



Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award

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Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson

*A Reading Guide for Teachers and Educators written by Katarina Lycken
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About the author

The American author Jacqueline Woodson received the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award in 2018. In the citation, the selection jury wrote that Woodson “introduces us to resilient young people fighting to find a place where their lives can take root. In language as light as air, she tells stories of resounding richness and depth. Jacqueline Woodson captures a unique poetic note in a daily reality divided between sorrow and hope.”

Jacqueline Woodson is the author of more than 30 books, including picture books, novels and poetry. She is a devoted supporter of young people’s right to read and is the 2018–2019 U.S. National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature. Information about Woodson as well as her writing can be found on her website:

<https://www.jacquelinewoodson.com/>

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About the book *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Brown Girl Dreaming is a story about the first ten years of Jacqueline Woodson's life, written in verse form. In addition to poems, the book also includes family trees and childhood photographs.

Woodson has said that poetry is the most honest way to depict a memory. Individual memories are intense and full of detail, but they exist in a vacuum, surrounded by the empty space of all the things we have forgotten. In the same way, each poem in *Brown Girl Dreaming* is linked to the memory of an experience, but all around the poems there is a kind of "vacuum." The memories do not tell a single, coherent story, at least no story that we can confidently call "true."

Each poem in *Brown Girl Dreaming*, then, is a story unto itself. Within the book, however, the poems are grouped in five sections. Each section covers one stage in the young Jacqueline Woodson's life: her earliest years in Ohio; the move to her maternal grandparents in South Carolina after her parents' divorce; another move, to Brooklyn, where her mother has found new opportunities; the process of making Brooklyn "home" in both body and spirit; and finally, a feeling of being at home, both in Brooklyn and in herself.

A sixth part threads through the other five. It consists of ten haiku, numbered and each titled "how to listen." The haiku are about writing: what it is and what goes into it. They describe listening, observation, and writing as a unique process. Woodson knew very early on—from age seven, she has said—that she wanted to be a writer, but it was hard for her friends and family to believe her. They knew she was a slow reader and struggled with both reading and writing. But she was

always good at making up and telling stories. Woodson has described *Brown Girl Dreaming* as her own investigation into how she became a writer.

In addition to recounting memories from the author's childhood, *Brown Girl Dreaming* also gives us historical snapshots of 1960s and 70s America. Structural racism and the civil rights movement are a constant presence in the book. The very first poem in the book describes the United States as “a country caught/between Black and White,” a nation where the fight for civil rights for “brown children like me” has not been won.

In the classroom

As a teacher, you may have a number of questions as you prepare to teach *Brown Girl Dreaming*. You might wonder:

- Will my students benefit from reading only excerpts from the book?
- How much should my students already know about the civil rights movement and the struggle against racism in the U.S. in order to understand what Woodson is writing about?
- How can I help my students understand the book as a whole, when there is no clear and connected narrative?
- What themes and questions should I be prepared to work on with my students, based on our joint reading?

In this guide you will find some answers to these questions as well as ideas for classroom activities and assignments.

Ways to use excerpts

To read *Brown Girl Dreaming* is to experience many separate recollections, which all come together to create a strongly moving portrait of the “brown girl” Jacqueline, her childhood and her dreams. Because, however, the book is written as a series of poems which are each complete in themselves, you can also successfully read just selected excerpts. Many of the poems would be good choices to read and discuss based on different themes. Here are just a few suggestions (page references are to the 2016 Puffin paperback edition):

- **Important people and events in the civil rights movement**

“second daughter’s second day on earth” (p. 3)

“power to the people” (p. 302)

“the revolution” (p. 308)

These poems are good jumping-off points for learning more about important people and events in the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, and for discussing the different strategies people use to try and bring about change.

- **Listening and writing**

“how to listen,” nos. 1–10 (pp. 20, 82, 102, 196, 210, 225, 278, 292, 299, 310)

Discuss how Woodson describes her own writing process and what a writing process might include. What happens when we sit down to write?

- **Difficulties reading and writing**

“the beginning” (p. 62)

“composition notebook” (p. 154)

“on paper” (p. 156)

“gifted” (p. 169)

“writing #1” (p. 217)

“writing #2” (p. 221)

“reading” (p. 226)

“stevie and me” (p. 227)

“the butterfly poems” (p. 249)

Discuss how it feels to get stuck or blocked when reading or writing, how it feels to imagine you aren't living up to other people's expectations, and the value of finding your own path forward.

