

# JACQUELINE WOODSON



“You ever miss something that’s right in front of you, Sage?”

—FREDDY, *Remember Us*

## INTRODUCTION

*Remember Us* invites readers to slide into the Chuck Taylors of twelve-year-old Sage, and experience 1970s Bushwick, Brooklyn, from her insightful point of view. For Sage, who is strong, independent, and going into her twelfth summer, the world is complicated.

As summer smolders from the heat of the fires incinerating Bushwick building by building, Sage and her friend, Freddy, find beauty despite the uncertainty in the neighborhood.

A upsetting midsummer encounter and a shocking loss disturb that beauty. Sage understands that a building can be lost to flames at any moment, but . . .

- What happens when our ideas about who we are become lost too?
- What happens when time or distance changes the people and things that we love?
- Why is change so hard sometimes?
- Why does missing familiar people or experiences hurt?
- What does it mean to remember the things that are gone?

AFTER THE  
YEAR OF FIRE  
VINES RISE UP  
THROUGH THE  
REST OF  
OUR LIVES  
OF SMOKE  
OF FLAME  
OF MEMORY.  
AS IF TO SAY  
WE'RE STILL HERE.  
AS IF TO SAY  
REMEMBER US.

— JACQUELINE  
WOODSON



★ “Taps into a wide array of emotional truths.”

—*THE HORN BOOK*,  
starred review

★ “Deeply moving.”

—*BOOKLIST*,  
starred review

★ “A truly masterly work.”

—*SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL*,  
starred review

★ “Mesmerizing.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*,  
starred review

★ “An exquisitely wrought story of self and community.”

—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*,  
starred review

★ “Has the feel of a new classic.”

—*BOOKPAGE*,  
starred review

## WHY THIS BOOK?

Many young people are exploring these and other questions as they journey through adolescence. In 2023, there are fewer safe places to talk through them. This book presents a character who is growing alongside our students, and is written in a way that gives readers direct access to her thoughts. Even if they never talk to another human about things like identity, belonging, change, loss, or community, readers will have Sage. She talks to them, and in doing so, Sage names the actual feelings young people can sometimes have a hard time finding the words to express.

Additionally, this book can serve as a powerful character study to sharpen analysis. It can be a compelling exploration of theme that allows learners to practice key interpretation and critical thinking skills, or the text can be a transformative apprenticeship for the narrative writing skills that are so essential in storytelling and essay composition.

Many classrooms, schools, and libraries do community reads—they experience a book together. This book is a PERFECT community read for celebrating a major accomplishment or mourning a significant loss. It’s excellent for communities and individuals that are growing through change. This book is an effective bonding tool for small groups of friends or even for groups of educators seeking to sharpen their instructional capacity by reminding themselves what it’s like to be a preteen. As an educator, this is a book that you can coach a solo reader or a small group of young people into selecting while checking in on them as they read it to encourage their thinking and discussion.

# Getting Ready

To teach with this book is to teach with your whole humanity. This is not just a book that you assign to have kids read, write a summary, do a project, or answer some questions. (Please try to read at least some of it before you experience it with teens. Consider sharing the audiobook read by Jacqueline Woodson—get a taste of the audiobook [here](#). I'll point out some key sections later.) This is a book that will require some reflection and introspection. We love to tell kids that reading books can help us to change the world, but they can only do so if we allow the act of reading to change us, as humans, first.

We can show young people how to do this.

Reading this book is easy. *Understanding* this book requires young people to be honest with themselves in some real ways, and that can be hard for kids and teens. It can be harder for adults.

This text is clear about its desire for a world where young people are free to be themselves as they grow into who they can become. Through story, it gives them the tools to do so. As educators, we know that

kids can't move optimally with tools alone. They need examples. Just as you cannot learn algebra powerfully from someone who does not know algebra themselves, adolescents cannot grow from someone who is not living thoughtfully in front of them.

Teaching with this book gave me an opportunity to outgrow some of the less-than-helpful ways that I was taught when I was in school. I could not just TELL kids to be strong or to be honest or understanding, I had to SHOW them. And showing them revealed the complexity in all these behaviors.

As humans, when we show strength, people can challenge or misunderstand us—especially when that strength does not look like how strength is “supposed” to look. When we are honest, there are consequences and potential losses for that honesty, and when we seek to understand we can become vulnerable to the emotional violence of others. There are real risks to being fully human, and growing up is all about how we navigate those risks.

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**THIS GUIDE WAS WRITTEN BY CORNELIUS MINOR.** Minor is a Brooklyn-based educator and part-time Pokémon trainer. He works with teachers, school leaders, and leaders of community-based organizations to support equitable literacy reform in cities (and sometimes villages) across the globe. His latest book, *We Got This*, explores how the work of creating more equitable school spaces is embedded in our everyday choices—specifically in the choice to really listen to kids.

