

Brown Girl Dreaming Study Guide

Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Brown Girl Dreaming Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part 1.....	4
Part 2.....	8
Part 3.....	15
Part 4.....	20
Part 5.....	26
Characters.....	30
Symbols and Symbolism.....	33
Settings.....	35
Themes and Motifs.....	37
Styles.....	42
Quotes.....	43



Plot Summary

“Brown Girl Dreaming” is a memoir by Jacqueline Woodson. She tells of her childhood as an African American in the American Northeast and South in the 1960s. Born in Columbus, Ohio, to the descendants of former slaves, Jacqueline is named after her father, Jack, much to the chagrin of her mother, Mary Ann. Jacqueline soon comes to be called Jackie. While Jackie’s early years are spent in the North, frequent trips are made to the South for Mary Ann to visit her parents as well as Grandpa Gunnar and Grandma Georgiana, who live in the Nicholtown area of Greenville, South Carolina. Mary Ann deeply loves the South, but Jack cannot understand why feels that way. The region is segregated and the people are racially-charged. Their very different feelings about the South causes arguments between Jack and Mary Ann. Eventually, Jack and Mary Ann split, and Mary Ann and her three children, Hope, Odella, and Jackie, move south to live with her parents.

In South Carolina, Jackie comes to love the land, the air, her neighbors, and her grandparents all very much. While racism and segregation exist there, the place is still home to Jackie’s grandparents. They will not leave it for anything. They are totally in favor of peaceful protest marches for civil rights. They know that God will bless them for doing the right thing.

Despite widespread animosity, there are white people in Greenville who are respectful and treat Jackie and her family like actual human beings, rather than dirt. One such woman is the never-named owner of the local fabric store, who has known Grandma Georgiana for years. Mary Ann, however, decides she wants to move back North. So, she travels to New York City to get settled. Jackie and her siblings stay on with their grandparents, relishing the time they have with them, until Mary Ann comes to retrieve her children, with a brand new baby boy in tow.

In New York, Jackie becomes best friends with a Puerto Rican girl. She also decides that she wants to become a writer. It is the one thing she loves to do, and she knows that she is good at it. Each summer, Jackie and her siblings return to South Carolina to visit their grandparents. However, each time finds Grandpa Gunnar, a heavy smoker, less and less healthy. In New York, the afro have come into style, and Mary Ann’s baby brother, Robert, sports one. He ultimately gets in trouble with the police. He is sent to prison. He returns to society as a Muslim. About the same time, Jackie and Maria come to admire Angela Davis of the Black Panther movement. They imitate Angela, though they have no real idea about the revolution in which she is involved. Grandpa Gunnar ultimately dies of cancer, and Grandma Georgiana moves up to New York to be with Mary Ann and the grandchildren. At school, Ms. Vivo tells Jackie that she is indeed a writer. Jackie is thrilled as she makes plans to fulfill this dream.



Part 1

Summary

February 12, 1963 – Jacqueline Woodson is born Tuesday, February 12, 1963, at the University Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. Her ancestors were slaves from South Carolina, though she herself is born in the North long after the Civil War. She is born in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, where all across the South, people are pushing for rights for black Americans.

Second Daughter's Second Day on Earth – Jacqueline is born to Mary Ann Irby, aged 22, and Jack Austin Woodson, aged 25, both black. Martin Luther King, Jr., is preparing for a march on Washington. John F. Kennedy is president. Malcolm X is advocating revolution. James Baldwin is writing novels and essays about injustice. Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges have made stands for freedom. Baby Jacqueline's hands curl into fists, the way of every baby's hands, according to her mother. For Jacqueline, her firsts are symbolic of her readiness to change the world, whether they are like Ruby's or like Rosa's.

A Girl Named Jack – Jack insists that his daughter be named Jack. Mary says no, as do all of Jacqueline's aunts. Mary settles on Jacqueline.

The Woodsons of Ohio – Family history traces back Woodson lineage to Thomas Woodson of Chillicothe, the first son of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. The family tree is full of doctors, lawyers, teachers, athletes, scholars, and people in government, all because Thomas Woodson expected the best of his family.

The Ghosts of the Nelsonville House – The Woodsons are one of the few black families in their town, Nelsonville, and live in a big white house on a hill. The house has long been home to Woodsons, from Jacqueline's father to his parents and family. Aunt Alicia, Uncle Woody, Aunt Ann, and Aunt Ada are the children of Hope and Grace, and have all grown up in the house.

It'll Be Scary Sometimes – Jacqueline's great-great-grandfather, on her father's side, was born free in Ohio in 1832, farming and mining, and later fighting in the Civil War for the Union. His son, William Woodson, was sent to Nelsonville, and attended school as the only brown-skinned child. Jacqueline's mom explains to Jacqueline that she will face scary situations in her own life, but to think of William Woodson's example.

Football Dreams – Jacqueline's father, Jack, was a football star in high school, and earned a scholarship to Ohio State University. He later moved to Columbus.

Other People's Memory – Grandma Georgiana recounts hearing about Jacqueline's birth in the morning when the blue jays were squawking. Jacqueline is born less than a year after her older sister, the way Mary Ann and her sister, Caroline, were. Jacqueline is born two days after Mary Ann turns twenty-two. Jacqueline's father was unable to



attend the birth, as he was late in getting to the hospital from work during rush hour. Jack wants to call Jacqueline “Jack” because she looks like him.

