



Jacqueline Woodson

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights Beyond the Movie

Jacqueline Woodson, interviewed in her home in Brooklyn, New York on October 24, 2006.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You write about many different lives from many different perspectives. *Miracle's Boys* won the Coretta Scott King author award in 2001. What was it like as a female writer to portray three male protagonists and no females in the story?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: I wrote *Miracle's Boys* because I wanted to see if I could write a book that had no girls in it.

When I first started writing books, most of the novels had girls as protagonists because that's what was familiar to me. Then, I wanted to challenge myself and see if I could write from a different perspective, so I wrote *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*. I knew nothing about how to do it. I have two brothers, and I asked them what it was like to be 14. They couldn't remember, so I asked myself, "What I would have wanted at 14; what do boys do; how do they talk to each other?" I remembered that boys were always jostling each other and trying to one-up each other. So that was *Melanin Sun*.

By the time I got to writing *Miracle's Boys*, I had already written the character of Jeremiah in *If You Come Softly*. With *Miracle's Boys*, I started with the character of Lafayette, and then I moved on to Ty'ree. I thought it was only going to be the two of them in the book, and then the character of Charlie came to me, and the book just came alive.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What was the kind of family represented in *Miracle's Boys*, and what questions did you ask as you were writing it?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: In *Miracle's Boys*, I created three boys who had lost their dad earlier on in their lives and had recently lost their mom. A central question was what was going to happen to them now. New Charlie was kind of on the road to being a criminal, but not really. Lafayette really didn't like who his brother was becoming, but he was fascinated by him because they had once had a fabulous relationship. And Ty'ree gave up his scholarship at MIT to take care of the family. They're all at a crossroads where they're making choices about who they're going to become. I wanted to investigate that and ask, "What if one of them had just gotten out of a juvenile detention center? Why had he been there; how did it change him; how did it change the family?"

It's fun to sit down and have this kind of blank slate and say, "Okay, in this corner I have New Charlie — where will he end up on this page? Here's Lafayette and here's Ty'ree...." It's fascinating. It gets overwhelming, but most of the time I can't wait to get into that world and see what happens.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Can you share part of what you're striving for in your writing?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: I write realistic fiction because I want to put onto the page people who I didn't get to see in books when I was growing up. A lot of the books I read did not have some part of who Jacqueline Woodson was in them. There weren't a lot of books at the time about growing up in Brooklyn or about African-American girls. I never read a book where there was a deaf kid, or where there was a single mom and a grandmother making up a family.

I was growing up in a rich culture where all different people are living around me, having different experiences — this was the real world to me. So to go to read books sometimes and not see myself in the pages made me think, "Well, where am I?" and by extension, "Who am I?" It made me start writing about the things that really mattered to me.

The thing I like about realistic fiction is that it makes me feel like I am just having a conversation with people, that I'm just sitting at someone's kitchen table or walking down their street or hanging out with them in the park or having dinner with them at a restaurant. It really puts me in a moment that feels like it can exist or could have existed at some point.

It could be historical fiction. It could be a little bit futuristic. But, it really makes me feel like I am getting to know some real people, and it's based on real things.

I visited a juvenile detention center and took a lot of what I saw there and put it into *Miracle's Boys* so that it could feel even more real. Even though it may not have happened to me, or my readers, it's something that's in the world.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What is fulfilling for you about writing realistic fiction, and how do you go about creating it?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: Part of writing realistic fiction, for me, is giving my characters hope. Even if the ending isn't always the happiest ending, there has to be hope and happiness somewhere in the book for me as a writer to really feel good in writing it. I want to enjoy the process of writing it, and I want my characters to be okay. I've created them; they've lived in my head; I've rewritten them and rewritten them. At some point, I come to love them, so I want them to have some sense that the world is okay out there.

The things that are happening to my characters are at once larger than life and are everyday minutiae — those small moments in people's lives that can make readers feel like they have their ears pressed against the door or are spying with binoculars. Some parts of the characters are familiar, and it makes readers' own lives feel more real. That's what I think I bring to it when I'm sitting down to write. When I read books that are realistic fiction, I find myself in them.

I think as readers, once we see ourselves in the pages of the book, we are allowed a certain amount of legitimacy, and that legitimacy empowers us.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your Newbery Honor picture book *Show Way* is the story of your maternal ancestors. How does it feel to tell your story?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: The thing about *Show Way* that feels close to me is that I didn't just happen to wake up one morning and be a writer; I come from a long line of people showing the way. It feels like my writing is result of all the people who came before me saying, "Now Jackie, it's your turn to do some work and pass the work on to your child."

