



STORYLAB

PRESENTS

JEWELL PARKER RHODES'S

Ninth Ward

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Ninth Ward*

Twelve-year-old Lanesha lives with her grandmother Mama Ya-Ya and her dog Spot in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, Louisiana. Lanesha was born with a caul, which is a thin skin over her face. Her family believes the caul gave her a special ability to see and talk with spirits.

As Hurricane Katrina gets closer, Mama Ya-Ya, who can see the future, begins to have powerful dreams about the coming storm. Even though the city tells everyone to leave, they decide to stay in their home. They believe they can make it through the hurricane together.

When the storm hits, it is worse than they imagined. They hide in the bathtub, but the house shakes hard from the wind and rain.

During a quiet moment in the storm, Lanesha's dead mother's spirit tells her to go to the attic. Soon the house is surrounded by flood water. Lanesha, Mama Ya-Ya, and Spot go up to the attic to stay safe. Lanesha's friend TaShon joins them in the attic. He was separated from his family. He arrives just as Mama Ya-Ya is dying.



In Ninth Ward, Lanesha and her friend TaShon face a deadly flood. They climb onto a rooftop and use a rowboat to survive the rising water.

With the flood water rising inside the attic, Lanesha knows she and TaShon must get to the roof. They find a small axe, using it to break open the attic window. She and TaShon, along with Spot, climb out onto the roof. They know they will need to leave their home for good. They spend the night waiting for someone to rescue them, but no one comes. As they hold on to each other, they keep saying the word fortitude, meaning "strength," to stay brave.

Finally, they see an old broken rowboat floating nearby. They get into the boat and start moving through the water full of broken pieces from houses and trees. After a dangerous trip, they are rescued by two men in a motorboat.

AN EXCERPT FROM *NINTH WARD*

Lanesha and TaShon face rising floodwaters in their neighborhood. They climb onto a roof to stay above the water. They find a floating tree trunk and use it to push a rowboat they spotted nearby.



Anyone coming by would think we were crazy. A dog. Two kids sitting on a roof, just above water, holding a piece of a tree.

But that's the point. No one is coming. At least, not yet. I blink. Maybe never.

I look out at the expanse of water. My neighborhood is buried as surely as my mother is buried in St. Louis Cemetery. As Mama Ya Ya is buried inside in the water.

"TaShon, I've got to get in the water." I look at the water. It's nasty. But what choice do I have?

"You'll drown, Lanesha."

"No, I won't," I say firmly. "Together, we'll push the trunk and I'll leap at the end. Off the roof. Try to hit the rowboat. Use my body's motion to set it free."

"Let's stand." I start standing, feeling TaShon rising with me, wobbling a bit.

"We need to do this, TaShon. I'll say, 'One. Two. Three. Push.' Got it?" I don't look back to see if TaShon agrees. I somehow know that he won't disappoint me. We'll be a team. I scream, "One, two, three! Push!"

We push, a huge effort, and I run right off the roof, and splash in the dirty water.

I hold my breath, grunt as I push. Then, I sink down. Down into a darkness darker than night. Darker than the attic without lights.

My eyes sting. I kick. Hard.

I cough out the awful water and try to swim. Try to knock the boat free with the trunk. Me and TaShon have got the boat's tip facing more north. Angling into the water, instead of toward the house.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jewell Parker Rhodes



Jewell Parker Rhodes

Jewell Parker Rhodes is an award-winning author and educator who grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has written more than a dozen books for young readers and adults. Often, she blends history, real events, and imagination to tell powerful stories. Rhodes studied at Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Michigan, and she has taught creative writing at several universities.

Her novel *Ninth Ward* was inspired by her own visits to New Orleans and her desire to show what life was like in the Ninth Ward during Hurricane Katrina. She wanted to

capture the real experiences of the people there—especially the close-knit Black community. Rhodes also added magical elements to bring the story alive for young readers. In the book, twelve-year-old Lanesha faces the storm and its dangers. Lanesha is guided by her grandmother's visions and the spirits she can see. Rhodes has said that combining history with magic helped her portray both the tragedy and the hope she saw in people's stories.

When *Ninth Ward* was published, it received wide praise from critics and readers. It was named a Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book and was recognized by School Library Journal for its emotional depth and vivid storytelling. Reviewers highlighted how Rhodes honored the real-life experiences of Hurricane Katrina survivors while creating a story that was accessible and engaging for young readers.