No Returns – When Jacqueline’s three year-old brother sees baby Jacqueline, he says to have her returned, because they already have one.

How to Listen #1 – Memories form in Jacqueline’s minds from every tear, laugh, and lullaby.

Uncle Odell – Six months before Jacqueline’s big sister is born, her uncle, Odell, dies in a car accident while on leave from the Navy. It leaves a hole in Jacqueline’s grandmother’s heart that is never filled.

Good News – Jacqueline’s big sister is named Odella in honor of Odell. Jacqueline’s mother’s mother, who lives in South Carolina, is glad for the good news.

My Mother and Grace – Mary Ann and Jack’s mother, Grace, are brought together by their Southern roots. Grace’s family, like Mary Ann’s, is from Greenville. They get along very well, but Grace knows Mary Ann feels a hollowness after the death of her brother, Odell.

Each Winter – Each winter, Mary Ann returns home to South Carolina, with all three children – Hope, Odella (Dell), and Jacqueline. Jack goes sometimes, but considers Ohio to be home, while Mary Ann will never consider Ohio to be home. She does her best to remind herself of home by growing plants indoors, but this never quite does the trick. She and Jack usually fight before she goes south.

Journey – Jack looks down on the South for its inequality, especially South Carolina. He wants his children to respect themselves and not have to answer to anybody for anything. He wants as little to do as possible with the South.

Greenville, South Carolina, 1963 – Mary Ann and her children sit in the back of the bus, not wanting to cause any trouble. Mary Ann goes through great lengths to keep her children on their best behavior, telling them they are no longer in Ohio. Despite the inequality, Mary Ann assures her children they are as good as anybody, though they are too young to understand.

Home – Mary Ann arrives home at Hall Street. Her parents are thrilled to see baby Jacqueline.

The Cousins – Mary Ann’s birthday is celebrated and her cousins, including Dorothy and Sam, all come to visit. They reflect on good memories of pool hopping and stealing pies off of windowsills. They listen and dance to Sam Cooke on the radio. The cousins believe that Mary Ann, daughter of Georgiana and Gunnar Irby, belongs in the South.

Night Bus – Jack arrives to visit, and makes up with Mary Ann after their fight. The following day, they will all travel home as a family, together.



After Greenville #1 – Mary Ann’s parents send her family back to the North with everything from sweet tea to fried chicken and cornbread. They travel by night, when it is safer for black people to do so, as during the day, they are often stopped, always questioned, and sometimes beaten.

River – The Woodson family travels back to Ohio through Virginia along the Hocking River, which flows through Athens, Coolville, Lancaster, and Nelsonville. The Hocking River itself flows away from the Ohio River, and then later rejoins it.

Leaving Columbus – When Hope is four, Odella is two, and Jacqueline is one, Mary Ann leaves Jack, taking her children with her.

Analysis

Jacqueline Woodson’s memoir “Brown Girl Dreaming” recounts her time as a child growing up in the 1960s American South and North, between South Carolina, Ohio, and New York. When the novel begins, the theme of existing in two worlds comes sharply to the fore through the ancestry of Jackie’s family. Jackie’s parents, both descendants of former slaves, are nevertheless sharply divided by North and South. Jackie’s mother’s family is from Greenville, South Carolina, while Jackie’s father’s family has long lived in Ohio. Mary Ann deeply loves and misses the South, while Jack, a proud Northerner, cannot understand how on earth Mary Ann could love anything at all about the South. To Jack, the South is the epitome of evil, and is only a place of pain and segregation for blacks. But to Mary Anne, the South is home, for she has grown up there, and there is a beauty to the land itself that has a hold on her heart. She, like her husband, wants her children to grow up with every possible advantage in the Northern world, but cannot shake her roots in the Southern world.

This division between Northern and Southern sympathies also brings about a sharp rift in the family, bringing to the fore the theme of family. Jack and Mary Ann want their children to thrive and succeed in life, and work hard to make sure this is possible. Jack can trace his family’s ancestors back to Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, and his family has long been full of doctors, teachers, lawyers, and other wildly successful individuals. His children, he contends, will be no different. His pride in fatherhood comes largely from his distinguished ancestry. Yet, each time Mary Ann travels South, Jack still cannot understand why she would willingly bring herself, and their children, to such a place. Each trip, the fights between mother and father get worse and worse. The reader should pay special attention to Woodson’s description of the Hocking River, which flows away from the Ohio River, only later to rejoin it. Here, the river becomes symbolic of her nuclear family, with her parents drifting away from each other based on geography and place, only later to come back together.

Right away, the theme of racism can also clearly be glimpsed by Mary Ann’s visits to the South with her children. Blacks travel on the bus at night, for it is less likely they will be stopped and interrogated by whites. Blacks also sit in the back of the bus, so as not to cause trouble by provoking white people. While traveling South, Mary Ann reminds her



children to constantly be on their best behavior, because they are not in Ohio anymore. Despite the prevailing racism inherent in the South, the South is home to Mary Ann, who reassures her bewildered children that they are just as good as anybody. Ultimately, however, the geographical and emotional rift between Mary Ann and Jack becomes too much to handle, and at the end of Part I of the novel, Mary Ann decides to leave Jack.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Jack not understand his wife's love of the South? Why does Mary Ann love the South?

Discussion Question 2

What differences are there between life in Ohio and life in South Carolina for the Woodsons?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mary Ann ultimately leave Jack? Can she be blamed for this? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Constellation, revolution, injustice, hollowness, lilt, immense.



