

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE LEGACY

AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH



Photo Credit: Carlos Diaz

Jacqueline Woodson received the 2018 Children's Literature Legacy Award for her significant and lasting contribution to literature for children. She delivered her acceptance remarks at ALSC's awards banquet on Sunday, June 24, 2018, during the American Library Association Annual Conference.

On Remembering—Everything

*And you wait, are awaiting the one thing
that will infinitely increase your life;
the powerful, the uncommon,
the awakening of stones,
depths turned toward you.*

*Dimly there gleams on the bookshelves
the volumes in brown and gold;
and you think of lands traveled through,
of paintings, of the garments
of women found and lost again.*

*And all at once you know: that was it.
You rise, and there stands before you
a bygone year's anguish
and form And prayer.*

Those are the translated words of Rainer Marie Rilke's poem Remembrance. Or in German—Erinnerung. Written in 1918, the many translations are all slightly different—the above remaining my favorite over the years. Still, every interpretation I've read of this poem has struck me. While translators come to it from their own experienc-

es and thoughts about how it should be brought to the English language, the essence of the poem remains the same. Each translator having a deep respect for what the poet is saying and what the poet wants us to feel.

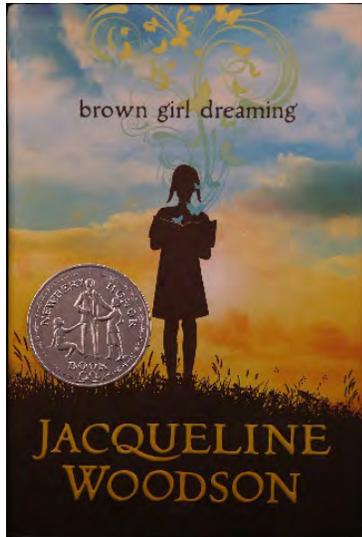
Rilke was a writer of his time. Sent to military school as a young boy, he was rescued by an uncle who saw him for who he was—a gifted child, a lyrical poet. I think often about what it means to be a writer of one's time. Especially, now—during this time we're living in when there are days, as the writers and artists in this room know, when we wonder if we will ever be able to create again at all. And when we finally do—because the truth of it is—of course we will. (This is our life-blood, our air, the way we have figured out how to stay sane and keep moving through the world.) When we finally create again, we will be setting the backdrop not only for the *time* we're living in, but also showing who *we* truly are. Our writing reveals us. It shows the world who we are, how we think, what we want. It is the deepest essence of our true selves translated through character and setting and plot.

Jacqueline Woodson is the 2018-2019 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. She received the 2018 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award and was the 2014 National Book Award winner for her bestselling memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming*. In 2015, Woodson was named the Young People's Poet Laureate by the Poetry Foundation. Her recent adult book, *Another Brooklyn*, was a National Book Award finalist. She is the author of more than two dozen books for young adults, middle graders, and children; among her many accolades, she is a four-time Newbery Honor winner, a four-time National Book Award finalist, and a two-time Coretta Scott King Award winner. Woodson is also the recipient of the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement for her contributions to young adult literature. She lives with her family in Brooklyn, New York.

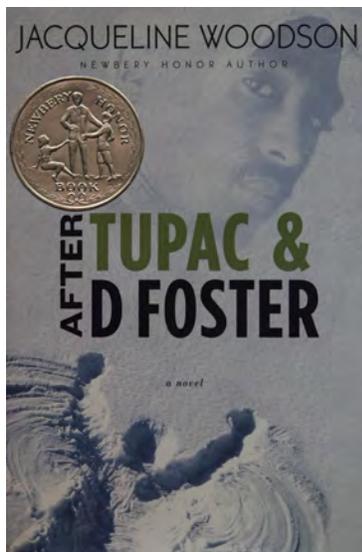
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SELECTED TITLES BY JACQUELINE WOODSON



Brown Girl Dreaming
Jacqueline Woodson
Nancy Paulsen/Penguin, 2014



After Tupac & D Foster
Jacqueline Woodson
G.P. Putnam's Sons/Penguin Books for
Young Readers, 2008

I've spent many hours thinking about how creative writing has moved through time—what has lasted and what didn't quite work for the not yet born readers—the so-called Future Generations. Rilke's poem is one I have kept in the back pocket of my brain since my early twenties and every time I've needed to pull it out, it's been relevant and timely and moving. It's been a tough year. If we think not, we are either in deep denial or on hel-la good meds. Brown bodies. Indigenous bodies. White bodies. Oh my lord, the brown and white and Indigenous bodies. The little brown bodies being separated from their families. The Indigenous bodies fighting for their land. The wealthy white bodies that saw no more reason to live. The young black bodies being brutalized or worse, killed by cops. The grown up black and brown and indigenous bodies being mass incarcerated. The women's bodies. Our. Bodies.

We write about bodies. We think about bodies. What is happening in our country right now is happening to bodies. To bodies that breathe and bleed. Bodies that cry and laugh. Bodies that were once babies whose heads were sniffed and diapers were changed. Human.