Each time I think about *Show Way*, I'm reminded that we have a purpose to being here. Writing the book *Show Way* showed me that I come from somewhere that is really important. When I was younger, when we talked about slavery it was almost shameful to have been a descendent of a slave. But to think that I come from people who came here with absolutely

nothing and that they were able to create people who were going to go on and do something. It's just amazing to me. We started out in one place and we were not going to let anyone turn us around. That's the blood that runs through my veins, and writing *Show Way* made me remember that.

TEACHINGBOOKS: There are a lot of African-American historical elements and culture-specific issues in your books.

JACQUELINE WOODSON: There is African-American history in so many of the books I write because it's a part of me. I write about where I've personally been and where I've been historically.

For instance, I know that during World War II, black women cleaned the railroads. So when I was writing *Coming on Home Soon*, I already had that information, even though when I was growing up, all I learned about at school was Rosie the Riveter, who was always white. And I thought, "Well, no, these African-American women were Rosie the Riveters too, and this is what they were doing." I wanted it to be in books, so I wrote it.

The same happened in *Show Way*. I grew up with the expression "jumping broom." I knew it was the ceremony by which slaves married, because they weren't allowed to have actual ceremonies. I hadn't really seen it written about until I was an adult.

In *Locomotion*, I talk about sickle cell anemia and Eric having it. I grew up knowing people who had sickle cell anemia. I was afraid of the sickle cell gene and knew it was a disease that was very common among African Americans. That history ends up in the book because it's a part of my story, and by extension it becomes a part of the African-American characters' stories.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please talk more about *Locomotion* — uniquely written as a series of poems.

JACQUELINE WOODSON: When I first started writing *Locomotion*, I was writing in a standard novel form. I was trying to portray a character who is learning to tell the story of his life through poetry, and I thought, "Jackie, you're telling us instead of showing us. If I'm going to show this story, I need to show him telling his story through poetry." So I went back and rewrote *Locomotion* as poems.

I love *Locomotion* so much because it gave me the chance to write poetry. I had an excuse to read a lot of poetry and read about the writing of it. I read sonnets, haiku, sestinas, rhyming couplets and all of these forms because eventually those forms were going to end up in the book. I knew a lot about poetry to some extent because I have a lot of friends who write poetry and because I majored in English and studied poetry as an undergrad.

I love the character of Lonnie. The more I wrote about him, the more I had him writing poetry, and the more the poems came out. When I first started writing about New Boy, I thought there was only going to be one New Boy poem, and then I realized, "Oh, he's a real character." So, in the end I think I wrote four poems about New Boy.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *If You Come Softly* is such a powerful love story for teens.

JACQUELINE WOODSON: I wrote *If You Come Softly* because I wanted to write a modern-day Romeo and Juliet. I knew if it was going to be a Romeo and Juliet story, it was going to be a tragedy, and someone had to die. I had that person die in a case of mistaken identity and police

brutality. A lot of African-American men are dying for this reason, and as I was writing the book, it was happening around me.

So many of the letters I've gotten about *If You Come Softly* ask, "Why did that person have to die? I loved that person — why does this have to happen?"

My answer is that I have hope that people think, "What do we do to make this not happen? How do we speak up and speak out against racial profiling or police brutality?"

TEACHINGBOOKS: You talked about portraying racial "othering" in *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. What is your personal experience with this phenomenon.

JACQUELINE WOODSON: "Othering" is taking someone or something and making them foreign — making people who are other than "us" into "them" or "those people."

I learned about "othering" early on through literature. I would read a book and it would describe people and say, "A little girl walked down the street, a little girl grabbed her mother's hand, a black girl walked down the street...." And I thought, "So am I to assume that everyone else wasn't black; that this is the only "other" in the book?"

The same with deaf people; the same with gay people. There are all these categories in which all of a sudden everyone else is "normal" and these people are different. I really don't like to see that happening to people.

In *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, when Marie, the main character, asked her parents, "Who are these people who sit in the corners of the cafeteria, who the other kids don't play with?" And the dad says, "They're white trash," and the mother says, "No, they're people — poor, white people."