Part 2

Summary

Our Names – Jacqueline’s grandparents are thrilled to have their grandchildren around. Jacqueline comes to be called Jackie.

Ohio Behind Us – Jackie and her siblings wonder how long they will be in South Carolina. Eventually, their mother tells them to stop asking. Mary Anne’s sister, Caroline, who is called “Kay”, now lives in New York City. Mary Ann’s baby brother, Robert, is saving up enough money to follow suit. It saddens Jackie because home seems less like home anymore with everyone moving away.

The Garden – Jackie’s mother’s father has missed slavery by a single generation. His grandfather, however, had been a slave. He has passed on the love and value of hard work to his family. Jackie’s grandfather works the earth near Nicholtown with his hands, growing sweet peas, collards, green peppers, cucumbers lettuce, melon, and other things. They are getting by, not wealthy or poor. Jackie’s grandmother explains that this is because God gives what is needed and should not be asked for more.

Gunnar’s Children – Jackie and her siblings come to call their grandfather, Gunnar, “Daddy”, because that is what their mother calls him. He is a tall, handsome man, and Jackie and her siblings love waiting for him each day to get home from work.

At the End of the Day – Gunnar is a printing press foreman. He supervises white people who have a hard time accepting that a black person is in charge of them. The black people live in Nicholtown, but Gunnar says the times are changing, and people are itching to go other places.

Daywork – Grandma Georgiana takes on cleaning work to help support the new family members. She is proud and does not mind the work, for it is for her children and grandchildren. She travels along with other black women to the areas of Greenville where they work for white people. However, she tells her grandchildren never to do day work. She is doing day work so that they won’t have to do it. The grandchildren tend to her swollen ankles each evening, hurting from a day of standing on her feet.

Lullaby – Each night, Jackie hears a lullaby outside, which includes everything from crickets to frogs to dogs. The crickets sing all night, long after the frogs and dogs.

Bible Times – Each night, Jackie’s grandmother reads from the Bible. Jackie and her siblings are mesmerized and in love with the events of the Bible. They shiver at the evil in the Bible and relish the goodness, such as brought about by Moses and Jesus. They are grateful to be in the safety and goodness of their grandparents’ home.

The Reader – Dell is an avid reader. She likes to read under the kitchen table. No matter what other noise is going on, Dell will keep reading.



The Beginning – Jackie is learning to write, beginning with the letter J. Writing fascinates Jackie.

Hope – Jackie's brother, Hope, does not adjust well to the South. It is too hot and humid for him. Hope becomes very homesick. He takes to reading comic books brought home by their grandfather. The South is Hope's kryptonite.

The Almost Friends – A boy with a hole in his heart visits sometimes from up the road. Jackie and her siblings are warned to stay away from Cora and her sisters, whose mother ran off from the family with a church pastor. There are three boys who live down the road who only come outside when their mother returns from work. Jackie's grandmother reminds Jackie that she, Hope, and Dell are a team, and that the three of them are plenty enough.

The Right Way to Speak – Grandma Georgiana is very strict when it comes to proper English. She will not tolerate use of the word "ain't", "huh", or "git", for example. She hits her grandchildren with switches when they forget. She also reminds them to be respectful and look people in the eye. Jackie's mother goes on to tell them that they are from the North, and know the right way to speak.

The Candy Lady – Every Friday, Jackie's grandfather brings her, Dell, and Hope to the candy lady's house, who sells every kind of candy imaginable, as well as ice cream. Jackie's grandfather always prefers lemon-chiffon ice cream, and is usually able to convince his grandkids to get it, too.

South Carolina at War – Jackie's grandfather tells his grandchildren about the unfolding Civil Rights Movement. Since 1863, black people are supposed to have been free, but it hasn't turned out that way at all. All over Greenville, Jackie and her siblings see protestors being taken away by police. Gunnar insists that to win, fists must not be used. Gunnar also insists that one must always be ready to die for what is right and for one's beliefs. Mary Ann and her cousins often join the protests, and Grandma Georgiana always tells her not to get arrested. Gunnar explains that black people are just as good, bright, beautiful, and free, as anybody.

The Training – Mary Anne's best friend, her older cousin Dorothy, brings her older children over one day. They go into Nicholtown while Jackie and her siblings are not allowed to leave the porch. Dorothy tells her kids not to get in trouble. All over the South, trainings are going on, about how to change the South without violence, even when violence is used against them. Dorothy, however, insists that her line for patience is wearing thin.

The Blanket – Mary Ann goes to New York City for the weekend, and Jackie, Dell, and Hope are thrilled to be home alone with their grandparents. They all go to the candy lady's house, together. They are not sad their mother is gone for the weekend, for they have so much love from their grandparents, it is like a blanket.

Miss Bell and the Marchers – Miss Bell, a neighbor, holds meetings of protest marchers at her house, even though her white employer has threatened to fire her if she is ever



seen on a protest line. Miss Bell prays for strength for herself and for the marchers each day.

How to Listen #2 – In stores, Jackie and her family members are always followed around because they are brown-skinned.

Hair Night – Saturday night, Grandma Georgiana transforms the kitchen into a beauty parlor to straighten everyone's hair. While Georgiana works on Jackie's hair, Dell reads aloud to her, and Jackie falls in love with reading.

