Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson (review)

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Brown Girl Dreaming
by Jacqueline Woodson

Noted novelist Woodson here turns the narrative lens on herself, chronicling her childhood in a sequence of titled free-verse poems. She begins with the story of her family before she arrived in it, her Ohio-born father coming from a long line of pioneering free African Americans, her southern mother missing South Carolina, leaving young Jacqueline with two regional identities (“I am born Negro here and Colored there”). Not long after Jacqueline is born, her parents split up, and little Jacqueline, her two siblings, and their mother move in with their mother’s parents in South Carolina, against the backdrop of early 1960s sit-ins and marches. Soon, though, their mother seeks a new life in New York City, and the kids sadly leave their beloved grandparents behind to find themselves—and a new baby brother—in Brooklyn. It’s there that young Jacqueline meets her best friend, María, and where her love of stories turns into a talent for writing.

The effect of this confiding and rhythmic memoir is cumulative, as casual references blossom into motifs and characters evolve from quick references to main players. Losses demarcate Jacqueline’s experience, such as the death of an uncle who died before her birth, the leaving behind of her father, the tragic accidental death of a beloved aunt, the slow decline of the adored grandfather Jacqueline calls Daddy. That’s not to say her life is unhappy, though; these events are prominent landmarks in the family narrative that little Jackie loves to absorb, and she’s bolstered by supportive family at every step. The result is a sequence of revealing slices of life, redolent in sight, sound, and emotion, as the narrator moves from being the subject and recipient of stories to the teller of them.

Woodson subtly layers her focus, with history and geography the background, family the middle distance, and her younger self the foreground; the result situates Jacqueline firmly in an era and familial context without destabilizing her centrality. She’s thrilled to discover Steptoe’s Stevie (“Someone who looked like me/ had a story”) because of its implications for her storytelling; “Learning from Langston” showcases her early love of writing and attachment to her best friend; when her uncle and then her mother adopt Afro hairstyles, it’s memorable because Jacqueline is forbidden to join in this glamorous grownup mode. Most vivid are those moments of Jacqueline’s growing realization of her talents and value, when her teachers praise her ability or when her uncle (“Keep making up stories”) encourages yarn-spinning that others view as lying.

Eager readers and budding writers will particularly see themselves in the young protagonist and recognize her reveling in the luxury of the library and unfettered delight in words (an intoxication that at one point leads her to graffiti).
Additionally, the similarities to Marilyn Nelson’s *How I Discovered Poetry* (BCCB 3/14)—the young African-American girl coming into her own during a turbulent time and discovering writing—will bring in that book’s fans. Woodson’s lyricism, resonance, and vibrant portraiture, though, make the book all her own; it’s a story of the ongoing weaving of a family tapestry, the following of an individual thread through a gorgeous larger fabric, with the tacit implication that we’re all traversing such rich landscapes. It will make young readers consider where their own threads are taking them. (See p. 73 for publication information.)

*Deborah Stevenson, Editor*

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**NEW BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

**Allen, Rachel**  
*17 First Kisses.* HarperTeen/HarperCollins, 2014 319p  
R Gr. 7-10

This debut novel follows the fate of whip-smart, athletic Claire as she negotiates friendships with both boys and girls throughout her junior high and high school life. Some of the plot here is familiar: Claire is part of a popular clique, and she has to manage both a jerkish boy and a long-suffering best male friend with an enduring crush on her. What sets this book apart, however, is the way these problems are solved on a human rather than a hyperbolic scale, with grace, tenderness, forgiveness and humor tempering the inevitable angst of a best friend who’s prettier and more popular than you, a seemingly sincere boy who’s playing the two of you off against one another, and a reputation that requires continual care and rehabilitation in a school where everyone knows whom you’ve kissed over the years. A large part of Claire’s story is embedded in the circumstances surrounding those kisses, which are treated as inserted memories that interrupt and contextualize the ongoing present narrative. Through these memories, Claire relates the complicated causes and sometimes momentous, sometimes forgettable effects of kissing, from second-grade surprises to seventh-grade mistakes to the higher stakes of high school kissing that lead to slut-shaming and the temporary loss of your best friends. In the end, the most important breakups and makeups for Claire are with her female friends, and their sensible, forthright confrontations model the possibility for strong, supportive female friendships. Claire’s voice is fresh and funny, with just the right amount of self-aware irony and emotional range to create a relatable, likable, completely ordinary heroine.  

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