

A guide to

# JACQUELINE WOODSON'S

brown girl dreaming



## Dear Educator,

Jacqueline Woodson's books are revered and widely acclaimed—four Newbery Honor awards, two Coretta Scott King Awards, a National Book Award, a NAACP award for Outstanding Literary Work, and the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement. Awards and accolades aside, her stories are relevant, personal, and thought-provoking. Woodson writes picture books, middle grade and young adult novels—and regardless of the target audience, her books push boundaries. *Brown Girl Dreaming* is Jacqueline's memoir, told in verse.

This guide includes discussion questions, close reading exercises and extension activities for Woodson's work. While the activities are written for whole class instruction, they can be easily adapted for independent reading, school book clubs, or literacy circles. Each section begins with general activities exploring some of Woodson's more commonly used literary elements and techniques in books from that particular genre. We've listed the most relevant Common Core State Standards that align to each activity and included an array of text-to-text opportunities that range in complexity to engage all of your unique learners.

We know this guide will be useful to immerse your students in Jacqueline Woodson's most personal work to date. Thank you for your support of our books and our brand.

## Penguin Young Readers School & Library Marketing

★ "A memoir-in-verse so immediate that readers will feel they are experiencing the author's childhood right along with her. . . . Most notably of all, perhaps, we trace her development as a nascent writer, from her early, overarching love of stories through her struggles to learn to read through the thrill of her first blank composition book to her realization that 'words are [her] brilliance.' The poetry here sings: specific, lyrical, and full of imagery. An extraordinary—indeed brilliant—portrait of a writer as a young girl."  
— *The Horn Book*, starred review



*I used to say I'd be a teacher or a lawyer or a hairdresser when I grew up, but even as I said these things, I knew what made me happiest was writing.*

I wrote on everything and everywhere. I remember my uncle catching me writing my name in graffiti on the side of a building. (It was not pretty for me when my mother found out.) I wrote on paper bags and my shoes and denim binders. I chalked stories across sidewalks and penciled tiny tales in notebook margins. I loved and still love watching words flower into sentences and sentences blossom into stories.

I also told a lot of stories as a child. Not "Once upon a time" stories but basically, outright lies. I loved lying and getting away with it! There was something about telling the lie-story and seeing your friends' eyes grow wide with wonder. Of course I got in trouble for lying but I didn't stop until fifth grade.

That year, I wrote a story and my teacher said, "This is really good." Before that I had written a poem about Martin Luther King that was, I guess, so good no one believed I wrote it. After lots of brouhaha, it was believed finally that I had indeed penned the poem, which went on to win me a Scrabble game and local acclaim. So by the time the story rolled around and the words "This is really good" came out of the otherwise down-turned lips of my fifth grade teacher, I was well on my way to understanding that a lie on the page was a whole different animal—one that won you prizes and got surly teachers to smile. A lie on the page meant lots of independent time to create your stories and the freedom to sit hunched over the pages of your notebook without people thinking you were strange.

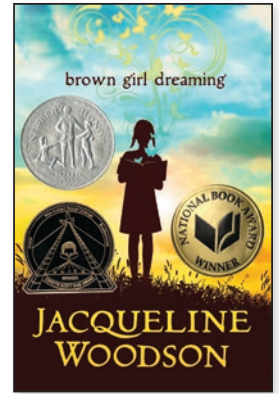
Lots and lots of books later, I am still surprised when I walk into a bookstore and see my name on a book or when the phone rings and someone on the other end is telling me I've just won an award. Sometimes, when I'm sitting at my desk for long hours and nothing's coming to me, I remember my fifth grade teacher, the way her eyes lit up when she said "This is really good." The way I—the skinny girl in the back of the classroom who was always getting into trouble for talking or missed homework assignments—sat up a little straighter, folded my hands on the desk, smiled, and began to believe in me.

*Jaqueline Woodson*

# Brown Girl Dreaming

Image-filled free verse will guide your students through Woodson's journey—to understand the world of Jim Crow, religion, family, and this new passion that makes her yearn to pick up that pencil and write.

- ✓ Poetry
- ✓ Historical connections
- ✓ Descriptive writing



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## Dive in & Discuss

1. Jacqueline's mother tells her children that they will experience a "moment when you walk into a room and/no one there is like you" (14). Have you experienced this? What might this feel like?
2. Why does Woodson structure her memoir into five distinct parts? How does this choice add to the story?
3. Where does Jacqueline start to see change happening in her life? Where does she start to see it in the world in which she lives?
4. What is Jacqueline's attitude toward God and religion? How does she seem conflicted?
5. Jacqueline loves writing because it allows her to create the worlds she imagines. What world did she create through her memoir? Is there an end to her story?

## Explore & Extend

### Equality Party

On pages 3-4, Woodson lists several names of people fighting for a similar goal. Divide the class into groups. Have each group research and explore the following: a) What was this person's main goal? b) What philosophies and strategies did he/she use to reach this goal? Once the research is complete, students prepare for and hold an Equality Party where students attend with name tags and in character as the people they researched. Instruct them to discuss with other "attendees" how they fought for equality using their unique strategies and techniques. After the party, the groups discuss what they learned about the other historical figures through the conversations at the party. How were they similar and different from one another?

***W.CCR.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.***

### Poetry Tie-ins

*Brown Girl Dreaming* is a unique story—it is Woodson’s personal journey *and* it is told through free verse. A dream book for teachers to use in the classroom! Explore why Woodson may have chosen poetry vs. prose to tell her story and the effect this has on the reader. Have students choose their favorite lines and rewrite them into prose. How does this affect the emotion behind the words, the author’s purpose, and the pictures that are created in our minds? Or does it? Have students create their own historical haiku poetry books while studying a civil rights unit and read/perform them at an assembly. Or have them write their own mini-memoir in verse, chock-full of imagery.