Family Names – Grandma Georgiana's mother gave birth to thirteen children, though three die as babies. Their names range from James and Joseph to William and David. Gunnar's siblings have unusual names, ranging from Levonia and Montague to Iellus and Hallique. These names, he explains, were so that no master could ever take them away. Hope insists he is named hope because is the great hope of the family.

American Dream – Grandma Georgiana explains that marches have been going on for years. She and her own children would participate in them. She says that all it would take for people to want to live together would be for people to simply want it. Everyone shares the same American Dream, of living freely as equals.

The Fabric Store – While Gunnar and Georgiana avoid stores in Greenville that are either segregated, or where black people are watched, they freely go into the fabric store, owned by a white woman who is friends with Georgiana, knowing her from back in the day in Anderson. She always asks about Georgiana's family, and the two always discuss sewing and making clothing. At the fabric store, Georgiana and her family are not Negroes, thieves, or shameful, but simply people.

Ghosts – In downtown Greenville, "white only" signs are painted over, though the words can still be seen through the paint.

The Leavers – Many people from the rural South and places like Greenville pack up and leave for the cities, for the chance at a better life.

The Beginning of the Leaving – Mary Ann decides she and her children will move to New York. She just has to figure out a few things, first. Grandma Georgiana sadly says she does not know what she will do without Mary Ann or the grandchildren around.

As A Child, I Smelled the Air – Mary Ann takes coffee on the porch, saying that New York doesn't smell like South Carolina. The air is what Jackie will remember, even when she moves to New York. South Carolina always smells like wet grass and pines.

Harvest Time – Grandpa Gunnar and the family harvest all of his crops, which will become side dishes for Grandma Georgiana's meals.

Grown Folks' Stories – In the evenings, all the grown-ups gather together to talk, including Miss Bell and Aunst Lucinda. Jackie and her siblings do their best to listen to the grown-ups while they fall asleep.



Tobacco – Grandpa Gunnar is a smoker, and has been coughing lately. The crops have been harvested, and the earth waits for what, or who, it will get in return.

How to Listen #3 – Grandpa Gunnar coughs through the night.

My Mother Leaving Greenville – In late autumn, things are in order for Mary Ann to travel to New York City. It causes Jackie to reflect on not seeing her father in years.

Halfway Home #1 – Mary Ann says she will find a place in New York, get settled, and then bring her children up. She tells her children they are halfway home.

My Mother Looks Back on Greenville – That night, Mary Ann leaves Greenville for New York. It is a bittersweet moment.

The Last Fireflies – Jackie and her siblings catch fireflies and let them go, knowing they want to be free. They continue to pray in the hopes they will be answered if they do what is right.

Changes – Things are somewhat lonely without Mary Ann being around. The winter comes on, and Jackie, her siblings, and their grandparents reflect on the warm summer months in the Nicholville neighborhood of Greenville. They promise each other that future summers will be just as good, though they all know things will change.

Sterling High School, Greenville – Sterling High School is burned to the ground by whites angry at the protest marches. It is Mary Ann's former school. The black students are then forced to attend the lower schools with their siblings. Jackie looks at photos from her mother's yearbook. In one photo is Mary Ann, Dorothy, and Jesse Jackson, who would one day become a civil rights leader and the first black man to run for President.

Faith – Grandma Georgiana continues to impart religious faith to her grandchildren, for it is incredibly important to her and to them. The Bible, she explains, should become one's sword and shield, even though Jackie and her siblings do not know yet what they are fighting for.

The Stories Cora Tells – Cora and her sisters begin visiting with Jackie and Dell, while Hope goes off by himself to be away from all the girls. Cora tells scary stories about the Devil coming to get Jackie because God won't protect her. It scares Jackie, but Grandma Georgiana tells Jackie not to believe everything she hears. She'll know, when she is older, if someone is lying or telling the truth.

Hall Street – On Monday evening, the Brothers and Sisters from Kingdom Hall come up and down Hall Street, preaching and praying, while everyone turns out on their porches to listen. As Jehovah's Witnesses, they must do Bible-study on Monday nights, though all Jackie and her siblings want to do is play.

Soon – Mary Ann calls, but shoos away the grandchildren while she speaks on the phone, promising them a moment with her mother, soon.



How I Learn the Days of the Week – Each day of the week has specific tasks and functions to perform. Monday night is Bible study, for example, while Thursday is Ministry School, and Friday night, the kids are free to do what they want. Each day, though, consists of some religious observation. Saturday, they go out to spread the good word, but are not always received warmly by the homeowners.

Ribbons – The girls of the family wear ribbons every day except Saturday, when their ribbons are washed by hand, and ironed. Jackie and Dell dream of the day when they no longer have to wear ribbons.

Two Gods, Two Worlds – Grandpa Gunnar, his cough getting worse, does not view God the way Jehovah's Witnesses view Him. They see that God is mainly vengeful and fear-inducing. Gunnar has his own beliefs about God, and Jackie doesn't know why anyone's God would make someone have to choose.

What God Knows – The family prays to God on behalf of Gunnar. He says he doesn't need prayers, that he works hard and treats people well, and God sees this. He says Georgiana and the grandkids can pray and preach all they want, but they do not need to do it for him.

New Playmates – Mary Ann writes to her children of New York, from Coney Island and Harlem to Bear Mountain. She sends home black dolls for the kids. The kids pretend the dolls are their own children and tell them they will never leave them.

