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## A Novel Set in Hurricane Katrina Wins National Book Award



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Award winners, from left, Stephen Greenblatt for nonfiction, Thanhha Lai for young people's literature, Nikky Finney for poetry and Jesmyn Ward for fiction

(You can download an MP3 of this story at [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com))

DOUG JOHNSON: Welcome to AMERICAN MOSAIC in VOA Special English.

(MUSIC)

I'm Doug Johnson. Today we play music from the first album of the West Coast band "Blouse" ...

And we answer a question about Virginia's state motto ...

But first, we tell about the National Book Awards and one of the writers who was honored Wednesday night.

(MUSIC)

### National Book Award

DOUG JOHNSON: On Wednesday night, four American writers received ten thousand dollars and a lot of publicity for their work. They were recognized at the

National Book Awards ceremony in New York City. Faith Lapidus tells about the awards and one of the winners.

FAITH LAPIDUS: The National Book Awards were established in nineteen fifty. A non-profit group, the National Book Foundation, administers the awards. There are prizes for four categories of books -- fiction, nonfiction, poetry and children's.

Writers of the same categories choose the winners. Some of the judges are past winners themselves. National Book Awards also have gone to some of the most famous American writers. Past winners have included novelists William Faulkner and Alice Walker, and poets Elizabeth Bishop and Philip Levine. Mister Levine is currently serving as Poet Laureate of the United States.

This year Jesmyn Ward won the fiction award for her book, "Salvage the Bones." It is just the second book from the thirty-four year old writer. Her first, "Where the Line Bleeds," came out in two thousand eight.

"Salvage the Bones" tells about twelve days in the life of a family as Hurricane Katrina hits their Mississippi town. The father of four is a single parent who drinks too much alcohol. The children worry about having too little food. And the only sister, fifteen year old Esch, is pregnant.

Jesmyn Ward told the crowd at the ceremony that she wanted to write about the poor and black and rural people of the South. She herself is from Mississippi. She also said it was the death of her brother that moved her to start writing. She said the experience taught her that life is weak and unpredictable.

JESMYN WARD: "I wanted to do something with my time here that would have meaning. My first stories were attempts to honor my brother. To write the kind of life that he might have lived. As I wrote more my focus widened."

Jesmyn Ward said her writing is a life's work, and that she is just at the beginning.

Poet Nikky Finney won a National Book Award for her book, "Head Off and Split." The non-fiction award went to writer Stephen Greenblatt for "The Swerve: How the World Became Modern." And Thanhha Lai won the award for Young People's Literature. Her book is called "Inside Out and Back Again."

### **Virginia's State Motto**

DOUG JOHNSON: Our question this week comes to us from William Ming. He wants to know how the state of Virginia chose the words, "Thus always to

tyrants" as its motto. To better understand this saying, you need to examine the state seal of Virginia.

This is the official symbol or picture that is found on the state flag. A state seal also may be cut out of wood, painted and hung on a wall. You might find one in a court room or other state government building.



Virginia flag

The Virginia seal shows a woman holding a spear in her right hand. Her left foot rests on the body of a man. A crown has fallen off his head and lies nearby. The woman is meant to be the Roman goddess of goodness and truth. The man is a tyrant, someone who illegally held power, and has been killed by the woman.

The words with this picture are Latin. "Sic semper tyrannis" means that what is moral, good, and true will always put an end to those who rule without the approval of the people.

Some historians say the Virginia state seal was the idea of four men: George Mason, Richard Henry Lee, George Wythe, and Robert Carter Nicholas. They were among the leaders of Virginia after it and twelve other North American colonies declared their independence from England.

When Roman leader Julius Caesar was killed, it was reported that his former friend, Brutus, said the words, "Sic semper tyrannis." When John Wilkes Booth shot President Abraham Lincoln in eighteen sixty-five, Booth shouted the same words as he began his escape. Lincoln had freed the slaves and fought against the southern states in America's civil war. This had angered Booth, and led him to kill the president.

All fifty states in America have mottos. Many are like Virginia's. "We dare defend our rights" are the official words of the state of Alabama. "The people rule" is

written on the flag of Arkansas. Massachusetts uses this saying: "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty."

Other states use religious thoughts in their motto. The state seal of Arizona has "God enriches" written on it. If you see a flag from Kentucky, you will find these words: "Let us be grateful to God." Colorado says there is "Nothing without God." And, the words, "In God We Trust" are found on the money used in the United States. That is also the motto of the state of Florida.

Michigan has a motto that deals with its geography. Since Michigan is nearly surrounded by the Great Lakes, the state motto is: "If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look around you." The state of Indiana lies near the middle on a map of the United States. Indiana's motto is: "The Crossroads of America."

One of the shortest mottos is that of California. On the seal of this state is the Greek word, "Eureka." In English that means, "I have found it." And to Mr. Ming who sent us this question, we say "gratius ago" ... thank you.

## **Blouse**

DOUG JOHNSON: Blouse is a new three member band from the city of Portland, Oregon. Their sound is a throw back in time to the nineteen eighties, and even earlier on some songs. Bob Doughty has more about the group and its first album, also called "Blouse."

BOB DOUGHTY: Blouse is lead singer and guitarist Charlie Hilton and two bass players, Patrick Adams and Jacob Portrait. Portrait also was the main producer of the new album.

Blouse's music is a dreamy sound that heavily depends on electronic synthesizers. Some of the songs could be right at home on an album by the Cure or the Smiths of nineteen eighties. "Time Travel" is one example.

(MUSIC)

Although Jacob Portrait is a member of Blouse, he has never even seen the band perform. Hilton and Adams have to play on their own. Portrait has been too busy with his membership in another group, the Unknown Mortal Orchestra. But, Hilton and Adams say he was essential in making the album.

Here they all perform "Firestarter," from "Blouse."

(MUSIC)

Charlie Hilton and Patrick Adams met in art school. Both had been playing music a while. They exchanged some of their recordings and liked what they heard.

Both dream of doing a series of shows in Europe. They say they especially want to visit France. We leave you with Blouse performing "Into Black."

(MUSIC)

DOUG JOHNSON: I'm Doug Johnson. Our program was written by Jim Tedder and Caty Weaver, who was also our producer.

If you have a question about American life, send it to [mosaic@voanews.com](mailto:mosaic@voanews.com) or click on the Contact Us link at [voaspecialenglish.com](http://voaspecialenglish.com).

Join us again next week for music and more on AMERICAN MOSAIC in VOA Special English.