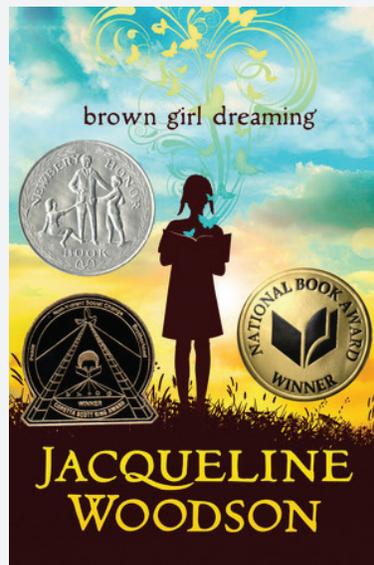


**Second Reaction: More Dominant than the First:
The Power of Memory in *Brown Girl Dreaming***

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

Steven Bickmore



I read Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* when it first arrived in 2014, many months before it won the National Book Award and a host of other stickers, including a Newbery Honor Award. I had taught the book and was planning to teach it again during the fall of 2017. Indeed, I experienced a "second reaction" after setting it aside. I reread the book and revisited course notes, PowerPoints, and student responses. I also discussed the book with adult colleagues in other educational settings. Their reactions mirror my own.

The poetic language of *Brown Girl Dreaming* conjures up memories. Memories of smells, tastes, sounds, sights, and events that drive you, as a reader, back in time to childhood. In some cases, these may drive you back to the childhood of others who embedded their remembrances in your DNA through stories told on porches, at dining room tables, at family reunions, or on slow walks with aging grandparents.

Brown Girl Dreaming stimulates my own memory. I also carry the celebrations of migrations and of grandparents. Woodson documents travel from South Carolina, to Ohio, to South Carolina, to Brooklyn. I track my own journeys: born in Las Vegas, moved to El Paso for the first through fourth grade, and moved on to Tucson for three years. Finally, in 1968, just like Jojo,

I left Tucson, and instead of landing in California grass (Lennon and McCartney), I was back in Las Vegas for junior high and high school. I went to integrated schools, fell in love with white loafers, bell-bottom jeans, striped shirts, embraced my out-of-control, curly hair in a loose afro, and was enthralled with James Brown, The Temptations, The Dramatics, and the O-Jays.

I have wrestled with my white privilege from the moment I was elected student body president and Alvin Smith, the vice president, was elected as the first black student body president in the school's history (Fasching-Varner, Sulentic Dowell, Bickmore, and Bickmore). Our alliance, as the only two males in student government, was an enlightening experience. Every summer as our family visited grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in Salt Lake City and Logan, Utah, I became acutely aware that their level of racial interaction was significantly different from the experience I was having in the late 1960s and early '70s. Rereading *Brown Girl Dreaming* once again had me confronting my history of racial bias, even as I advocate for diversity in books and social justice in America's schools.

Woodson fondly remembers conversations on porches, turned dirt in her grandfather's garden—"pole beans and tomatoes, okra and corn/sweet peas and sugar snaps, lettuce and squash"—(97), travel food "tucked gently into cardboard shoe boxes and tied with string" (36) and "lemon-chiffon ice cream" (71). I remember open irrigation ditches lined with dandelions, fresh peaches, and cherries; earwigs crawling through the sandbox; and handfuls of Cap'n Crunch as our grandmother held the box and enticed all of the cousins to continue our walk for another block or two.

Woodson states her emerging artist's desire: "I want to catch words one day. I want to hold them / then blow gently, / watch them float / right out of my hands" (169). This book, those written before it, and those yet to come corroborate the fulfillment of Woodson's desire and impact.

Throughout *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Woodson bears witness to the power of memory, from the written word to the urge to create. Her memories nurture my own as a grandfather. Woodson's grandmother calls her and her siblings "HopeDellJackie" (45), and to my grandfather we were "Steve, Dawn, Jack, Kent and Terry—old boy" in every weekly letter. I wonder if my interactions with my grandchildren will instill memories of a man who handed them book after book and as one who helped carry the burdens of others. Will they know, as an educator, that I strived to make everyone feel they were in the fabric store of Woodson's youth:

At the Fabric store, we were not Colored
or Negro. We are not thieves or shameful
or something to be hidden away.

At the fabric store, we're just people. (91)

I am bolstered by the book's language; by its metaphors and imagery; by its memories and hope; and by its witness. As I approach each class, I promote diverse books in terms of

choice, availability, promotion, and pedagogical approaches. While I share some parallels with Woodson's memories, mine are never interlaced with the fear of where I could sit on a bus, or if I was allowed to eat in a diner, or if I would be put in my place because of the color of my skin. I try to bear that in mind as I offer *Brown Girl Dreaming* to teachers and students. I agree with Woodson's subtle allusion and homage to Frost's power of imagination (223–24). Indeed, "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches" (Frost). I join with Woodson's prayer: "God, please give me and those people marching another day" (81).

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About the Author

Steven Bickmore, a Las Vegas native, obtained his PhD from the University of Georgia at Athens. He makes his way back to Las Vegas from Louisiana State University to join the faculty in the Teaching and Learning Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. His research areas include English methods, novice teacher education, and the teaching and scholarship of young adult literature. He is a coeditor of *Study and Scrutiny: Research on Young Adult Literature* and maintains the academic blog, Dr. Bickmore's YA Wednesday.