

**NCTE Book Rationale for *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson
By Robyn Sumner and Rebekah J. Buchanan**

Title, Author, Publisher, and Year

Brown Girl Dreaming, Jacqueline Woodson, Penguin/Nancy Paulsen Books, 2014

Target Grade Level and Audience

Grade Level: 4–8

Lexile: 990L

Audience: Although this memoir is written for middle grades readers, students throughout middle and high school who are interested in memoir, verse, and African American history during the 1960s and 1970s would all be drawn to Woodson's work.

Plot Summary; Genre(s); and Themes, Awards, Reviews

Plot Summary

This verse memoir delves into Jacqueline Woodson's early years as an African American girl growing up in the 1960s and '70s in South Carolina and New York. Starting with her birth in Columbus, Ohio, in 1963, this collection of poems follows Woodson's early life. She struggles with her parents' complicated relationship and resulting divorce before moving to South Carolina with her mother. She shares her experience growing up in Greenville and the influences of her Grandpa Gunner and Grandma Georgiana on her life. Jackie, as she is known in the book, talks about how her mother and grandparents instilled in her the knowledge of what it was like to live in the Jim Crow South, and how they taught her about the Civil rights movement. After leaving the South and moving to New York, Jackie shares her complex relationship with reading and falling in love with writing. Throughout the memoir, Woodson navigates the complexities of race, identity, friendship, and family. Her memoir captures the happiness and difficulties she encountered while discovering her voice as a writer.

Genres: poetry, memoir, children's literature, middle grades.

Themes: power of storytelling, racial/social injustice, identity and belonging, family/relationships, education

Awards

[John Newberry Medal \(2015\)](#)

[National Book Award for Young People's Literature \(2014\)](#)

[Boston Globe-Horn Honor Book \(2015\)](#)

[Coretta Scott King Award \(2015\)](#)

[Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People \(2015\)](#)

[Robert F. Sibert Honor Book \(2015\)](#)

NCTE Notable Children's Book in Language Arts

Reviews

“For every dreaming girl (and boy) with a pencil in hand (or keyboard) and a story to share.” [Kirkus Starred Review](#)

“Captivating poems depict coming-of-age in tumultuous 1960s.” [Common Sense Media](#)

“Everyone who reads it will remember some small detail that spoke to them personally. It’s the book adults will wish they’d read as kids. It’s the book that hundreds of thousands of kids will read and continue to read for decades upon decades upon decades. It’s Woodson’s history and our own. It is amazing.” [School Library Journal Review of the Day](#)

“Ms. Woodson writes with a sure understanding of the thoughts of young people, offering a poetic, eloquent narrative that is not simply a story, but a mature exploration of grown-up issues and self-discovery.” [The New York Times Book Review](#)

State Standards Connections

Illinois Learning Standards for ELA Incorporating the Common Core

CC.6.R.I.6 Craft and Structure: Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and explain how it is conveyed in the text.

- Examine the contrasting settings—South Carolina and New York—to address the narrator’s development throughout the book.

CC.6.W.3.b Text Types and Purposes: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, and description, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

- Writing activities such as journal entries, letters to characters, or poems would allow students to discuss their own interpretation of the book and view it from different perspectives.

CC.6.R.L.6 Craft and Structure: Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

- Examining poetic devices such as imagery, repetition and allusion throughout the book and within various poems would help to examine point of view and development of voice.

Suggested Teaching Approaches

The memoir’s strong, historical connections make it an ideal text for cross-curricular units or teaching opportunities. Teachers can turn to [Facing History’s resource for teaching *Brown Girl Dreaming*](#) for activities such as reading and writing a “Where I’m From” poem; reading about Jim Crow laws and thinking about social justice issues in the book; doing some storytelling [sketch to stretch](#); and discussing [windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors](#). Tying the text to these various activities and explorations can be adapted for middle and high school-level students.

Teachers can use the poem "[February 12, 1963](#)" as an introduction to the memoir as a whole and the ways Woodson connects personal, familial, and American history. Students could create a three-column chart that traces personal, family, and national history in the poem and then complete their own examples for each column. Teachers could then have each student contribute one example from each column on a shared document and look for connections, overlaps, and areas of divergence. In addition, students can search for ways Woodson connects other parts of the book back to "February 12, 1963." Teachers could extend work with this poem by having students look up details for their own birthday including the [day of the week](#) and top events and headlines for the day and year. Using Woodson's poem as a mentor text, students can create their own poems based on their birthdates.