# What's in This Book?

This is a book that you want kids to hold as a navigational tool for thinking about their own lives—the triumphs, the struggles, and the things that feel uncomfortably on the spectrum between those two states of being a teen human.

The book is set in Bushwick, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. This area was home to the Lenape people before it was “founded” by the Dutch in the 1700s. After the establishment of the United States, families of German immigrants called the neighborhood home. Over the last one hundred years, the neighborhood has been home to Italian American families, Latinx and Hispanic families, and Black families. Since the 1970s, these last two groups have made up most of the Bushwick population. This is when we encounter Sage—at a time when the neighborhood was changing. Though this is a work of fiction, the book

leans on actual historical tensions related to this changing time.

As the neighborhood aged, landlords discovered that “there was more money in insurance than rebuilding” for a changing population. So some landlords paid arsonists to burn the buildings that they themselves owned. These relatively wealthy landlords would collect the insurance money, and working families would be displaced.

In a [2022 \*New York Times\* essay](#) describing this malicious practice, Bronx resident David Gonzalez says that “it wasn’t the flames that endangered us. It was the indifference.” He goes on to say that “instead of intergenerational wealth, we inherited trauma.” While this is not the center of Sage’s story, her narrative comes out of this history. At twelve years old, she navigates this world.

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**THE FOLLOWING PAGES HIGHLIGHT SOME IMPORTANT EXCERPTS  
AND QUESTIONS/TOPICS ASSOCIATED WITH THEM THAT YOU WILL DEFINITELY  
WANT TO CONSIDER AS YOU WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE.**

## **CLICK THE LINKS BELOW**

to jump to a a specific section in the book and their questions/topics

[Chapter 8](#) • [Chapter 14](#) • [Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 21](#) • [Chapter 32](#) • [Chapter 39](#) • [Chapter 45](#)

# What's in This Book? (continued)

## CHAPTER 8

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Sage reads about the Bushwick fires in the newspaper. And she senses that somehow the paper got it wrong. They cover the fires and the losses, but the news fails to capture the spirit of the people. She knows that Bushwick is more than what she reads in print. This is confirmed later that day when the kid who lost his home shows up to play ball in the park. The love in this scene is evident. The ballplayers at the park extend care, understanding, and concern in such powerful ways. This is what the papers missed. The people. The love.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND TOPICS:

- Why does there seem to be a difference in what people say about a group of people and who those people actually are?
- Who usually gets to decide what is said/written about a group, place, or person?
- Why do those people get to decide?

## CHAPTER 14

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After another building burns, the kids are drawn to what's left of it the next morning. Sage and Freddy stare reverently at the cinders—remembering the building and the lives housed within just a day before. Freddy turns to Sage and says, “We gotta remember the once was.”

Here, Freddy is seeing the neighborhood change in real-time, and he's trying to hold on. What's powerful about this scene is that Freddy isn't talking about things—objects lost in the fire, or even buildings—he's talking about something deeper, immaterial.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND TOPICS:

- What is the “once was”?
- Why is it important to remember it?
- Are there parts of us or of our community now that are already “once was”?

# What's in This Book? (continued)

## CHAPTER 19

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Jacob, a young neighborhood boy, is jumping on an old mattress from a burned-out building with his friends. There is incredible joy and beauty in this moment. All the kids experience real freedom in the simple act of pretend flight, and Jacob is the most free and expressive among them. In chapter 18, Sage and Freddy marvel at this freedom. After a particularly beautiful jump, Jacob lands wrong, and hurts himself. All the neighborhood kids witness the pain of this moment—freedom brought crashing back down to earth. When Jacob is carried off by his mother, the neighborhood kids resume their jumping—despite the evident risk. The opportunity to be free, however briefly, is worth it.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND TOPICS:

- Sometimes being free means risking breaking things. Is it still worth the risk?
- What is freedom?

## CHAPTER 21

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Sage observes the kids nearby on Ridgewood Place who live in brick homes with fancy cars in front of them. She then considers the impermanence of the wooden buildings on Palmetto Street. And she thinks about the lives of the kids who live in those buildings with no fancy cars out front. The kids whose fear of fire is a permanent bedfellow.

Freddy, who lives on Palmetto but walks down Ridgewood Place often, has important insight on what he's observed about the lives of the people on Ridgewood. He observes that "they have meat every night," and he recalls watching the children there eat ice cream in the evening after dinner. Freddy's telling of what he observes on Ridgewood Place is an important image of how different life can be among groups of people—even when they live in the same neighborhood. This is not just a Brooklyn thing. It's everywhere. All over the world, poverty is mere meters away from opulence. To read it in Freddy's words is important.