For me, and for so many like me, it's been art that has helped me get through the pain—of everything. Jokes and memes and clever comments on Twitter. Books and audiobooks and comic books. Music.

Great, thoughtful movies. The Chi. Atlanta. Blackish. Grownish. Even the occasional streaming of The Boondocks. All of it has allowed me to escape. To laugh. To think. To figure out what more I can be doing.

Many of you know I am a New Yorker by way of South Carolina by way of a Christian and Muslim background by way of a belief that every body in this world has a right to be here. Every single one of us has a right to safely move through this world. But for too long, too many bodies have not been safe.

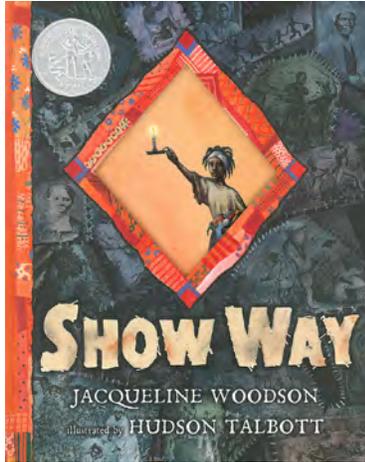
I thought a lot about this talk—how people who wanted to publish it and record it were asking for it like 'last yesterday in March' and I had to keep saying, "But we don't know what's happening tomorrow and I can't write a talk in March that would be completely irrelevant by May. Or June. Or July." I swear, it felt like I got the call and the next call was like, "Where is your talk?" So I did what writers do so well—I thought about the thing I had to write lots and lots. For a long time, I didn't write it.

The evening I got the call saying I'd be receiving this award, I was surprised. (I was to find that it was going to be a year of surprises but this was the beginning!) And, facts—I was beyond grateful to be asked to accept an award that was a praise-song to the work I've done. I never expected to write as much as I've written. I truly

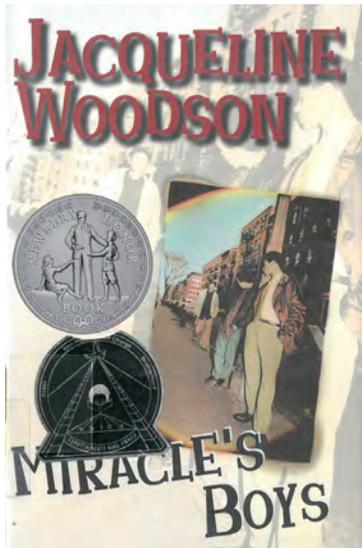
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SELECTED TITLES BY JACQUELINE WOODSON



Show Way
Jacqueline Woodson
Illus. by Hudson Talbott
G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2005



Miracle's Boys
Jacqueline Woodson
G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2000

didn't think I had this much to say! But the world keeps spinning and we hold on and try to make sense of this place. We try to make sense for ourselves and for our readers. We try to make sense of the past to get a grasp of our own futures. But when the call came, I was not ready.

Because I knew the story. I knew the lines in the beloved books that weren't kind. I knew of the minstrel show and the disparaging remarks about the Indigenous people whose land we walk, sleep, eat, love, fight, grow, and die on. I knew my own girlhood of wincing when I read lines or saw illustrations that seemed to be dishonoring...*me*. But how could this be? After all, hadn't everyone been taught what I feel like I heard every single day of my childhood—if you have nothing nice to say, don't say anything at all.

So when the call came, my first thought was *Ding-dang, isn't there a less controversial award out there ya'll can give a sister?*

And then I thought of Rilke. Of the poem I go to like prayer ...

And you wait, are awaiting the one thing that will infinitely increase your life.

The powerful, the uncommon, the awakening...of stones...

Depths turned toward you.

And I thought—this is it, isn't it? At this moment, this is the only place I'm supposed to be. Here in this room with my fellow awardees, talking about what it means to be a writer who really does want to do that work that shines a light on the beauty of *all people* without picking and choosing whose body is worthy and whose is not, whose body should be looked down upon, be warned against, deemed frightening. The work I was brought here to do is the work I'm doing and hope to continue to do. It is the work to make people feel safe and *seen* in this world—not just today—but in future generations. And not just thoughtful narratives but narratives with no sharp edges, no demeaning words or phrases laced inside of beautiful stories.

While I am deeply honored to be on this stage, while I am beyond grateful to the committee who not only chose me for this award but continues to do the work of questioning and challenging the name of it, while I am grateful to my publisher, my amazing editor, the hardworking publicists and agents and assistants who helped get me here, while I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for my family and my friends that are my family, while the past years have turned us upside down and back again and the past weeks have reminded us daily of how much work we still have to do, I stand here reminded again of writing's complicated journey—how it contin-

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ues to reveal ourselves to us. How it shows us our grace. But more than anything, my hope is that it continues to remind us of the work ahead—and the people we're doing the work for. The future generations. The young people. Who, more than anything, deserve a world they can spend their whole lives safely walking and running and jumping...and reading through.

In the words of Rilke:

You rise, and there stands before you
a bygone year's anguish
and form And prayer.

Thank you.



2018 CHILDREN'S LITERATURE LEGACY AWARD COMMITTEE

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