Students may benefit from discussions around Woodson's relationship with reading. The poems "reading" (p. 226) and "[Stevie and Me](#)" (p. 227) are great places to start a larger discussion on reading. Have students read the poems and watch Woodson's 2019 TED Talk on [What Reading Slowly Taught Me about Writing](#). Have students discuss in small groups their experiences with reading, focusing on when they may have felt they weren't a good reader, or they were being judged about how or what they read. Ask them to discuss their experiences of finding books at the library with people who look like they do on the cover, such as in "Stevie and Me." Have students think about a text that became a part of them as Woodson describes.

Alternative Texts

[The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros](#). This collection of vignettes chronicles the life of a young Latina girl growing up in Chicago. Similar to *Brown Girl Dreaming*, it delves into issues of family, identity, and the need to fit in. The books are similar because of their poetic structure and the use of detailed vignettes.

[Ghost Boys by Jewell Parker Rhodes](#). This middle grades novel follows twelve-year-old Jerome who is killed by a white police officer who mistakes his toy gun for a real one. Jerome becomes a ghost and meets the ghost of Emmett Till, who was murdered in 1955. The novel connects to themes of racism, the Civil rights movement, and identity work that appear in *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

[The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo](#). Through poetry, Xiomara, a Dominican-American teenager, navigates her own identity, faith, and societal norms in this novel-in-verse. It talks about issues of self-expression, culture, and race. A good text to use if teaching *Brown Girl Dreaming* at the high school level.

Potential for Challenge

Racism and Discrimination

Woodson shares the various kinds of discrimination she experienced as a young child. Expectations for her were lowered and she was receiving different treatment because of her race, including facing racist taunts and being turned away from some segregated locations due to her appearance. The book could be challenged for potentially teaching

Critical Race Theory (CRT) because of the frank and honest discussions around racism and discrimination.

The Jim Crow South and the Civil Rights Movement

The book covers Jim Crow laws and the civil rights movement. There are several reasons why teaching about discrimination and civil rights issues in the classroom might be difficult. The current political climate may make this controversial, especially in the ELA classroom. Sources such as [Civil Rights Teaching](#) and Learning for Justice's resources on [Teaching the Civil Rights Movements](#) may be helpful in navigating these concerns.

Child out of Wedlock

When Jackie's mother returns to South Carolina from New York she has a new baby with her. She is not married and the baby is born out of wedlock.

Smoking and Drinking

Characters also smoke and drink, which might be challenged, especially with middle-grades readers.

Having read and thought about this book as a teacher, briefly describe the unique ways in which this book is valuable for the curriculum and/or for a classroom library.

Brown Girl Dreaming offers approachable introductions to racial, ethnic, and family history topics. These topics are important and relevant to students' daily lives. These themes also highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and diversity. The focus of this book is a young African American girl growing up during the civil rights movement, which is an essential aspect of American history that students should be aware of and knowledgeable about. It promotes empathy, critical thinking, and discussions about social justice issues. This is significant because it helps students become more aware by exposing them to experiences that might be different than their own. This instills in children the value of considering one another's experiences in addition to their own. By doing this, children are able to identify challenges and injustices that are happening in front of them. This may be taught to students via the lens of discovering and embracing diversity, and it is significant since it highlights the distinctions among us as people. The book's autobiographical style also allows readers of different backgrounds to engage with the author's experiences and consider their own identities and goals, making it a stimulating and thought-provoking resource. In addition, the use of verse introduces readers to how poetry can be used to tell stories, encapsulate memories, and share experiences.

Additional Resources

Jacqueline Woodson's [official website](#) is full of videos, resources, and information about her and her books. A great resource for learning more about her or encouraging students to do an author study.

Common Sense Media's list of [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Resources for Classrooms](#) can be helpful when planning for teaching this book or for other DEI work.

Jacqueline Woodson is actively involved in [We Need Diverse Books](#). This website is a great resource for not only bringing diverse books into the classroom but for using as part of classroom discussion around book choices and learning about authors and social justice work.

The ReadWriteThink Lesson [Exploring Perspectives on Desegregation Using *Brown Girl Dreaming*](#) is another great activity to use with middle grades students who are looking at the civil rights era and desegregation.

[Penguin Random House's Teacher's Guide](#) is full of information not only about teaching *Brown Girl Dreaming* but about Woodson's other books as well. A helpful guide for using Woodson's texts for different grade levels, themes, and teaching activities.