

Second Reaction: Dipping a Toe Into Feelings: The Power of *Jabari Jumps* to Elicit Discussions About Emotions

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

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"I love this book!" my two-and-a-half-year-old proclaimed after we finished reading *Jabari Jumps*. And I can understand why. Written and illustrated by Gaia Cornwall, *Jabari Jumps* is not only a book about big feelings, but it is also a book that evokes big feelings. Through simple text and bold illustrations, Cornwall documents a single but important day when Jabari jumps off the high diving board for the first time and all of the feelings he experiences about that inaugural leap. Helping him through the event are his father and younger sister, who serve as both his guides and his champions.

In many children's books about feelings, the emotions are explicitly stated by the characters (e.g., "I feel happy"). Such an approach is often helpful for our youngest students, whose socioemotional learning requires the development of an emotional vocabulary. However, the utility of these books can diminish once children move past recognizing emotions to empathizing with and understanding the reasons behind those emotions. *Jabari Jumps*, on the other hand, smartly infuses emotions implicitly, leaving readers to hypothesize about how Jabari is feeling before, during, and after his jump. As a result, the book creates opportunities for developmentally appropriate discussions about emotions with a wide range of students.

Reading the book with my daughter's class of two- to three-and-a-half-year-olds, our discussion focused on feeling identification. Using hints from the text and illustrations, the

kids were able to identify a range of feelings, including Jabari's excitement at the prospect of jumping off the board, and his happiness once he successfully: "Sprang up! Up off the board!" (unpaged). Lost on these littlest of students, however, were the more complicated emotions that the book explores. To my six-year-old niece and nine-year-old nephew, however, these complex feelings were clearer. Through conversation it was evident they recognized Jabari's apprehension about jumping off the board, even though those feelings can only be deduced from the variety of stall tactics Jabari employs (e.g., letting all the other kids go before him in line as he "thinks about what kind of special jump" he's going to do and deciding that he needs to do his "stretches" before taking the big leap).

This approach of infusing feelings into the book without making them obvious is the genius of *Jabari Jumps*. By implying Jabari's feelings, as well as the reactions of his father and sister, the book provides students with opportunities to theorize on the character's feelings, the evidence they have for those theories, and the times in their own lives when they may have felt similarly. What is more, the subtlety of the book invites discussions about these topics between students and their peers, parents, and teachers. After reading the book with my daughter, even without planning to, I found myself asking her follow-up questions about how she knew Jabari was happy, how she thought the younger sister felt, and when she had felt the same way. With my niece and nephew, I was also naturally drawn to talking with them about what they do when they're feeling scared and times when they've overcome their fears.

A large part of what makes the book so emotionally evocative is the illustrations. Starting on the title page on which Jabari is shown getting dressed for the pool, my daughter and I were both drawn in. Jabari then rapidly became a character we cared deeply about, mainly because of his facial expressions and the love Cornwall showed between father and son. Indeed, throughout the book the body and facial expressions of all of the characters are both compelling and infectious. In addition, the illustrations draw readers in by sometimes showing what Jabari is seeing through his own eyes. One illustration, in particular, depicts Jabari's perspective as he is standing on the high diving board before he jumps. Showing "his toes curled around the rough edge" of the board and the pool far below where his father and sister were waiting, I could feel Jabari's apprehension (unpaged). This picture, as well as the subsequent images of Jabari leaping off the board, "splashing" into the water, diving "down, down, down," and surfacing with a "whoosh" captivated my daughter and her classmates, who asked to see those pictures again and again. My niece and nephew also quickly picked up on Cornwall's use of collage, which added intriguing texture to the images.

All in all, *Jabari Jumps* is a beautiful example of a book that invites readers to reflect on and talk about feelings. Through straightforward text and vibrant illustrations, the book allows readers to empathize with Jabari and also consider their own feelings. What is more, the subtlety with which emotions are infused into the book make it appropriate across a wide range of ages.

About the Author

Amanda Case is an assistant professor in the counseling psychology program at Purdue University. She earned her PhD in counseling psychology from University of Wisconsin–Madison with a specialization in child/adolescent treatment and assessment. In addition to doing research on educational access, she also consults with community-based youth programs and schools on data management, inclusive practices, socioemotional learning, and mental health.