The dad is trying to "other" them by making them into this thing that isn't even human, and the mom pulls them back in and says no. It's a crossroads for Marie, even though she hasn't met Lena yet. At that point, she's beginning to ask why it is that people exist like this. "Why is it that we separate ourselves from people, why is it that we have to name people negatively in order to see them?"

TEACHINGBOOKS: Your book *Feathers* deals with race from yet another perspective.

JACQUELINE WOODSON: In *Feathers* I had a white kid cross the color line because he was looking for "home." He ends up living among blacks because he and his family feel like that's going to be a place where he can fit in. In *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, Lena ended up in a predominantly African-American community by default.

TEACHINGBOOKS: In many of your books, such as *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, you find the positive in a negative situation.

JACQUELINE WOODSON: I think a lot about how I can be more open. I think of myself as progressive and very tolerant, but I do have roadblocks. I have places where it's hard for me to understand how someone could do that or say that.

I think an example is in *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*. The father is abusive, and for me as a writer, I could have just made him a villain. But then in investigating the character and thinking about him, I asked, "What would make a person so broken that this is what they would do?" As a result of being able to look at him from a different angle, I was able to create a

character who readers dislike immensely but also feel a little sorry for. I try to see my characters in all their dimensions. I try to look past what people are telling me to see who they really are.

TEACHINGBOOKS: You have said that you write because you love writing and because you believe literature can change the world. Please explain.

JACQUELINE WOODSON: I had a teacher who said when you choose a career choose something you love doing because you're going to be doing it for the rest of your life. And writing is the thing I love doing. It makes me feel creative. It makes me feel powerful to be able to sit down and create a whole world. It also makes me feel like I'm doing something that's impacting a greater good somehow, that someone's going to read a book and have a thought or feeling and be a little bit different somehow because of it.

"The function of freedom is to free someone else," that's a quote from Toni Morrison. And I believe that. I think once you have your freedom, the question you should ask yourself is, "What do I do with this, how do I use this to help someone else, how do I use this to change the world?" Harriet Tubman could have gone to where she was going and stayed there and just had her little free life, but she kept coming back and bringing more people to the Promised Land. She kept risking her own life, and her own freedom, to free other people.

I think that's what knowledge does. If you have some information and you impart it on someone else, they have a little more information. Freedom is the same thing. You help someone else to be free. I think literature does that. That's why I write.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Do you believe anyone has the ability to change the world through their art?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: Yes. You can just say, "This is my ordinary, everyday life and there's nothing special about it." Or you could say, "Wow, this is big; this is important. My being here is for a reason, and I can do something to make art in this moment." I don't think you have to be an artist to do it. I think each thing we do that somehow changes the world is about making art. And, I think art is the thing that helps us to be free.

I have the gift of being able to sit down and tell a story about two girls who become friends across economic, race, and class lines. And you read it, and you get involved in it, and you love the girls. And you think about the things that are happening in the book, and that's a piece of art, right? It has a life: Someone reads it, they say beautiful things about it, or they say terrible things about it — whatever. But it has a place in the world as art, as literature.

But it also has a bigger place in the world in that it impacts. Something happens to people when they read it. They have a feeling; it impacts them. There's a reaction attached to the action of reading. That's a powerful thing, and that's a thing that is what art can do. So I say, "Art is everything."

TEACHINGBOOKS: What's it like to have won awards for your writing?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: I remember being nine or ten, and I used to stand in front of the mirror with a hairbrush and practice my thank-you speech for the Pulitzer Prize. I really did. It was the only prize I knew that was awarded to writers, and I knew I wanted to be a writer. So, I thought if I'm going to be a writer, I might have to practice giving talks.

A part of me never, ever believed that I would give a talk for getting an award for being a writer, but something was deeper than that that said, "Well, practice anyway." Maybe there was

something in me that believed that one day I would publish a book. But it's a real juxtaposition when you come from a family like I did where there weren't writers, where people didn't make a living through their art.

They thought I had lost my mind when I announced I wanted to be a writer. They said, "Get a real job and then make your art on the side." But it was part of my dream. The hairbrush in the hand was part of the dream. Sitting in my corner and writing was part of the dream.

Now I'm in a much more surreal place — I have my name on books and awards for them. But, when I sit down to write a book, I don't think about anything that has come before because those awards are attached to those earlier books. I don't want to think about what people might think about what I'm writing. I just start writing because I need to tell a story; I need to get this story out of me.