Rhodes continues to write books that focus on communities and events often missing from children's literature. Her graphic novel *Ghost Boys* talks about police violence, and her novel *Towers Falling* explores what happened after 9/11. In *Sugar*, Rhodes deals with the issue of slavery. In her works, Rhodes gives young readers stories that are both meaningful and unforgettable. Through her writing, Rhodes has built a career helping young people see history, community, and courage in new ways.

TEXT CONNECTION

Hurricane Katrina



In the middle of this picture you can see the break in the levee.

Water can travel quickly when a strong storm hits, and New Orleans is a city surrounded by water. The mighty Mississippi River curves around it like a giant snake's body. Lake Pontchartrain is to the north, and the Gulf of Mexico is to the south. Furthermore, most of New Orleans sits below sea level.

To protect itself, New Orleans built levees, or huge walls of earth and concrete. For many years, these levees held when storms hit. But they had a hidden weakness: They were not built sturdy enough for a very strong storm.

When Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005, it was like filling up a bathtub way too full. The hurricane pushed massive amounts of water from both the Gulf of Mexico

and Lake Pontchartrain toward the city. Scientists called it a storm surge. It was like a giant wall of water, as tall as a two-story house in some places. The pressure was incredibly strong, like the force of thousands of fire hoses.

The levees started failing in more than 50 different places. In some spots, water simply poured over the top. In others, the powerful pressure caused the walls to crack and collapse. The soil underneath got so soggy that entire sections slid away, like wet sand castles collapsing.

When the levees broke, water rushed into neighborhoods. Within hours, about 80% of New Orleans was underwater. In some areas, the water was 20 feet deep. That is about the same as two school buses stacked on top of each other.

Engineers later concluded that some of the levees were not tall enough. Others weren't strong enough. After Hurricane Katrina, billions of dollars have been spent to rebuild. There is a stronger system of levees, flood walls, and pumps to better protect New Orleans from future hurricanes.



This wall is part of the new flood protections installed in New Orleans.

TEXT REFLECTION

The Veil and Other Beliefs in Lanesha's World



The ghosts Lanesha sees are ancestors and community members who have died. These ghosts still feel connected to their home and loved ones.

In the book *Ninth Ward*, Lanesha is special from the moment she's born. She comes into the world with a thin membrane covering her face, a birth caul. According to her family's beliefs, a baby born with a caul is protected from drowning. It has the ability to see ghosts and spirits. It's like being born with a veil over your eyes that lets you see

into another world. This belief is a big part of why Lanesha can see her dead mother's ghost. It is why she can interact with the spirits of New Orleans, which she calls her "unseen friends."

Supernatural beliefs are also a part of everyday life for many people in the real world. These beliefs are often passed down through generations. The culture of New Orleans is a unique blend of traditions, including French, Spanish, African, and Caribbean influences. Cultural practices might include the religion of Voodoo. People might honor ancestor spirits or use charms for protection. Ghost stories are common. The cities' cemeteries are sometimes seen as gateways between the living and the dead.

Jewell Parker Rhodes, author of *Ninth Ward*, explores these beliefs in the story. The character Mama Ya-Ya, for example, is a seer and a midwife. She represents the strong spiritual traditions of the community. There are also the "ghosts" Lanesha sees; they are ancestors and community members who have died but not left. They still feel connected to their home and loved ones. These spirits are a source of comfort and guidance for Lanesha, especially after the storm.

By understanding the folklore of New Orleans, you can better understand how Lanesha's "gifts" are a natural and powerful part of who she is. This makes her story of survival not just a tale of physical strength, but one of spiritual and emotional resilience as well.

What Is Magical Realism? Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Ninth Ward* is considered an example of magical realism. Magical realism consists of:

- a made-up story but set in the real world;
- a conflict that could happen today; and
- magical elements that are treated as ordinary.

Keep Reading: Want to read more of *Ninth Ward*?

- Go to your library and get a copy of *Ninth Ward*

If you like *Ninth Ward*, then you might also like to read these realistic fiction texts:

- *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan
- *The Jumbies* by Tracey Baptiste
- *The Inquisitor's Tale* by Adam Gidwitz

Start Writing: Inspired to write your own magical realism?

Consider this prompt to get started:

- “Everyone was panicking but me. I knew it was time to use the power I’ve been keeping secret, even if no one else would believe it was real . . .”

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