

“A Voice, a Power, a Space in the World”:

2004 ALAN Award Winner Jacqueline Woodson Talks about Her Works

I had the delightful fortune of dining with Jacqueline Woodson at a Penguin-sponsored dinner while at NCTE 2004 in Indianapolis, shortly after Ms. Woodson received the 2004 ALAN Award. Through conversation and listening to her read from a work in progress, I experienced a voice drenched in a poignancy I have come to expect from her written words. Like many readers, I became a fan from my first Woodson novel. And as a middle school teacher, I confidently place her books into the hands of my students because Woodson writes of them and for them. Her characters are not stick figures to move a plot but representative of adolescents, regardless of race or gender.

Woodson has been honored twice as a National Book Award Finalist, three times with a Coretta Scott King Honor, and once with the Coretta Scott King Award. Her books consistently rank high on the ALA Best Books for Young Adults, and she has received numerous state awards for her exceptional and honest portrayal of young people.

To the question asked on her website about if she would ever stop writing, Woodson responds: “Probably not even when I die. I love writing that much.” For her legion of readers, I can only hope her words continue to instill a genuine voice in quality young adult literature.

RC: In *Locomotion* (2003 and your third Coretta Scott



King Honor) you used verse to tell a young man’s story. What challenges did that present to you, the writer, and what impact do you think poetry has with young people (or all people) versus prose?

JW: I think the biggest challenge was trying to get inside a young man’s head—via poetry. I mean, how *does* an eleven-year-old come to a poem, what is his thought process, how does the poem appear on the

page, how does he feel about it once it’s there . . . I, as always, doubted my ability to tell Lonnie’s story. But once I let myself go to that place and feel what it felt like for ME to be in fifth grade discovering MY voice for the first time, the writing just came and kept on coming. I think poetry has the ability to make people think. It’s short and provocative and when it’s not written in some arrogant code—when it’s truly poetry for the people—then it has the ability to make people feel like they have a voice, a power, a space in the world.

RC: Life can be cruel in the real world and literature alike. The events that leave Ty’ree, Charlie, and Lafayette orphaned in *Miracle’s Boys* (2000, a Coretta Scott King Award winner) are relentlessly tragic, but young people love this book. In *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (1994 and your first Coretta Scott King Honor) Lena has a horrible secret that

never is told to people who could help, but again, young people love this book. What do you think it is about the tragedies of life that appeal to young readers in a well-written story?

JW: I think for young people, adolescence is the greatest tragedy, so seeing some of themselves reflected in the lives of others gives their own lives

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some sort of value and truth. There is this 'me against them' sense about being young, and struggling with others is a way of making that feeling more collective somehow.

RC: People in your books (*From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, 1995 and your second Coretta Scott King Honor, *The Dear One*, 1991, for examples) often have to deal with each other, whether they like it or not, and find a way to make life work. How does this, if at all, reflect a philosophy of yours about life?

JW: I think, as I wrote in *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*—we all have a right to be in this world. We're living in a dangerous time—when Christianity can be

about intolerance—which, growing up a Christian I know is the complete opposite of what it's about, when our own society is xenophobic, when your family life is in peril simply because you're poor or of color or gay—or all of the above, when the act of making art can be dangerous, when people find ways of justifying hatred, intolerance, ignorance—as the population grows and the middle class shrinks. I am trying to write, always, against fear—

my own and those who come to my books. I have a daughter now—and many other young people in my life. I want their world to be a safe place for them—I want them to love their bodies and have control over those bodies. I want them to do the work they love and not worry about starving to death doing it. I want them to always think of the greater good in each act. Writing helps me envision this, articulate it, create it.

RC: You have written sequels (*Lena*, 1999; *Behind You*, 2004) and even a trilogy (*Last Summer with Maizon*, 1990; *Maizon at Blue Hill*, 1992; *Between Madison and Palmetto*, 1993). How is it different in the writing process to continue an established story line?

JW: When I'm writing a sequel, it's like going back into an old familiar house and revisiting the people there. They are just as I left them in the last book, and it feels kind of amazing to find them that way, to remember them as they were. The territory is familiar yet open to new ideas. When I'm starting to write a new story—that is not part of a sequel, it's a bit scarier. I never know where a story is going, so I never know if I'll get through it.

RC: How much of your experience working as a therapist with troubled youth shows up in your writing?

JW: I don't know. I think what I brought to working with young people in crisis had always been in me, so it's just natural that it remains with me. I have to keep saying "Be open, girl," no matter what the situation. That has always been true.

RC: Who have been some of the influential people in your life?

JW: Virginia Hamilton, James Baldwin, Nikki Giovanni, James Taylor, Carson McCullers, Joanie Mitchell, my grandmother, my daughter, my dog, some teachers, some students, some characters I met in other books . . . the list goes on.

RC: Do you find sanctuary for writing in places like Whidbey Island and/or writing workshops? What

kind of environment best facilitates your work?

JW: Sometimes I have to go away from where all of my living happens to be able to access the worlds in my head. It's lonely to do that—to leave my friends and family, to choose fiction over my real life. But it's also rewarding—coming back home and having TWO worlds instead of one. I don't get to go away as much as I once did, but I do find solace in long stretches of quiet. Sometimes, I just go to the Writer's Room in Manhattan where I can sit in silence among strangers. It's hard because there is still so much New York City energy around me but sometimes easier than being at home—where I have access to the Internet and a stack of bills and various creaks reminding me what needs to be done at home. Sometimes I sit in my backyard with my Ipod on and listen to the same album over and over while I write. That's my spring plan. I haven't gotten much writing done all year.

RC: In addition to writing over thirteen novels for young adults, you have composed six picture books, beginning with *Martin Luther King, Jr. and His Birthday* (1990). Is there a different need for you as a writer to pen picture books? What age groups might learn from picture books?

JW: Seven picture books—counting *SHOW WAY* which is coming out in September! Picture books allow me to write poetry—they're short and lyrical and visual. I love being able to take that break. Doing so helps me to remember that I should do the same with older books—think about the language and the rhythm of them. Picture books allow me to challenge myself in ways that I like to—how to get

my ideas across with limited space, how to stay true to my voice—things like that.

RC: You mentioned *The Other Side* (2001) was written as a current story; however, the illustrator E. B. Lewis envisioned your text as taking place in the 1950's. Since differences still exist today, do you believe your message was altered by the illustrations?

JW: I think the altering of the message allowed the book an entry it may not have otherwise had—People are more comfortable talking about segregation as a thing of the past as opposed to talking about all the work we still have to do. The book is extremely popular in a way I don't think it would have been. I was bummed when I first saw the illustrations—even though I thought they were stunning. But as years passed, I realized the need for it to be done that way.

RC: What advice would you offer to young adult readers about writing?

JW: Don't be afraid. Fear keeps people from moving forward, from saying and writing what they mean, from DOING. Write because you love writing. Don't listen to people who say you can't or shouldn't. We all have a story. Tell yours.

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