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please describe a typical workday.

JACQUELINE WOODSON: These days a workday is shorter than it was before I had my daughter, so now the workday is getting [four-year-old] Toshi up, and watching her drag her feet for a long time and going, "Tick, tick, tick, let me get to my writing day." Finally getting her to school, getting back home, going through email and stuff, finally sitting down and giving myself a few hours to just think about character or to think, if I'm working on a book, "Now, where is it going, how am I going to get there, what is going to happen to these characters?"

Some days, I get no writing done. Some days it's just about trying to think about the story. Some days, I can write a lot. My schedule is different now also because I've been traveling so much. This is hard because I love going out and meeting people and meeting readers of my books, but it also means I am not writing.

After I've written something, I read it out loud. It has to sound good to my ear, as well as look fine on the page. I get to a point where the writing is just flowing beautifully and it sounds beautiful when it is read.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do when you get stuck?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: When I get stuck, I try something different, like going for a ride or switching genres. If I'm stuck in a middle-grade book, I'll move to a picture book. If I'm stuck there, I'll move to young adult. Or I sit down and I say to myself, "Why are you afraid?" I think the thing about being stuck is that you're not writing what you want to be writing. You're writing something that you think you *should* be writing.

So, when I start writing myself into that place where the writing is raggedy and it feels like the characters are plastic and it feels like it's going nowhere, I have to stop and say, "Okay, what is this trying to say and how are you trying to say it?" But I never do that too early on because I think the writing's too fragile at that point. But asking these questions pushes me forward a little bit.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you like to tell students?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: I tell them that it's important to tell their stories. Not all of us are writers — people are going to draw their stories, teach their stories, play their stories in a basketball game. Find what you feel passionate about and follow through.

I tell them, although I'm sure their parents hate to hear this, don't listen to people who tell you that you cannot do what you dream of doing. We as adults might look down on something and see it as unrealistic because we don't understand anymore. And the strength of young people is going to be in having faith in that thing. I think it's so important that I show people that they can be writers.

I tell them to read because it opens the world to them. When you sit down with a book, you enter a world that you might not otherwise get to. You get to sit in your comfortable corner and go into another world and know that that world is out there, to whatever extent it's out there, and know that it can be a part of your world someday.

TEACHINGBOOKS: How did you get started writing books?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: When I was 13, 14, 15, I knew there were things I wanted to do, but I didn't know what they were. Madeleine L'Engle, best known for *A Wrinkle in Time*, said, "When you write, write remembering the child you were." So, when I write, I go back and I remember who I was, and I start crafting my characters from that place. My writing starts with something that I know deeply, and then put it onto and into my characters.

When I was first starting out as a writer, I met Dorothy Allison, who's an amazing novelist, and she said, "Tell your story, everybody has a story, and everybody has a right to tell it." And just hearing those words helped me realize that, "Yes, we all have stories, including me."

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you do like to tell teachers?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: I ask teachers not to assume anything about who their students are until they know them. I think one thing that can be really detrimental to students is to feel "lesser-than" in a classroom. When we were looking at schools for our child, we walked into a classroom and teachers were saying, "Your mom and dad need to do this..." And I thought, "What about the kids who live with their mom, what about the kids who live with two dads, what about the kids who live with their foster moms or aunts?" I thought it would be so much nicer for those kids to hear, "Tell your caregiver or tell your guardian or tell someone who's taking care of you," because when kids hear that and they didn't have a mom or a dad, they shrink a little and see themselves as a little "lesser-than."

When I go into classrooms on an author visit and I see kids' family books and some siblings are biological, some are not, or they include their auntie, I think, "Yes, this is family." I think the great thing that teachers can do is to bring literature into the classroom in which kids can see themselves, their families and their ways of living. Teachers can send the message, "Let us see who you are, and let's celebrate that."

TEACHINGBOOKS: How is this feeling about family reflected in your books?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: A lot of my writing is about family dynamics and relationships, the way we choose family, the families we're born into, and the families we grow to love. And I try to show all different kinds of families in my books.

When I sit down to write a book, I don't think, "I'm going to teach about the different ways we have family." But I do think, "This is realistic fiction, and here is one of the groups that I'm going to write about today."

When I was writing *Miracle's Boys*, I didn't know that the boys were going to have neither a mother nor a father. When I first started writing, the mom was still alive. And then as I rewrote and rewrote, I realized, "No, I think these boys are going to be on their own and here's a different way we have family — siblings raising each other."

