

Talking with Jacqueline Woodson

The award-winning author discusses the message of hope in her books. **By Dean Schneider**

Jacqueline Woodson was born in Columbus, Ohio, and grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, and Brooklyn, New York, where she currently lives. She says on her Web site, “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.” Her many books—picture books, poetry, novels—are about characters getting by, finding strength, finding hope, and finding warmth in loving families. Woodson has already won most major awards in children’s literature, including the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement, Newbery Honor Book citations for *Show Way* and *Feathers*, National Book Award nominations for *Locomotion* and *Hush*, and the Coretta Scott King Author Award for *Miracle’s Boys*. The following interview was conducted by e-mail.

DS: On your Web site, you say you wrote *Feathers* to explore “the many ways people find hope in the world.” Would you say that’s also a theme of *Miracle’s Boys*?

WOODSON: I think you can’t write for young people without having hope in the story, and I think so much of what I try to do is show young people (and myself) through the writing that no matter how dire a situation may seem, there is something great in the surviving of it. In *Miracle’s Boys*, the brothers

“It’s hard to find a person who doesn’t have a tiny bit of good somewhere.”

are really just trying to survive, to get through each day—together. I think the theme of that book is definitely hope-based but more about moving forward—how do we do this when the odds seem so stacked against us? How do we stay whole and good?

DS: What kind of research did you have to do to write a book in which the only characters are boys?

WOODSON: *Miracle’s Boys* killed me. I rewrote it about 25 times—cover to cover—changing point of view and circumstances and ages and everything about who each brother was. Because I really didn’t know, and it was scary, this not knowing. I had so much doubt all the time. Talk about Imposter Syndrome—*Miracle’s Boys* was it to the hilt. I kept asking myself what right did I have to tell this story. In some ways, the story had nothing to do with me, and in so many ways the story was all mine. So it was confusing and sometimes so painful.

My first research was hitting up my two brothers—asking them about their lives, their childhood, etc. They didn’t give me much I didn’t already know—or remembered better than they did. (I have



a brother who is three years older and one who is three years younger.) Then I watched boys—just went to the park and watched them play ball, interact, hang out. I spent lots of time just thinking and imagining—if I was a boy, who would I be? If I had a son, what would I want him to be/do/say? If I was an older brother/younger brother/middle child, what would I want? And on and on.

I had done a lot of this “research” when I wrote *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, so I had some sense of how to turn my own gender inside out and examine its opposite, but working with three boys as opposed to one and figuring out how to get them to love and hate each other was a whole different story.

DS: Even though *Newcharlie* is so tough when he comes home in the early part of

WEB CONNECTIONS

For more about Jacqueline Woodson, visit the *Book Links* Web site at <http://www.ala.org/booklinks> and click on "Web Connections."

the novel, he clearly is a likable young man underneath, as you let readers know in carefully revealed details. Is there a connection between the character of Charlie and the characters in or the inspiration behind your picture book Visiting Day?

WOODSON: That's an interesting question. I had an uncle who was in and out of prison throughout his 20s. My younger brother has done time in federal prison and even as I write this, is having to do another three months for a parole violation. My uncle was a smart and loving guy. My brother is absolutely brilliant—part of his prison sentence was having to work with the FBI and show them how he was doing half the stuff he was doing—crazy. My uncle and my brother both are great people who made stupid choices, and I think this about Charlie. I don't know the father in *Visiting Day* well. I think he regrets losing his family and what he has to put them through, but I don't know how or why he's in prison. Charlie's dumb choice came from a loving place—he wanted to take his mother to Puerto Rico. I think both characters have good hearts. I think it's hard to find a person who doesn't have a tiny bit of good somewhere. Sometimes, it's so hard to find, but then you catch glimpses of it and go, "Yes! I saw it! Right there."

DS: What was it like to have a movie made of Miracle's Boys? Does it do justice to the novel, and can a movie get inside characters the way a novel can?

WOODSON: Books and movies are very different. They are their own entities and can't even be compared. The movie does justice to the novel in that it got young people to pick up the book. The actors were amazing and worked really hard. I

fell in love with each one of them and began to really see them as these people I had made up come to life. Very surreal. But it wasn't the book by any means—the movie felt far less complicated to me. But probably to someone working in film, the book feels less complicated.

DS: What would you say to eighth-graders when they complain—and they often do—that so many of the books we read are so sad?

WOODSON: Hmm . . . that's a tough one. I don't see the books as sad. I see them as realistic and hopeful. I would ask students to write a paragraph about the one place or the many places in the books where they see a part of themselves. And I would be surprised to meet an eighth-grader who couldn't find some part of themselves, their lives, their world, on the page. And I would say there are places in these sorts of books where you laugh, where you choke up, where you get really angry, where you feel a little bit afraid—and that's what makes it realistic fiction, because each of us experiences some part or all parts of those reactions/emotions every single day. And what's so grim about that? It makes us complicated and whole.

