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Discussion Questions:

Jewel by Bret Lott

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About the Author:

Bret Lott is a native of Los Angeles, California. His parents were raised in Mississippi and East Texas and relocated to Los Angeles in the 1950's. It is this Southern heritage -- all the way back to the War Between the States -- on which Mr. Lott has drawn in writing *Jewel*. He is the author of five highly acclaimed novels, *The Man Who Owned Vermont*, *A Stranger's House*, *Jewel*, *Reed's Beach*, and *The Hunt Club*, as well as two collections of widely anthologized short stories, *A Dream of Old Leaves* and *How to Get Home*, and a memoir, *Fathers, Sons, and Brothers*. He lives with his wife and two sons near Charleston, South Carolina, and teaches at the College of Charleston and Vermont College.

1. Jewel's mother referred to the stories of who Jewel was and where she came from as "stones in your pocket." What did she mean by this? What were Jewel's "stones" and how did they affect the course of her life?
2. "I say unto you that the baby you be carrying be yo' hardship, be yo' test in this world. This by my prophesying unto you, Miss Jewel." These words of Cathedral not only carried great portent, but also haunted Jewel throughout her life. Discuss the various implications of Cathedral's prophecy.
3. With this same statement, the author interjects a spiritual element to the story. Is it believable? Or does it seem to run counter to the tone of the rest of the book?
4. When Jewel slaps Cathedral, it is a defining moment for them both. Besides expressing Jewel's blaming of Cathedral for Brenda Kay's accident, what else did this act signify? Was slapping Cathedral a slap at faith?
5. Did Jewel's determination and action-oriented path to help Brenda Kay diminish her own religious faith?
6. When Jewel returns to make amends with Cathedral, why does Cathedral reject her and offer no comfort? Why is Cathedral angry and unforgiving?

7. Why did the author assign the names Jewel and Cathedral to these characters? Are we to find meaning in them? If so, what?
8. Jewel's attitude toward blacks and her understanding of racial issues evolved after she moved to California. Was she able to overcome all of her prejudice? Did she eventually see blacks and whites as equal?
9. To what degree did the differences between the racial attitudes of the south and those of Los Angeles affect Leston's ability to adjust to life in Los Angeles?
10. Is Leston a racist? Discuss his attitude toward blacks.
11. Was Jewel's decision to move to California based solely on her desire to get help for Brenda Kay or was she just as eager to climb out of the ignorance and stagnation of being "white trash?"
12. Can any of Jewel's determination to do better for herself, for Brenda Kay, and for her family be attributed to Missy Cook, the grandmother whom she despised?
13. What was the significance of Missy Cook burning Jewel's and her mother's belongings?
14. What did it mean to Missy Cook? What did it mean to Jewel?
15. Is Jewel fair to Leston? Does she sacrifice too much of him, his happiness, and his wishes for Brenda Kay?
16. Does Leston die a broken man?
17. Leston implies that because of Jewel's fierce love and determination, Brenda Kay would have progressed just as far if they had remained in Mississippi. Do you agree?
18. When Leston insists that they move back to Mississippi, did Jewel give it a chance at all to work? Did Leston deserve to live out his life there? Did Leston really want to return to California or was he bending to Jewel's will?
19. Does the author let us know Leston as much as we need to in order to understand all of his actions?
20. Why does Leston throw away the very lighter that he proclaims is the one thing that will always be his?
21. What finally makes him agree to sell the house he built and move to California? Is it weakness in the face of Jewel's fierce will, or is it the strength of his love for her?
22. How would the experience of a woman today giving birth to a child with Down's syndrome differ from Jewel's? How would it be the same?
23. Jewel considers Brenda Kay both a burden and a blessing. Are these in equal parts? What blessings does Brenda Kay bring? In the end, does Jewel see her as the

hardship she had to bear?

24. If Brenda Kay had been born a normal child, what would have happened to Jewel and her family? Would they have stayed in Mississippi?

25. Does Jewel love Brenda Kay more than her other children?

26. Is Jewel a believable character? Is she flawed enough or too good to be real?