

The complexity of junior



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Although Junior in *Salvage the Bones* is only 10 years old, his character not only is complicated but also provides complexity to the rest of Ward's novel. His birth resulted in the death of Mama, which leaves the rest of the family motherless and alone to fend for themselves in the Pit. Without a mother or even peers close to his age, the youngest of the Bastiste siblings was forced to grow up more quickly than the average 10-year-old. Despite this, Junior's brothers and sister still view him as a baby, and never seem to recognize that he has experienced horrors that have forced him to grow far beyond his years. During the majority of the novel, Junior is constantly trying to prove to Randall, Skeetah, and Esch that he is, in fact, mature enough to be involved with their lives. However, when Katrina hits the Pit, there is a clear retraction of the brave and mature boy that Junior has proved to be, leaving the reader with a only a scared shell, traumatized by the stormy waters.

Junior has a much deeper understanding of his surroundings than his siblings are aware of. When all of the Batiste siblings decide to go to the basketball game to support Randall, for example, Junior is quick to realize Esch's distress after the incident in the bathroom with Manny. In this moment Esch describes Junior's actions, " I want to let Junior go ahead of me back around the building to the gym, so I walk slowly, but then he walks slower so he doesn't leave me, and it takes us 10 minutes to walk around to the front" (147). She goes on to say, " He loops his arm around my elbow like he is escorting me" (147). Although Esch expects Junior to run off with the other children in the gym, leaving her alone, he does not. He is acutely aware of the pain that Manny had put her through only a few minutes prior in the

bathroom, and although Esch may not think of him as mature, he clearly is able to pick up on what is happening around him.

Junior's short life has been riddled with adversity, as he has been exposed to much more than an average 10 year old boy. Daddy, who is often drunk and uninterested in Junior's upbringing, sheds the burden of his youngest son's life onto the older children. As a result, Junior has not been protected from many of the more mature activities that his older siblings participate in.

While the family and Big Henry are on the way to Randall's basketball game, Esch narrates, " I am glad to be sitting in the backseat by the window in the car, Junior's bony rump squirming in my lap, Skeetah in the middle of pulling at the blunt, Marquise next to him at the other window, opaque through a cloud of smoke" (140). Esch's nonchalant description of the events seems to mask the strange reality that, rather than protecting Junior from illegal substances, they are open to smoking marijuana within feet of him inside of a closed car. Despite all of this, Junior is still considered the baby, and is treated as if he is oblivious to the happenings in the Pit. In one of the most eye-opening moments in the novel, after Junior finds Daddy's severed finger with the his wedding band still in place, he exclaims, "' I know about his hand and the beer and his medicine... I saw it when he smashed it. I found it... I see things!'" (185). It is clear that this moment resulted from mounting frustration on Junior's part due to his family's belief that he is simply a naive child, with no ideas or concerns about what is happening around him.

Hurricane Katrina brings out a different side of Junior, as he no longer tries to be mature, but is clearly petrified by the storm and dependent on his older siblings. While the siblings are braving Katrina, just barely holding onto

survival, the usually talkative and opinionated Junior says next to nothing throughout the entirety of the chapter. In the days following the hurricane, when they have finally made it out of the flooded Pit and found safe haven at Big Henry's house, Junior is still so traumatized by near-death experience that he is unable to let go of Randall. On their trip to see the destruction in St. Catherine's, the neighboring town, Esch narrates, " Junior is scrambling onto Randall's back again, and Randall loops and knots his arms under Junior's legs. Junior's cheek brushes against Randall's: I haven't seen him set Junior down since the hurricane" (251). It is clear that the hurricane caused a retraction of Junior's " mature beyond his years" persona. In just one day, the relentless, stubborn, and brave character that the rest of the novel describes is suddenly transformed into a frightened child. In the final two chapters of the novel, it is evident that not even Junior's difficult life could not prepare him for the horrors that Katrina posed. Though he may have more life experience than a typical 10-year-old, he is still just that, a young boy.

Junior's siblings treat him unfairly throughout the duration of the novel. They constantly expose him to events meant for people much older, failing to realize that their actions are inappropriate for a small boy. As a result, Junior is forced to grow up exceedingly quickly, as even Esch describes him as her " shield" (140). By the end of the novel, Junior shows strong signs of becoming a more mature protector; however, Katrina demonstrates that he is still a young, and very scared, boy who may not necessarily be ready for responsibility to be placed upon him.