



## THE BOOKS OF JACQUELINE WOODSON

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### INTRODUCTION

#### About the Books

#### If You Come Softly

Elisha Eisen and Jeremiah Roselind meet on their first day at Percy Academy and are immediately attracted to each other. Elisha is the youngest daughter of a successful Jewish doctor and his wife. Ellie, as she prefers to be called, is the only child still at home where she is haunted by two earlier periods when the family was abandoned by Mrs. Eisen. Jeremiah—Miah—is the only child of prominent African Americans: Norman Roselind, an Oscar-nominated filmmaker and Nelia Roselind, a critically acclaimed novelist—a couple once labeled "most romantic," and now separated. Despite their initial attraction, it is weeks before Ellie and Miah actually speak again. Once they are able to spend time together, it is obvious they have a special connection. Ellie and Miah find they are able to share their deepest feelings and the time they spend together brings unexpected happiness. Ellie worries about her family prejudices and Miah ponders making a life for himself away from the shadows of famous parents. For a while, they keep their growing romance away from their parents. The reactions of schoolmates and strangers hurt their feelings and Ellie receives a very negative reaction about her interest in Miah from her sister Anne, the one person she had expected to understand because Anne had endured family disapproval because of her sexual orientation. Finally, Miah introduces Ellie to his mother and the young couple finds a measure of acceptance for their relationship.

Finally, Ellie feels ready to reveal her relationship to her parents, welcome news to Miah. However, before this can occur, Miah is mistaken for a wanted criminal, shot and killed. Despite this unspeakable tragedy, Ellie is able to hold onto the memories of the special time she had with Miah.

This is a compelling and poignant story of young love against the odds of social expectations. Ellie and Miah are vivid characters, whose stories are told in alternative chapters until the heartbreaking ending. Readers are drawn into their lives and experience the connection they feel for each other.

## Miracle's Boys

**Miracle's Boys** is the story of three brothers, Ty'ree, Charlie, and Lafayette and their struggle to stay together as a family after the death of their mother. The family struggles actually began years ago when the boys' father died after saving a jogger and her dog from drowning. Milagro, (miracle, in Spanish) was left to raise three boys on her own. There was little money but Milagro was able to pass on her strong values and love of learning to her boys. Ty'ree in particular is gifted in math and science and attends and excels at a special high school outside of their neighborhood. Things begin to unravel though when middle brother Charlie, at age twelve, is sent to a juvenile detention center for his part in an armed robbery. Two months later Milagro dies suddenly and the boys face separation. Their aunt offers to take them in but oldest brother Ty'ree gives up his scholarship to MIT and assumes the role of parent and guardian. It is a difficult job that gets harder when Charlie is released and returns home angry, mean, and disruptive to the household. Lafayette, the narrator of the story, has a difficult time coping with the person his brother has become, naming him "Newcharlie" to describe his new personality. Lafayette knows it is just a matter of time before Charlie gets into trouble again and destroys their fragile family. When he does, Ty'ree continues to support him despite his own anger and frustration. Finally, Lafayette is reminded, by the spirit of his mother, of a promise he made concerning Charlie and he tries, again to reach out to his brother. This time, Charlie responds embracing, rather than rejecting his brother.

This is an eloquent story of the power of love to sustain a family, against tough odds. Despite her death, Milagro is a powerful presence in the lives of her sons and it is her spirit that keeps the boys together and helps them resist the destructive lures of the streets.

## Hush

Toswiah and her sister Cameron have a good life with their parents in their home in Colorado. Their mother is a teacher who loves her job and their father is a decorated and popular member of the police force, despite his being one of only a few African Americans. When her father witnesses the shooting of an innocent African American teen by two of his fellow officers, he is unable to keep silent. His testimony brings racial tension and death threats and the family finds it must leave Colorado, assuming new names and identities. Toswiah and Cameron become Evie and Anna Thomas. The girls are devastated to leave their friends and their beloved grandmother behind. Evie is even more alarmed at the impact the changes have on her parents. Her strong father sinks into mental illness and her mother, unable to teach until she can get new credentials, takes refuge in a new religion. Anna devises a plan to go to a college that will admit her at age sixteen and spends all of her time studying. Anna's anger at her parents nearly consumes her. Evie is at a loss until she secretly joins the track team. Once she begins to run, she feels some of the freedom she left behind in Denver. When her mother gets a teaching job and her sister is admitted early to college, Evie fears she will never get back to the life she misses. Finally, it is her father's suicide attempt that forces the rest of the family to confront just how much leaving their old life has damaged the family. After a time in the hospital, her father returns to the family, at last able to talk openly about his own pain. For the first time in many months, Evie and her father are able to have a real conversation.