Down the Road – Grandma Georgiana cautions her grandchildren to be cautious when playing with the boy who has a hole in his heart, so it doesn't beat too fast. The boy always wants to know about how Mary Ann is getting along in New York. The boy says he will one day go to New York City, but looks south instead of north.

God's Promise – Christmas nears, and snow falls. Jackie and her siblings are jealous of Cora and her sisters, who play outside in the snow on Sunday.

The Other Infinity – Grandma Georgiana explains to her grandchildren that they are God's chosen people, that everything they have is a gift from God. Dell says the swing set is a gift from Grandpa Gunnar. Grandma Georgiana counters that this is because Gunnar has a job provided by God. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday are all days reserved for God's work. In return, they will receive eternity, which is better than infinity, says Dell.

Sometimes, No Words are Needed – On cold winter nights, no words are needed when Jackie is snuggled up warm against Grandpa Gunnar, with a blanket around them.

The Letter – A letter arrives from Mary Ann, which states she is coming to collect her children to bring them to New York. They miss their mother, but they will miss their grandparents just as much. Mary Ann also reveals she is pregnant.

One Morning, Late Winter – One morning, Grandpa Gunnar is too sick to walk the half-mile to the bus. Jackie makes him comfortable and tells him a story.



New York Baby – Grandma Georgiana tells Jackie that when her mother comes to get them, she will no longer be her mother’s baby girl. Jackie is suddenly jealous.

Leaving Greenville – Mary Ann arrives late at night and sees her children. All they know is South Carolina, their grandparents, and their mother. To Jackie, Greenville is home. She is too sleepy to tell her mother this. Mary Ann says they will meet their new baby brother the next day.

Roman – Mary Ann’s baby boy is named Roman. He is pale and cries a lot.

Analysis

Jackie and her siblings soon come to learn why South Carolina has such a hold on their mother, Mary Ann. Her family had all been born and raised in South Carolina, even though many of them have moved away. Mary Ann’s parents, Grandpa Gunnar and Grandma Georgiana, are a huge reason why Jackie considers South Carolina, and the South in general, to be home. True, there is segregation and there is racism; but, Mary Ann’s parents manage to get by through hard work, patience, and faith in God. It is through Mary Ann’s parents that the theme of faith comes to the fore. Georgiana is a devout Jehovah’s Witness, while Gunnar is a God-fearing, but non-church-attending, man. Here, Jackie feels caught between two worlds. Her grandmother sees God with an Old Testament mindset, of fear, trembling, and awe, while Gunnar sees God with a more casual, intimate, and forgiving way, knowing that God sees the goodness in people, church or not.

The theme of family also continues strongly through the second part of the memoir. Just as Jackie’s nuclear family divides, her family increases through the joining of her grandparents. Indeed, Jackie’s grandparents –her grandfather, especially –grow so close to the siblings that they end up calling Gunnar “Daddy” instead of “Grandpa.” The grandparents teach Jackie and her siblings very important lessons in faith, self-respect, and independence. Jackie and her siblings are amused at the unusual names Gunnar and his siblings received, but Gunnar explains –in a lesson of true independence and self-respect –that his siblings received names that white people could not take away from them, as in the past, slaves were given numbers and names at will. Here, the theme of racism can be viewed again, as protest marchers are continuing to work for greater freedom, an end to segregation, and an end to racism. Part of Grandma Georgiana’s love for the South can be glimpsed through the unnamed white woman who owns the local fabric store, who treats Jackie and her family like human beings first and foremost, having known Georgiana for years. There are many good white people in the South, though the racists are far louder, and violent. Racist whites, for example, burn down Mary Ann’s old high school in opposition to equal rights. Despite it all, Georgiana urges her family and friends to keep their faith in God through all the darkness.

Things, however, soon change for Jackie and her siblings, as Mary Ann leaves for New York to settle in and to pave the way for her children to follow her there. Jackie and her



brother and sister miss Mary Ann while she is away, but they are thrilled to have time alone with their grandparents, whom they have come to deeply love and admire. Mary Ann ultimately writes to her parents, telling them that she will soon be coming to collect her children. She also tells them that she now has a new baby boy. His name is Roman. The family has expanded. Jackie feels as if she is no longer the baby of the family. While she looks forward to seeing her new baby brother and her mother, she also knows that her time with her grandparents is coming to an end. That realization deeply saddens her. The reader should pay careful attention to the fact, as well as the irony, that Mary Ann's arrival also means a coming divide.

Discussion Question 1

How do Jackie and her siblings come to view South Carolina? Do they consider it home? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What are some of the important lessons that Georgiana and Gunnar teach their grandchildren? Why are these lessons important?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mary Ann seek to make a new start in New York? How does Jackie feel about this? Why?

Vocabulary

Slavery, intrigues, infinity, sickly, subservient, nonviolence, resistance, infinite, segregated, ushering.



Part 3

Summary

New York City – To Jackie, New York is not the dream that so many Southerners talk about. To her, it is a treeless bad dream where everything is gray. It is loud and strange.

Brooklyn, New York – Jackie and her family move out of the small apartment on Bristol Street, in Brownsville, Brooklyn, when the bathroom ceiling falls into the bathtub. Aunt Kay and her boyfriend, Bernie, help Jackie's family move.

Herzl Street – Jackie and her family move to a building on Herzl Street, where Aunt Kay and Bernie live upstairs, and Peaches from Greenville lives below them. Evenings are full of other people from Greenville visiting and talking about the old days and Greenville.