When I wrote *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, I knew from the beginning that his mom was going to be single, and I knew she was going to get a partner, but I didn't know how that was going to happen. I knew the book was going to be about Melanin and his mom, how much they adored each other, and what happens when someone tries to come between that relationship.

TEACHINGBOOKS: *If You Come Softly* was censored recently. Why was it, and what impact has censoring your books had on you as a writer?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: *If You Come Softly* was censored because it was about an interracial relationship. *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* was challenged, as well.

It's sad that people think keeping literature out of the hands of young people is the way to help them grow up. It seems like such a contradiction to me. But, organizations that, for different reasons, feel like the books aren't safe or shouldn't be on the shelves will challenge my books.

I think the thing to do is to sit down and read with your young person or read with your parent, and discuss the book — as opposed to saying "Let me get that book out of there." Once that book is snatched away, something else is going to take its place that is either not as great for them or is going to make them hungry to search that topic out anyway.

From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun was given to all the sixth-graders in a school before the principal knew what it was about. A parent called the principal and said, "I don't want my kid reading this book." So the principal, over the loudspeaker, told everyone to return their books. They gave out about 60 books and they got 3 back. The minute you challenge something, kids are going to jump on it, so it's kind of silly in that respect.

As a writer, I never think, "What are they going to say about this book?" because that would keep me from writing it, and it would make it feel less authentic to me. I don't want to be afraid, and I don't want to censor myself. I write against fear.

TEACHINGBOOKS: What do you see yourself doing with regard to monitoring what your young daughter reads?

JACQUELINE WOODSON: There are lots of books that I think are awful for a number of reasons, but I would never name them, and I would never say, "You should not read that book."

If my daughter says she wants such a book, I'm going to have the discussion with her as opposed to saying, "No, because I said so." I feel like that's what a lot of the censorship stuff is about — saying, "Because I said so."

TEACHINGBOOKS: Please share some of your guiding principles as a writer.

JACQUELINE WOODSON: I think it's important to read, to write, and to ask lots and lots of questions, because I think when you ask questions, you begin a dialogue. When you begin a dialogue, you begin an understanding. The more you understand, the more you know, and the more you know, the more you can do. It just keeps growing that way.

It is also so important to listen. I learned how to be a writer by taking everything in. I walk through the world hearing and thinking about what people are saying. I think there's this way in which listening to each other says, "I respect you, I care about what you have to say." For me, learning to write came from being able to hear people, and — even though I didn't always agree with them — being able to let those ideas come inside me and do whatever I need to do with them.

Books by Jacqueline Woodson

- POTENTIAL FOR LIGHT, THE, TBA
- ROPE, THE (illustrated by James Ransome), Penguin Young Readers Group, date TBA
- AFTER TUPAC AND D FOSTER, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2008
- FEATHERS, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2007
- SHOW WAY (illustrated by Hudson Talbott), Penguin Young Readers Group, 2005
- BEHIND YOU, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2004
- COMING ON HOME SOON (illustrated by E. B. Lewis), Penguin Young Readers Group, 2004
- LOCOMOTION, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2003
- HUSH, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2002
- OUR GRACIE AUNT (illustrated by Jon J. Muth), Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 2002
- VISITING DAY (illustrated by James Ransome), Penguin Young Readers Group, 2002
- OTHER SIDE, THE (illustrated by E. B. Lewis), Penguin Young Readers Group, 2001
- MIRACLE'S BOYS, Penguin Young Readers Group, 2000
- SWEET, SWEET MEMORY (illustrated by Floyd Cooper), Jump at the Sun / Hyperion Books for Children, 2000
- LENA, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1999
- IF YOU COME SOFTLY, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1998
- HOUSE YOU PASS ON THE WAY, THE, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1997
- WE HAD A PICNIC THIS SUNDAY PAST (illustrated by Diane Greenesid), Hyperion Books for Children, 1997
- FROM THE NOTEBOOKS OF MELANIN SUN, Blue Sky Press / Scholastic Press, 1995
- I HADN'T MEANT TO TELL YOU THIS, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1994
- BETWEEN MADISON AND PALMETTO, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1993
- MAIZON AT BLUE HILL, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1992
- DEAR ONE, THE, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1991
- LAST SUMMER WITH MAIZON, Penguin Young Readers Group, 1990

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