This is a compelling narrative about a family that is put to the test. Each member must find its own way of coping with the stresses. The first person narrative allows the reader to clearly hear Evie's voice and share her reactions to the changes going on around her.

## ABOUT JACQUELINE WOODSON

Jacqueline Woodson was born in Columbus, Ohio but was raised in Greenville, South Carolina and Brooklyn, New York. She is the author of a number of books for children, young adults and adults. She has received numerous awards for her writing including a Coretta Scott King Award, an LA Times Book Prize both for *Miracle's Boys* and two Jane Addams Peace Awards. In spite of writing full time Jacqueline also works with the National Book Foundation's Summer writing camp where, along with three other Writers in Residence, she teaches creative writing to young people from under served communities.

Jacqueline currently lives in Brooklyn, NY.

## Related Titles

### **Dancer**

by Lorri Hewett

Stephanie works hard to pursue her dream of becoming a professional ballerina while coping with the pressures of her family expectations and those at her mostly white private school.

### **Lives of Our Own**

by Lorri Hewett

African American Shawna and white schoolmate Kari defy the unspoken social standards of their small town as they work together to reveal a hidden community secret.

### **Money Hungry**

by Sharon Flake

A period of homelessness and poverty has made Raspberry Hill determined to hoard as much cash as possible.

### **Monster**

by Walter Dean Myers

Aspiring filmmaker Steve Harmon copes with his arrest for murder by relating his story as if it were a movie script.

### **145th Street**

by Walter Dean Myers

The highs and lows of one Harlem neighborhood are explored in ten stories.

### **Othello: A Novel**

by Julius Lester

This novelization of Shakespeare's classic play revisits the story of interracial love and tragedy.

### **Tears of a Tiger**

by Sharon Draper

Andy Jackson, feels responsible for the death of his good friend, Robert, in a drunk driving accident.

## **Zack**

by William Bell

Zack, the son of a African American mother and a Jewish father, experiences racial rejection for the first time when his family moves from Toronto to a small college town, and feels a need to connect with his family history.

## **Other books by Jacqueline Woodson**

### **Last Summer with Maizon**

Reissue available Summer 2002

HC: 0-399-23755-0

PB:TK

### **Between Madison and Palmetto**

Reissue available Fall 2002

HC: 0-399-23757-7

PB: TK

### **Maizon at Blue Hill**

Reissue available Fall 2002

HC: 0-399-23576-9

PB: TK

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUELINE WOODSON

### **Why do you write for young adults?**

I think it's an important age. My young adult years had the biggest impact on me of any period in my life and I remember so much about them. When I need to access the physical memories and/or emotional memories of that period in my life, it isn't such a struggle. And kids are great.

**The issue of identity is central to the three books under discussion, yet each seems to approach this topic differently. Was this a deliberate choice on your part? What does each of these stories say about the teen characters and their struggles to define themselves?**

Identity has always been an important and very relevant issue for me. For a lot of reasons, I've been 'assigned' many identities. From a very young age, I was being told what I was—black, female, slow, fast, a tomboy, stubborn—the list goes on and on. And this happens with many children as they are trying to become. So that by the time we're young adults, no wonder we're a mess!! There are so many ways we come to being who we are, so many ways in which we search for our true selves, so many varying circumstances around that search. No two people are alike but every young person is looking for definition. My journey as a writer has been to explore the many ways one gets to be who they are or who they are becoming.

**What drew you to the telling of the interracial love story in *If You Come Softly*? What aspects of this relationship did you want to illuminate for young readers?**

A story comes to me from so many angles. When I first started writing *If You Come Softly*, I thought I was writing a modern *Romeo and Juliet*. I kept asking myself "What would be different if *Romeo and Juliet* was being written today?" But when I was younger, I was also deeply affected by the death of Edmund Perry—an African-American boy who was attending prep school and while home on break, was shot by cops. After the death of Perry, I took notice everytime a young black man was shot by cops—which is too often—and later found innocent. I also knew as I was writing this book that I wanted to say "Love who you want. Life is too short to do otherwise." All of this and I'm sure a lot more was there at my desk with me as I sat down each day to work on this book.

