters?
8. Infertility is a subject that is talked about "behind closed doors". Why do you think there is such a cultural stigma on the subject? Why do you think there has been so little discussion on this issue, especially in the ways that it affects African-American women?
9. The novel's ending is sort of open-ended. What do you think will become of Aria in terms of her relationship with her family? Dwayne? Keisha?
10. How do you interpret the title of the novel?