- **The right to see yourself in literature**

“stevie and me” (p.227)

Discuss power structures in literature. Whom do we see in books and who is hidden? Who gets a voice and who remains silent?

Background on the civil rights movement

In Jacqueline Woodson's recollections, America's history of structural racism and the civil rights movement are never far off. The historical context and the people mentioned in her texts may be unfamiliar and need explanation for many students. For example, it may be necessary to describe and explain historical elements such as the difference between Northern and Southern states, social structures linked to slavery, the civil rights movement, and names such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and the Black Panthers. Of course, one possibility is to let the texts themselves inspire more research as a group. This is also a great chance to do cross-curriculum projects, for example in reading or language classes, history, and social studies.

Helping students keep the story together

Woodson herself has said poems were the only way she could find to portray memories—both her own memories and those handed down to her by relatives. There is no “complete story” here, only fragments that together make up a whole. There are a few ways you can help students navigate the book. Two family trees found on the first pages help readers keep track of the various characters. Also try highlighting connections between the five sections in terms of their content, to make it easier for students to understand where and when the different events take place.

Themes and questions to work with during and after reading

Brown Girl Dreaming provides many chances for readers to discuss a range of themes, both during and after reading. Try giving students questions to think about while they read, centering around one or several themes. Students might collect quotes in a reading log as a way of gathering material to use later in group discussions. Here are some themes you might study in *Brown Girl Dreaming*:

- **Racism**

The theme of racism runs throughout *Brown Girl Dreaming*: experiences of racism as well as the fight against it.

How did Jacqueline’s family experience racism?

How is life in Ohio different from life in South Carolina?

How does the young Jacqueline come in contact with the fight against racism in her day-to-day life?

The title *Brown Girl Dreaming* seems to have a connection to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I have a dream" speech. What dreams do King and the young Jacqueline have in common?

In her [ALMA acceptance speech](#) Jacqueline Woodson talked about the words we choose to describe skin color. Discuss what she says in her speech and the way she describes the skin of the people in *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

- **Being at "home"**

The young Jacqueline struggles to feel like any one place is her "home." She is caught between a "home" in Greenville and a "home" in Brooklyn.

What makes her feel that she is "home" in each of these places?

In what ways is it hard for her to have more than one "home"?

Does the way she thinks about home change by the end of the book, and if so, how?

- **Family**

Jacqueline's family plays an important role in *Brown Girl Dreaming*. In the book's dedication, Woodson writes, "This book is for my family—past, present and future." The book begins with two family trees and ends with family photographs.

In what ways is her family important for Jacqueline as she grows up?

How do her thoughts on the idea of "family" change over the course of the book?

- **Language and stories**

For the young Jacqueline, language is a source of both joy and frustration. Her difficulties in learning to read and write are a recurring topic, as is her strong drive to master both skills.

In what ways and in what situations does Jacqueline express her frustration at struggling to read and write?

What motivates her to learn to read and write?

What are the different ways that she talks about language and storytelling?

As a girl, Jacqueline is surrounded by people with strong opinions about the right way to talk. What are those opinions? Why does Jacqueline's maternal grandmother, for example, place so much importance on her grandchildren's speech?

- **Religion**

Jacqueline's grandmother on her mother's side is a devout Christian, while her grandfather is not very interested in religion. Her uncle Robert converts to Islam in prison.

How does the young Jacqueline relate to the different expressions of faith she observes in the people around her?

- **Hope and change**

Jacqueline Woodson has said that she wants her books to give young readers tools for both hope and change.

In which ways and in which contexts do the texts in *Brown Girl Dreaming* express hope?

In which ways and in which contexts do the texts talk about change? What is being changed, by whom, and when?

Read more by Jacqueline Woodson!

Jacqueline Woodson has written many books for different age groups. Two more of her books will be published in Swedish translations in the spring of 2019: *Den dag du börjar* (*The Day You Begin*), a children's picture book, and *Fjädrar* (*Feathers*), for ages ten and up. In many cases,

however, student groups will be able to read her books for middle-graders and teens in English together. No matter what book you choose, you will encounter the same qualities recognized by the ALMA jury: feather-light language, rich, deep stories, and a powerful sense of hope, come what may.