**Is there something special about sibling relationships that you drew on to write *Miracle's Boys*?**

Mostly I tried to create boys who were real. I used a bit from my own childhood and I guess I drew on the love I feel for my two brothers—one who is older and one who is younger. My older brother is kind of like Ty'ree and my younger one is a bit like both Charlie and Lafayette. I think there is a lot of me in Charlie too.

**What do you do differently, if anything, when you tell a story from a male perspective?**

When I'm writing from a male perspective, I try to imagine myself as a boy and I really try to remember as much as I can about the guys I knew and know. It's very different than creating girl characters but I love the challenge of it.

## **Where did you get the idea for Hush?**

Some years ago I read an article in the **New York Times Magazine** that started the seed for **Hush**. I did a good bit of research and just thought about the story for a long time before I started writing it. I kept asking "Who would I be if this happened to me? What would I have left?" It was devastating to think about but at the same time, it really made me grateful for all that I do have—all the people in my life who have been with me since childhood, my family, my pets, everything.

**Although these are very different stories, they each reflect what can happen to African Americans when they are impacted by the criminal justice system. What do you want your readers to understand about this?**

I don't really know what I want readers to understand. I know what it helps me to understand—that the criminal justice system has historically not worked for African-Americans, that the percentage of people of color as compared to whites in jail, killed by cops, racially profiled and constantly singled out is unbalanced. I want the system to be different and the only way that it can change is if the way our society looks at race changes. And the only way that can happen is if people really start paying attention and making a decision to create change.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### If You Come Softly

1. Describe Ellie's relationship with her mother and her father. How have her relationships been influenced by things that happened in the past. How is Ellie's life different from her older siblings?
2. Ellie expected Anne to understand about Miah. Describe their relationship when they were younger. Why did Anne react the way she did? What change did this cause between Ellie and Anne?
3. Why does Ellie fear her parents' reactions to Miah?
4. How do Miah's famous parents impact his life? How does he handle the reactions of his peers when they learn about his father? What happens when Ellie learns about them? Should he have told her earlier? Why or why not?
5. Miah is close to both of his parents. How have they tried to build his self- image? What characteristics does he get from each of them? How is he affected by their separation?
6. How do teachers and students attempt to stereotype Miah? How does he handle these incidents?
7. Ellie doesn't have any close girlfriends from her old school or at Percy Academy. What do you think a girlfriend would have said about her relationship with Miah? What advice would you have given Ellie and why?
8. Miah has a friend Carlton who is mixed racially but considers himself African American. What issues do biracial and mixed racial people face?
9. If You Come Softly deals with a classic theme of the challenge of loving someone outside of your own group. Name some other well-known couples that faced similar challenges.
10. The story begins and ends nearly three years after Miah's death. What has happened in Ellie's life? How do you think she handled the tragedy?

## Miracle's Boys

1. Each of the three brothers is haunted by a past incident involving their parents. Describe each incident and tell how it continues to bother each of the boys. How do they each deal with what Ty'ree calls "a monkey on their back"?
2. Why does Charlie act so hostile to his brothers when he returns from Rahway Home for Boys?
3. Lafayette has a difficult time coping after his mother's death. How does the psychologist help?
4. Although the boys are on their own after Milagro's death, they receive some help from their Aunt Cecile. What kind of help does she provide?
5. Describe Charlie's friend Aaron. How does he interact with Lafayette? Why? What kind of choices is he making about his life?
6. People in the neighborhood refer to Ty'ree as "St. Ty'ree." Why has he earned that nickname?
7. Lafayette has strong memories of his mother as a reader, particularly reading Toni Morrison. How does the quote "The function of freedom is to free someone else" relate to Ty'ree, Charlie, and Lafayette?
8. Issues about money and poverty confront the family constantly. How did Milagro show her values concerning money? How do the boys accept or reject her feelings?
9. What do you think will happen to Miracle's boys?

## Hush

1. Describe Evie's life in Denver before her father witnessed the shooting. Why is her real name so important to her?
2. How did her mother become involved with religion? Why?
3. Why does her grandmother refuse to leave Denver?
4. Why is it so important for Evie's father to testify in this case? What other actions could he have taken?
5. Contrast Evie's home in Denver with her family's new home.
6. Each member of the family leaves something important behind when they are forced to leave Denver. Describe what each leaves behind and why it matters.
7. Why does Evie decide to join the track team and why does she keep it a secret?
8. Anna decides to try to gain admittance to a college that will accept her before she graduates. Why is this important to her? What impact will this have on her family? On Evie?
9. How are Evie and her father able to reach each other again? What understanding does Evie gain when she is able to finally speak openly with her father again?

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