**W.CCR.4** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

### Showing vs. Telling

Woodson is a master of showing vs. telling in her writing. Close read “the ghosts of the nelsonville house” on pages 10-12. Find examples where Woodson describes a place or a person. What *else* is she saying in these lines? What does she say explicitly, and what can you infer from the text? What techniques does she use to *show* us (e.g., imagery, personification, line breaks) and what exactly is she showing? How is this different from *telling*? Direct students to identify other lines where Woodson *shows* in her writing. Challenge your students to write their own poems where they practice this technique.

**R.CCR.1** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

### This I Believe

Through Woodson’s odyssey searching for her identity in all of the worlds she’s navigated, she states “I believe that there is good in each of us/no matter who we are or what we believe in” (317). What do your students believe and know to be true? Examine the NPR series *This I Believe*. Listen to and read several essays of your choosing. Ask students what they all have in common. How is each unique? What elements go into writing one of these essays? Walk students through the writing process to write their own *This I Believe* essay. Take it a step further and record them to share with other schools who are doing the same project!

**W.CCR.3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

2014 National Book  
Award Winner

2015 Newbery Honor  
Award

New York Times  
Bestseller

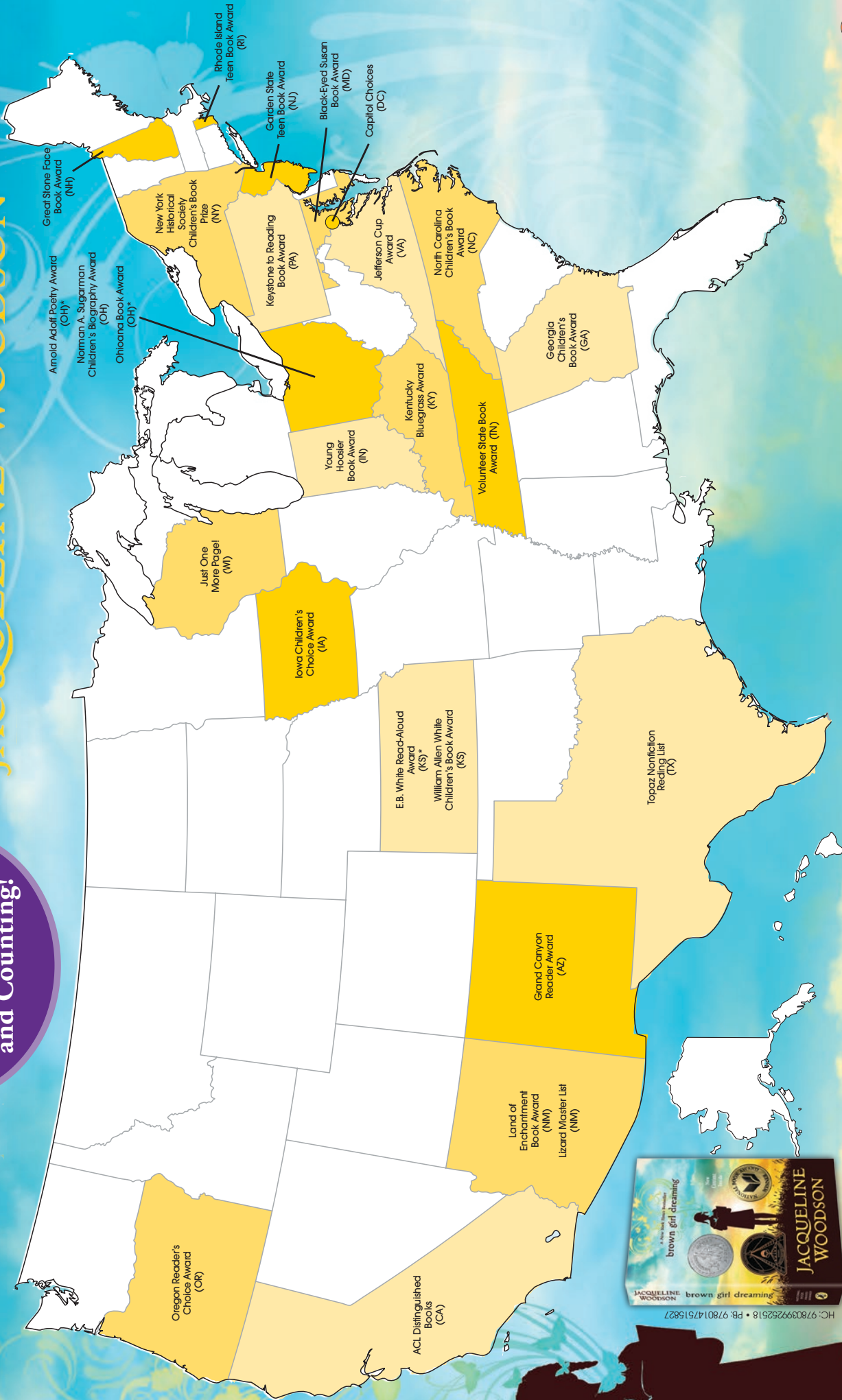
2014 E. B. White  
Read-Aloud Award Winner

2014 LA Times Book  
Prize Finalist

Coretta Scott King  
Author Award

**26**  
State Awards  
and Counting!

READ  
**brown girl dreaming**  
BY NATIONAL BOOK AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR  
**JACQUELINE WOODSON**



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JacquelineWoodson  
\*Indicates State Awards Won

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