The Johnny Pump – When it is really hot out in New York, the johnny pumps are turned on so the kids can play in the water and cool down. Even Mary Ann walks through the water in her bare feet.

Genetics – Mary Ann, Gunnar, Jackie, Dell, and Hope all have gaps between their front teeth. Roman, however, is pale as dust and has soft brown hair. No one believes he is Jackie's brother.

Caroline But We Called Her Aunt Kay, Some Memories – Aunt Kay loves her family. She loves dressing up on Friday nights. She eats Argo starch like candy, sings in a band, braids Jackie's hair, and later commits suicide by jumping from a window.

Moving Again – Bernie and Peaches move to Far Rockaway after Kay's falling. Mary Ann moves her children to a place on Madison Street, a pink house with a sculpture of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus out front. The house is protected by the saints, says the landlord. Mary Ann says the house is protected by the Saint of Ugly Sculpture. This causes Mary Ann to smile, and reminds both her, and Jackie, of Aunt Kay.

Composition Notebook – Jackie doesn't remember how she received her first composition notebook, but the idea of blank, lined paper makes Jackie excited –from the very smell of the paper to the sound of the pencil moving across it. It is something Dell cannot understand because Jackie can't even write, yet.

On Paper – The first time Jackie writes her full name in her note book without help – Jacqueline Amanda Woodson –she knows she can write anything she wants to write.

Saturday Morning – Jackie wishes often she was back in South Carolina. For example, she misses the food. However, she does not complain about the food in New York, for she is grateful to have food at all.



First Grade – Jackie begins first grade at P.S. 106. The school is as big as a city block. Jackie loves school and loves her kind teacher, Ms. Feidler, who always greets Jackie at the door.

Another Kingdom Hall – Keeping her promise to Grandma Georgiana, Mary Ann brings her kids to Kingdom Hall on Bushwick Avenue. Mary Ann drops the kids off at Kingdom Hall, but she never attends services, preferring to read or go home until after the service is over. Sunday, she explains, is her day of rest because she has a full-time job.

Flag – Jackie does not pledge allegiance to the flag because of her religion forbidding belonging to the world. Even though Mary Ann is not a Jehovah's Witness, she makes sure her kids follow the rules. Gina and Alina, two other Witness kids, also do not say the pledge. They walk out into the hall during the pledge. They decide to pray for the kids who don't know God's truths. Alina and Jackie wish they could say the pledge, but Gina, who is very devout, keeps a watch on them.

Because We're Witnesses – Jehovah's Witnesses do not celebrate birthdays or holidays. They do not vote, fight, curse, or join wars.

Brooklyn Rain – In New York, even the rain smells different. In the South, even in the rain, Jackie knew there was always some place to go. In New York, she is cooped up in her apartment.

Another Way – Mary Ann will not allow her children to play outside with other children or watch TV, so she brings home board games for them to play. Jackie and Roman long to learn how to play chess, but Dell and Hope tell them they are too young to understand.

Gifted – Dell excels in school. She is gifted, Jackie is told. Jackie believes she herself is not gifted, for she is more of a dreamer than an academic.

Sometimes – There is only one house on the block where a father does not live because he is deceased. Jackie often lies about her own father to explain his absence, saying he is dead or that he is coming soon. Dell says they simply don't have a father anymore.

Uncle Robert – Uncle Robert moves to New York City. He is Mary Ann's baby brother. He lives in Far Rockaway, now. He gives Dell a pair of silver earrings. He gives Mary Ann a James Brown record, and dances to it. Jackie and her siblings ask him to teach them to dance, which they try but don't quite succeed at doing.

Wishes – Uncle Robert tells the kids they can make wishes on floating dandelion puffs, if they catch them.

Believing – Jackie tells stories to her uncle, about going to the park alone and being bitten by spiders. Uncle Robert knows she is simply being a storyteller, while Mary Ann believes her daughter is making up lies, and this will lead to stealing.



Off-Key – Though Jackie's voice is not the greatest, she loves singing about God at Kingdom Hall. It is beautiful to her, and sounds quite right.

Eve and the Snake - Jackie never understands why only men are allowed to get onstage at Kingdom Hall to talk about God on Sundays. Nevertheless, she listens intently to the account of Adam and Eve and the snake. As a result, all of Eve's descendants are in church seeking forgiveness.

Our Father, Fading Away – As time passes, memories of Jackie's father, Jack, also fade, along with memories of his side of the family. It is later learned that Grandpa Hope in Ohio has died. This causes Jackie to think about Jack, but only briefly.

Halfway Home #2 – New York is still strange and foreign to Jackie, and she loves talking to her grandmother on the phone. She often thinks of South Carolina, and how much she misses the South.

The Paint Eater – Every night, Roman eats paint from the wall. He says it feels good to have it melting on his tongue.

Chemistry – Hope becomes vastly interested in science as a result of superheroes in comic books. Mary Ann buys him a chemistry set, which he constantly works with and experiments with. On days when Mary Ann doesn't want him smelling up the house with chemicals, he takes apart his toy trains and puts them together again. Jackie and her siblings do not know what Hope is searching for, but they do know that he is looking for something far beyond Brooklyn.

Baby in the House – Roman becomes very ill, and goes to the hospital.

Going Home Again – Uncle Robert brings Jackie, Dell, and Hope back to South Carolina. Roman remains behind in the hospital, for he is suffering from lead poisoning, due to all the paint he has been eating.

