

## First Opinion: Jabari Makes a Big Splash!

Cornwall, Gaia. *Jabari Jumps*. Candlewick Press, 2017.

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In *Jabari Jumps*, Gaia Cornwall narrates the story of an African American boy who can swim, jump off the board, and even eagerly anticipate the next level: a double backflip. The boy goes from initial excitement to abject pause and eventually to fully alert, amused, and ready. Cornwall encapsulates the experience of jumping off the diving board as a genuinely exciting event in a young child's life. The boy hesitates to jump because he is simply uncertain of what might happen. However, he eventually succeeds under the supervision of the conscientious parent. The main lesson that Jabari learns is not an energetic jump and a delightful splash, but the fact that it is ok to be scared of doing something you've never done before.

Determined to jump off the diving board, Jabari attempts to understand and manage his emotions. As he stands at the bottom of the ladder, the diving board seems very high and the ladder appears to be too tall. The uneasy feeling holds him back from leaping into the pool. Looking around, he sees "the other kids climb the long ladder" (unpaged); they spring up! up! up! and then they dive down, down, down. Jabari has successfully finished his swimming lessons and passed the test. He knows he is "a great jumper" (unpaged). With his bright patterned trunks and a pair of swimming goggles, he is well prepared for the big "SPLASH!" However, when his dad squeezes his hand, Jabari squeezes back.

There are many different ways to help children comprehend their feelings. The way that Jabari's father nurtures his son's new experience is empathic and encouraging. He helps Jabari work through negative emotions by asking simple questions, acknowledging his feeling, and

offering him a choice. “Maybe you should climb down and take a tiny rest” (unpaged). Dad’s suggestion helps Jabari stop, take a deep breath, and think about the situation before acting. Later Jabari tells his dad that he needs to do his stretches. Dad reassures his son that “stretching is very important” (unpaged). After completing the stretches, Jabari and his father look up at the diving board together. Since Jabari is on his father’s shoulders, he is looking at the ladder from a shorter distance. Through this elevated perspective, the experience might seem more doable and less overwhelming.

Jabari’s father lets his son’s new emotion unfold while still offering him ways to cope effectively: “It’s ok to feel a little scared” (unpaged). This response leaves the child free to explore his feeling and engage with the solution. The father boosts Jabari’s confidence when he shares with him what would he do when he is scared. As a result of this interaction, Jabari manages to think about his feelings, finding a simple strategy to overcome it. In other words, he feels well equipped to regulate his emotions. When Jabari curls his toes around the rough edge of the diving board, his father and little sister are already in the pool waiting for the big splash. This scene radiates an inclusive and embracing feel and captures the family support and love.

Themes of emotional development and overcoming fear are certain to spark discussions in classrooms, particularly in early elementary grades. Jabari’s concerns will resonate with children who have experienced fear of the unknown and might give young readers the confidence to talk about their fears or to simply adopt the same strategy as Jabari. Young readers will appreciate the theme of overcoming fears. Additionally, parents, teachers, and other adult readers will enjoy the emotional insight shared to conquer a negative feeling. Through the help of his father, Jabari uses a simple technique to comprehend his emotions. As dad says, “sometimes if I feel a little scared, I take a deep breath and tell myself I am ready” (unpaged). Furthermore, dad continues, “sometimes it stops feeling scary and feels a little like a surprise” (unpaged). The read-aloud of *Jabari Jumps* can be followed by questions to help students integrate their reading with their personal experiences. How do you express or manage your emotions? How does it compare to Jabari’s strategy? How do Jabari’s feelings change from the beginning of the story to the end?

The other important theme in the book is the portrayal of African American children outdoors. In examining “the wide-ranging canon of children’s literature,” Michelle Martin indicates, “of all the picture books about children exploring the wild outdoors for fun, only a scarce few feature African American kids as protagonists” (qtd. in Fetters, para. 2). The major theme of *Jabari Jumps* does not feature a protagonist of color exploring wilderness adventures. Yet the book marvelously portrays that the immersive enjoyment of diving is not some obscure topic in African American experience.

*Jabari Jumps* is a gentle, thought-provoking, and reassuring story. It’s important to emphasize and recognize children’s big feelings and help them in their emotional development. The book is an excellent choice to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop an appreciation for the simple yet insightful content.

### **Works Cited**

Fetters, Ashley. "Where Is the Black Blueberries for Sal?" *Atlantic*. 27 May 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/05/the-lack-of-diversity-in-childrens-books-about-nature/590152>

### **About the Author**

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