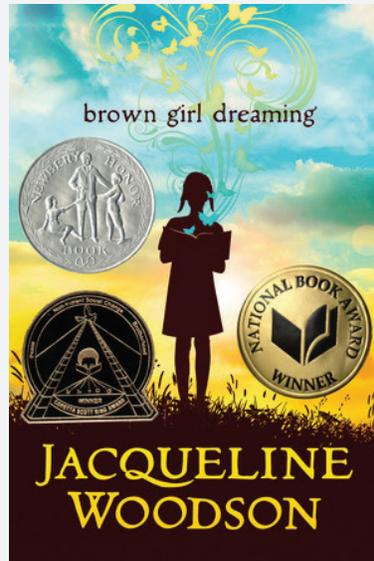


First Opinion: Waking Up: *Brown Girl Dreaming* in 2017

Woodson, Jacqueline. *Brown Girl Dreaming*. Nancy Paulsen Books, 2014.

Kristin K. A. McIlhagga



In 2014, Jacqueline Woodson won the National Book Award for her memoir, *Brown Girl Dreaming*. The book, written in striking and terse verse, is a testament to the kind of sensory journey a reader can be taken on with great poetry. Woodson utilizes design elements such as changing fonts and patterns on the page to provide an engaging reading experience. Her rich voice and authentic use of dialogue make this memoir seem both current and timeless. The book is overflowing with images of the Jim Crow south, the powerful love of her family, and the rise of civil rights. Anyone who has read the book in the last three years should pick it up again and lose themselves in the relevance of the poetry.

Woodson takes readers on a journey to the many different worlds she inhabits, which are shaped by places, people, and experiences. Drawing on sensory experiences from her childhood, along with a tradition of storytelling, we experience the ways Woodson's book helped her to make "sense of [her]self as a writer in a way [she] had never done before" (325). The worlds of Ohio, South Carolina, and New York City provide a road map of Woodson's journey to becoming "one world called You" (320). Throughout the novel, she intimately invites the reader into the story with language that brings the warmth of her grandfather alive (131), reminds us of the smell of chalk in her first grade classroom (158), and the power of stories that can be heard in silence (278).

Woodson uses her own birth in Ohio in 1963 to remind readers that the civil rights movement did not happen in some distant past. Instead, Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, James Baldwin, and Ruby Bridges were participating in civil rights work during Woodson's lifetime. In fact, she makes a direct connection between the possibilities that lie ahead of her as a two-day-old "brown-skinned, black-haired and wide eyed . . . Negro here and Colored there" (3). Shortly after her first birthday, Woodson's mother moves her young family back to South Carolina. Her father stays in Ohio, where, "there's never gonna be a Woodson that sits in the back of the bus . . . that has to Yes sir and No sir white people" (29). We become more aware of the world with Woodson as she notices that she and her family are followed in stores because of their skin color, but they are "just people" (91) at the fabric store. In the poem "South Carolina at War" (72), her grandfather helps Woodson understand why people are marching, why they are mad, and how people with brown skin need to fight.

Brown Girl Dreaming is punctuated with the new homes Woodson and her family make each time they move. When she leaves North Carolina for New York City, she experiences new cultures, languages, and tastes. Her poetry captures the new sounds New York is filled with, such as her best friend Maria, who is Puerto Rican and speaks Spanish (209). In addition, Woodson lets us experience the taste of Maria's mother's arroz con *habichuelas* and tostones for dinner (216). New York is where Woodson's literary discoveries were incused by finding a picture book "filled with brown people, more brown people than I'd ever seen before" (228).

Reading this book in 2017 offers people of all ages the opportunity to engage with what it means to grow up in the US with brown skin. Keep in mind, when it was published in 2014 this country had the first black president, and "post-racial society" was being used in an attempt to erase the painful history of race in our country. But that history is very much with us to this day. Even at the National Book Award ceremony for *Brown Girl Dreaming*, the MC Daniel Handler (aka Lemony Snicket) said, "Jackie's allergic to watermelon, just let that sink into your mind." ("The Pain"). In her *New York Times* op-ed piece about the experience, Woodson pointed out that, "By making light of that deep and troubled history, he showed that he believed we were at a point where we could laugh about it all. His historical context, unlike my own, came from a place of ignorance. That with those words, we are immediately drawn away from my career as an author and storyteller and redirected to focus only on skin color and all the racist tropes that go along with it" ("The Pain").

In August 2017, the news was filled with Nazi white supremacists marching and creating violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. It is clear that the United States is still "a country caught between Black and White" (1) much like the world when Woodson was born. The entire book offers multiple complex entry points worthy of deep discussions of the ways in which history may have happened in the past yet is still very much a part of the present.

Works Cited

Woodson, Jacqueline. "The Pain of the Watermelon Joke." *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/29/opinion/the-pain-of-the-watermelon-joke.html>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2017.

About the Author

Kristin K. A. McIlhagga is an assistant professor of reading and language arts at Oakland University. Her scholarship and teaching are focused on children's and young adult literature, teacher education, and equity and educational justice. Her work is impacted by and intersects with all three of these areas.