Home Again to Hall Street – Jackie, Dell, and Hope are thrilled to be back in South Carolina. Everything is just the same. It truly feels like home.

Mrs. Hughes's House – Grandpa Gunnar is too sick to work, so Grandma Georgiana now works full-time. While she works, Jackie, Dell, and Hope attend Mrs. Hughes's Nursery and Day School. Mrs. Hughes is a big, yellow woman. The other kids at the day school make fun of Jackie and her siblings for their city ways. Jackie and her siblings feel as if they are now stuck between two worlds.

How to Listen #4 – Dell knows kids are mean. She tells her siblings to ignore the meanness.

Field Service – Saturday mornings are spent going door-to-door with the Word of God. Jackie is allowed to visit houses on her own now, for she is old enough. Jackie enjoys getting people to come to Kingdom Hall or find God, but is saddened when they don't.



Sunday Afternoon on the Porch – Miss Bell comes over to visit Grandma Georgiana while Grandpa Gunnar works the garden as best he can from a chair, coughing all the way. Gunnar tells his grandchildren not to worry about him. Jackie prays that one day Roman will be well enough to know South Carolina. She prays that she will always have her grandparents.

Home then Home Again – The summer quickly comes to an end in Greenville. Jackie and her siblings already miss South Carolina, even though they have not yet left. Grandpa Gunnar promises to cement the swing set down next summer, so they'll be able to swing as high as they want.

Analysis

Jackie's moving to New York to be with her mother is a strange and unhappy experience. Here, the theme of two worlds again comes into effect, as Jackie longs for South Carolina –what she now considers to be home –and struggles to adapt to New York, which is where she now lives. The irony here should not be missed on the reader in that Mary Ann leaves Ohio and her husband in order to return to her home in the South, only to leave home in the South in order to return North. The longing for home is both expanded and treated by the presence of so many other family members, friends, and fellow citizens of South Carolina who live in close proximity to one another and make time to have regular visits with one another. Still, Jackie cannot see what is so great about New York. At the same time, Jackie receives a composition notebook while in New York, and this paves the way for her desire to become a writer.

The theme of family can also be seen coming to the fore once more, as Jackie struggles to adapt to life in New York and reorients herself to life with her mother. Her mother works hard to provide for her children, pursuing financial success in New York along with so many others from not only the South, but around the country, and around the world. New York is full of opportunity, and somewhat greater equality than the South, which means that Jackie and her siblings will have greater shots at success in life. Mary Ann's motivation for moving her family up North, though it splits apart her family, is primarily to be able to care for her immediate family, specifically, her children.

However, each summer, Jackie, Hope, and Dell are sent South to South Carolina to spend the season with their grandparents. It is something each of the children look forward to with great anticipation. Jackie, especially, has come to view South Carolina as home, with her grandparents being a huge part of it. Unfortunately, each visit South reveals that Grandpa Gunnar is in weaker and weaker health. True to the form of family, Jackie loves to spend time with her grandfather. She even helps to care for him. She prays to God that she will always have her grandparents with her. Then, she goes on to pray that Roman will be able to experience South Carolina with both grandparents around. Also true to the form of family, Georgiana takes on full-time work to support her husband and her grandchildren while they are staying with her.



Interestingly, the theme of two worlds again comes to the fore by the end of Part III, as Gunnar's illness requires Jackie and her siblings to be put up in day school while Georgiana works full-time to pay the bills and support Gunnar. Jackie and her siblings are made fun of at day school for their city ways and Northern way of talking. Though South Carolina is home to Jackie, she feels caught again between the city life and the country life, as well as between the North and the South. Nevertheless, the summer ends too quickly for Jackie's liking, and she very much looks forward to returning home to South Carolina once again.

Discussion Question 1

What is Jackie's experience in New York like so far? How does she feel about New York? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Jackie feel stuck between two worlds while at Mrs. Hughes's Day School? How does she handle this?

Discussion Question 3

Does Jackie feel more at home in South Carolina or New York? Why?

Vocabulary

Meaning, blessings, edible, immature, fascinated.



Part 4

Summary

Family – There is always a happily ever after in stories, and Jackie wants a happy ending in real life.

One Place – For a while, Roman is in and out of the hospital. The lead has seriously injured his body and slowed his brain. By the time he is four, Roman is finally allowed to come back home.

Maria – It is now late August. Jackie has a new best friend named Maria. She speaks Spanish and English and teaches Jackie songs in Spanish.

How to Listen #5 – Maria asks Jackie what her dream come true will be.

Tomboy – Dell continues to read, while Jackie becomes a tomboy, learning to sprint, play handball, and kick the can. Jackie reminds Mary Ann of Jack.

Game Over – When Mary Ann calls for her kids to come inside, Jackie and Hope hate coming back in, for all the fun is over.

Lessons – Mary Ann teaches Jackie how to make pancakes and how to cook in general.

Trading Places – Maria and Jackie often meet for dinner, exchanging what their mothers have made, whether it is fried chicken or garlicky rice and beans.

Writing #1 – Jackie loves writing, but she finds it easier to make up stories than write them down. She always has trouble spelling words like “introduce”.

Late Autumn – Ms. Moskowitz has her students write their names in cursive on the blackboard, but Jackie cannot make a “q” in cursive, so she simply writes “Jackie”. She wants to tell everyone her real name is Jacqueline, but is afraid to because she cannot make a “q” in cursive.