# What's in This Book? (continued)

## CHAPTER 21 (CONT.)

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND TOPICS:

- Palmetto Street is meters away from Ridgewood Place. What “barrier” do you think keeps the Palmetto and Ridgewood kids from spending lots of time together?
- Whose job is it to overcome that “barrier”?
- What ideas do you have for bringing the kids and the communities that they represent together?
- Are there any barriers that exist in your school or community?
- How do they make you feel?
- How can we overcome them?

## CHAPTER 32

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This chapter is significant. I could not breathe while reading it. Great literature does that. This is a chapter you will want to experience first by yourself, and then with your students. Sage is EVERYTHING that we want young people to be. She is expressive, thoughtful, kind, athletic, and connected to her community in the most beautiful ways. All of that is taken from her in an instant. Surprisingly, not by fire.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND TOPICS:

- What makes this moment so intense?
- What can Sage do next? How does a person recover from something like this?
- How might her family and friends support Sage moving forward? What would you offer her? How would you assist in making sure that she has the support that she needs?
- In the next chapter, Sage herself observes that she is disappearing. How has this event changed her?
- Can Sage ever go back to how she used to be? Is the old version of Sage part of the “once was” now?
- What can be done to make communities like the one that you live or attend school in physically safer?
- What can be done to make them emotionally safer?

# What's in This Book? (continued)

## CHAPTER 39

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Sage spends time thinking about how we “learn” to be the “kind” of people that we are “supposed” to be. There seems to be “rules” that you follow if you are a “boy.” And things that you are “supposed” to be if you are a “girl.” Sage is certain that she’s not interested in following all the “rules” or expectations. Among other things, she loves basketball, and that’s not what girls are “supposed” to do. Is it?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND TOPICS:

- In Sage’s community, no one really tells you the rules of how to be; you are just expected to know them. In your community, are there “rules” like this? Do you think that they are fair?
- What are the negative consequences for going against expectations? What are the advantages or benefits?
- In what ways does Sage go against expectations? In what ways does she follow the rules? What negative consequences does she experience? What advantages does she enjoy?
- What is your relationship to these “unspoken” rules or expectations in your community?

## CHAPTER 45

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Tragedy lands very close to home for Sage and Freddy, and they have to deal with it. They watch other people in their neighborhood deal with it too. This is another thing that no one teaches them how to do. They just have to figure it out . . .

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND TOPICS:

- How do Sage and Freddy use “remembering” in this moment? Do you think that it is helpful to remember in moments like this?
- We are all going to face some forms of hardship in our lives. The powerful thing about books is that we can learn things from characters and borrow their moves or strategies. Is there anything that we can borrow from Sage and Freddy in this moment?
- In what ways are Sage’s and Freddy’s adults helpful? How can the adults in the book be better at supporting the young people through tragedy, uncertainty, and change?
- How can the adults in your school and community be better at this?

# What You Can Do!

With this general summary of the book and the ideas it presents, there are so many things that you can choose to do as students make their way through this or any text. The teaching moves that you practice here in *Remember Us* can serve you well as you explore other texts with kids.

## CLASS DISCUSSIONS

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Kids don't learn because adults talk at them. Kids learn because they try on new ideas and they wield them—clumsily at first—until they practice enough to wield them well. Young people cannot be powerful thinkers in the world if we don't provide them the space to become powerful thinkers in the classroom.

Also, we cannot leave this to chance (or to the three kids who always raise their hands in class). One of the easiest ways to develop healthy talk habits in any classroom is to establish rituals for talking. When I used this book, I had kids talk in partnerships first, before they ever talked as a class. I separated young people into pairs and labeled each pair *Partner #1* and *Partner #2*.

To work up to powerful class discussions, I started with small, low-stakes partner

conversations. That usually started with me making a request . . . “Partner #1, tell Partner #2 all about your favorite meal. You have 30 seconds . . .” This does several things. It gets kids used to sharing the mic, and it gives them an opportunity to warm up to the idea of sharing thoughts without the spotlight of everyone's eyes shining on them. I might follow this up with a different request. “Okay, Partner #2. Your turn. Tell Partner #1 about your favorite meal . . .”

After low-stakes conversations in this way, I can move to more substantive conversations in pairs, and then to richer conversations in groups of four or eight before I even “graduate” to whole-class conversations. Talking about Sage's story in this way helps kids to make some important discoveries about themselves and about their communities.

# What You Can Do! (continued)

## CHARACTER STUDY

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Studying Sage helps kids to make some important choices about who and how they want to be in life. This starts by thinking about who and how I want to be today or this week. The characters in this book are living blueprints for how we can be with one another. We can look at the choices that they make to plan the choices that we will make when we encounter challenges, find success, navigate love, or consider the future.