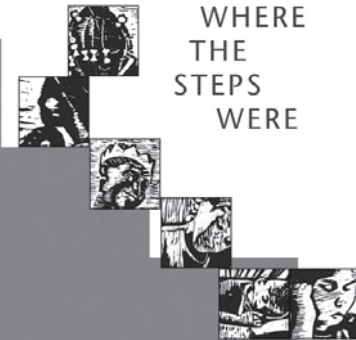
DS: How about the strong women characters in so many of your books? In Miracle's Boys, Mama dies before the story begins, yet she is clearly a strong presence in the boys' lives. In Coming on Home Soon, Show Way, Feathers, Visiting Day, and other stories, strong women are there, providing home and support, and helping characters to get by day to day. This might be an odd question, but are you ever inspired by the characters you create?

WOODSON: I think it's both that I'm inspired by the women who came before me and that I want women represented on the page in a way that's respectful, complicated, and loving. And yes, when I re-read a character on the page who is amazing, I have to go, "Yes!"

It's funny, years ago when I wrote *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* and created

Andrea Cheng

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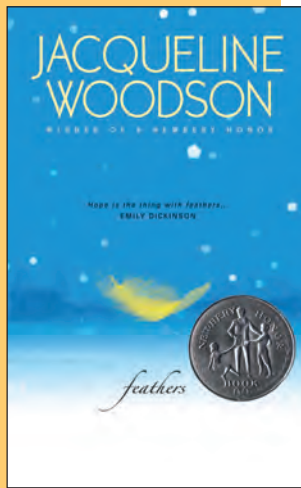
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this mom who left, I was stunned to see how negatively people reacted to her when I, in creating her, was thinking, “This is a great woman—a woman who knows she can’t deal—and instead of messing up her family, she leaves.” But others didn’t see it that way. I had seen the work crazy moms could do on their kids and had always thought, “Well, if they had been unselfish enough to leave, the kid wouldn’t be in such a mess.” So I thought the act of leaving was a very big and unselfish act. I still do. But boy, did people think differently.

up not knowing what a gift it is to have another day.

Sampling Woodson

After Tupac and D Foster. 2008. 160p. Putnam, \$15.99 (9780399246548). Gr. 6–9.

Coming on Home Soon. Illus. by E. B. Lewis. 2004. 32p. Putnam, \$16.99 (9780399237485). K–Gr. 3.

Feathers. 2007. 208p. Putnam, \$15.99 (9780399239892). Gr. 4–8.

From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun. 1995. 160p. Scholastic, paper, \$5.99 (9780590458818). Gr. 7–10.

Hush. 2002. 192p. Putnam, \$15.99 (9780399231148); Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780142406007). Gr. 6–9.

I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This. 1994. 176p. Putnam, \$17.99 (9780399244995); Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780142405550). Gr. 5–9.

If You Come Softly. 1998. 192p. Putnam, \$16.99 (9780399231124); Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780142406014). Gr. 7–10.

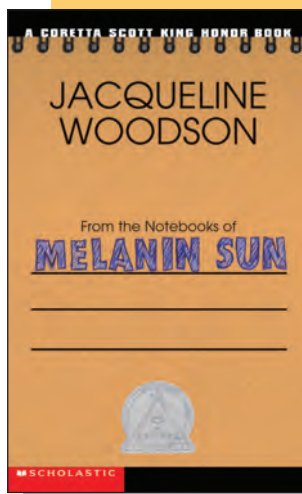
Locomotion. 2003. 112p. Putnam, \$15.99 (9780399231155); Puffin, paper, \$5.99 (9780142401491). Gr. 4–6.

The Other Side. Illus. by E. B. Lewis. 2001. 32p. Putnam, \$16.99 (9780399231162). K–Gr. 4.

Show Way. Illus. by Hudson Talbott. 2005. 48p. Putnam, \$16.99 (9780399237492). Gr. 3–5.

Visiting Day. Illus. by James E. Ransome. 2002. 32p. Scholastic, \$15.95 (9780590400053). K–Gr. 2. [↪](#)

Dean Schneider teaches seventh- and eighth-grade English at the Ensworth School in Nashville, Tennessee. For an article on teaching Woodson’s *Miracle’s Boys* in the classroom, see opposite page.



DS: *Do you feel the boys in Miracle’s Boys will make it as a family, “B to B to B”?*

WOODSON: Yes. I think it won’t be easy, but I imagine them in their 30s being very close. I imagine Ty’ree finally getting a degree and Charlie figuring out who he is. I don’t know who Lafayette will become. He’s a bit of an anomaly to me—I think this is usually the case for my narrators. They’re the characters I know the least, the watchers and tellers. But yes, I see them getting through this.

DS: *You are one of the friendliest, most upbeat, life-affirming people I have met, and that shows in your writing. For example, at the end of Miracle’s Boys, Charlie, a boy who had seemed tough, says, “This is art, though, ain’t it? . . . Sometimes I feel like our life is one big work of art.” How do you find your way through the sometimes tough lives and situations in your novels to such hopefulness and appreciation of life in spite of it all?*

WOODSON: Thanks for saying that. I have a lot of strong people around me and I swear, they keep me sane and whole and knowing what’s important. And they make me laugh. And the laughter eases the stress of the everyday. At the center of everything, and I’m sure I learned this from my grandmother, is that we have the gift of another day. I mean, that’s AMAZING! That we woke up this morning, somewhat healthy, somewhat sane, and able to face the day. It makes me sad that people wake