One significant thing that I had to communicate to students in *Remember Us* is that it's okay to have an opinion about a character that comes from your heart. You don't have to think what the other kids in your class think about them. You don't even have to think what the teacher thinks. So many kids came to me

looking for a "right" answer about what to think or how to feel. It was powerful for us to practice feeling how you want to feel and thinking what you want to think. This will be important work in your classroom too, and will require kids to unlearn some of what they have acquired in their previous experiences with books.

All ideas about character come from paying close attention to what the characters in books think, say, and do. We hold these observations next to the things that we have personally experienced in life, and we make thoughts from the insight that emerges from that space. There is no "right" or "wrong" answer when it comes to this kind of thought or idea formation.

### **Giving students steps to guide this thinking was so helpful in this area:**

1. Read the story like you normally would any story.
2. Take a pause as you near the end of a section and name what a character has recently said, done, or thought.
3. Ask yourself: "In my experience, what kind of people say, do, or think things like this?"
4. Make a guess, and stretch your guess out into a complete sentence.
5. This guess is the beginning of your thinking and analysis.

# What You Can Do! (continued)

## CHARACTER STUDY (CONT.)

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When I model this for kids, it looks something like this:

1. “As I finish chapter 56, I have thoughts . . .”
2. “Even though it was not easy, Sage chose to talk to Freddy about what has been bothering her.”
3. “In the past, I’ve kept stuff like that to myself. It’s hard to talk about the hard stuff sometimes. Even to good friends. I think that Sage is really bold here. And trusting.”
4. “Yes, Sage is the kind of person who is willing to do bold things to keep herself happy and safe. She’s good to herself. Even when it’s not easy to be that. I think that this is a healthy thing.”
5. “This is how my thinking about Sage is growing because of what I’m reading. Thinking like this can help me understand characters in books AND people in life.”

Practicing this kind of thinking in front of kids in clear and intentional ways yields powerful benefits, but it’s important to note that they won’t be immediately perfect at this. They will get better as they do this kind of thinking in their talk and in their writing. This kind of analytical practice extends beyond this book, into their other studies, and we can communicate to kids that this ability to understand people based on their actions and words can improve the quality of the relationships that they maintain.

## CONSIDERING THEME

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Historically when we talk about theme with kids, we talk about it like it’s some mystical artifact hidden in the forest that kids have to quest for. We send kids into books to “look for the theme” and they return from their quests for us to judge the “worthiness” of their finds . . . “Yes, this is the theme,” or “No, this is not correct. Go back and look some more.”

This has never felt optimally productive to me. Working with kids in *Remember Us* gave me an opportunity to rethink my approach to teaching kids to read thematically.

# What You Can Do! (continued)

## CONSIDERING THEME (CONT.)

As educators, we know that there are certain themes and ideas that are relatively universal. They show up consistently in lots of stories. I asked myself, “Instead of asking kids to hunt for themes, what would happen if I told kids the themes before they started reading? . . . What if I just revealed to them that these are the themes that will show up in almost every book that you read?” That way, adolescents can spend less of their time guessing at what the teacher might want to hear and more of their time thinking about how these themes develop over the course of the story.

I shared with kids that the following ideas have been explored by storytellers for years. These are things that humans are always grappling with, and because of that, these ideas show up in stories as characters deal with them too. “Your job as a reader is to determine which of these things characters are dealing with and HOW characters are working through these ideas in *Remember Us* or in any book that you read. These themes will be in most of them.”

### CONFLICT

In life, there are conflicts from time to time. Sometimes those conflicts are verbal or physical. As teens, we know what that looks like. Sometimes, though, those conflicts are inside of us. Parts of our lives feel like they don't get along with other parts of our lives. Characters go through this too.

### FRIENDSHIP/FAMILY

In difficult times, people turn to friends, family, or community for support. That support is not always perfect, so characters in books learn to live through that imperfection.

### CHANGE

When faced with difficulty, sometimes people have to make changes to work through it. Sometimes the changes are inside us. Sometimes the changes are in relationships, and sometimes the changes are in the world.

### POWER

Some people use their power to take advantage of other people. In the world and in books, the power that people abuse can be related to size, ability, gender, race, social class, or other things.

This is not an exhaustive list, but these are the themes that show up most often in the books that teens read and in the experiences that they navigate. Studying them so transparently gives young people so much more agency in their lives, and ultimately this is how we want them to use *Remember Us*—to show up in ways that are richer, healthier, and more authentic. This is how we remember Sage and all of the kids who once were. This is how we honor them. Happy studying.