The Other Woodson – Jackie is the other Woodson, always following in Dell’s footsteps. Some mistake her for Odella. All of them call Dell “brilliant,” and Jackie waits to be brilliant. But, it never seems to happen.

Writing #2 – Jackie learns to write things by copying down what she hears, from songs and books. Jackie reads these over and over again to her mother. Jackie learns to read from memory, and everything she learns becomes a part of her memory.

Birch Tree Poem – Jackie’s teacher reads a poem to the class about birch trees, written so beautifully that Jackie can see every part of the poem in her mind, even apart from the picture of a birch tree their teacher shows the class.



How to Listen #6 – When Jackie sits underneath of the block’s oak tree, the whole world disappears.

Reading – How Jackie reads is never good enough for others, or for her teachers, but to Jackie, reading is a slow process, for she wants to remember everything she reads.

Stevie and Me – Every Monday, Mary Ann brings her children to the library, where they are allowed to check out seven books, each. There, Jackie prefers picture books, and especially enjoys a book called “Stevie”, which has characters that look like Jackie. She has never before believed that someone who looked like her could have a story.

When I Tell My Family – Jackie tells her family she wants to be a writer. They smile dismissively and say she should be a teacher, a lawyer, or do hair, instead.

Daddy Gunnar – Jackie and her siblings are thrilled to talk to their grandfather on the phone. He coughs a lot, but tells them he loves them very much.

Hope Onstage – At P.S. 106, during a show, Hope, now ten years old, sings a solo piece beautifully. Ever quiet, his singing voice is incredible.

Daddy This Time – Roman comes to visit Greenville the following summer. Grandpa Gunnar has cemented the swing set down. He tires much more easily now. Even eating for him is a challenge. In moments alone with Jackie, Gunnar tells her that she is his favorite and she will be fine. He asks her to sing to him and to speak to him in Spanish. He tells her that she is perfect.

What Everybody Knows Now – The laws have changed, but Grandma Georgiana still sits with her grandchildren at the back of the bus so no one looks at her like she is dirt. Jackie admires the bravery of the blacks who sit up front. She desires to be brave that way. She continues to avoid certain businesses and places, not wanting to stir things up. She even avoids the Woolworth’s store where she once went in to eat. She was made to wait long past her turn for service.

End of Summer – The summer ends once more, and Grandpa Gunnar talks about getting back to gardening the following year. Jackie and her siblings are sad to travel back to New York with Uncle Robert, leaving their grandparents and Greenville behind.

Far Rockaway – Uncle Robert heads home, promising to bring the kids new toys and take them to Coney Island. Mary Ann knows better than to trust his promises. She knows he has been getting into trouble, for the police have come around looking for him.

Fresh Air – Maria spends part of her summer in upstate New York, in a place called Schenectady with rich white people. Jackie invites Maria down south to Greenville the following summer. Maria promises she will come.

P.S. 106 Haiku – Jackie writes a haiku about how she is now in fourth grade and how it is raining.



Learning from Langston – Jackie comes to be a fan of the poetry of Langston Hughes.

The Selfish Giant – A story is read in school about a giant who loves a little boy. The boy disappears one day. He returns with wounds in his hand like Jesus. The giant then dies and goes to Paradise. The story causes Jackie to cry all afternoon and evening. The story is “The Selfish Giant” by Oscar Wilde, and Jackie reads it over and over, wanting to be the Jesus boy’s friend. She memorizes it, and her classmates are amazed by it. But to Jackie, there is nothing to be amazed about because she loves stories the way she breathes air. She now knows that words are her brilliance.

The Butterfly Poems – Jackie decides to write a book about butterflies. Hope finds it hard to believe an entire book on butterflies can be written, since they don’t live for long. Jackie knows that things on paper never die.

Six Minutes – The Sisters of Kingdom Hall are given time to be on stage in groups to perform skits from the Bible. The skit must also be delivered sitting down. Mary Ann’s mother reminds her to stick to the point because she only has six minutes. Jackie vows that there will be a time when she can tell a story the way she wants to tell it.

First Book – Jackie’s first book consists of a collection of seven haiku poems about butterflies.

John’s Bargain Store – Maria and Jackie buy shirts from John’s Bargain Store so they can match in school.

New Girl – A Puerto Rican girl named Diana moves in next door, and becomes the second best friend of Maria and Jackie. However, Jackie’s days of being Maria’s best friend are numbered, as she sees Maria and Diana hanging out when she is not allowed to go outside.

Pasteles & Pernil – Maria and Jackie attend Maria’s baby brother’s Baptism. Carlos is a tiny baby, and pernil is served for the guests. Jackie cannot eat pernil since it has pork in it. Maria’s mom makes special food for Jackie, from chicken. Jackie asks Maria about Diana, and Maria explains that that particular part of the celebration is just for family.

Curses – Everyone compliments Mary Ann on how polite her kids are. They are not even allowed to use words like “stupid” and “jerk”. Their friends try to get them to say bad words, but they simply cannot do it.

Afros – Afros are now the popular hairstyle. Robert has one, and Jackie wants one. Mary Ann gives herself an afro, but she denies one to Jackie because she is still a child. It makes Jackie stick her tongue out at her mother when Mary Ann isn’t looking, and Dell explains that is what makes her a child.

Graffiti – When Jackie and Maria attempt graffiti, Jackie’s uncle stops them, telling them they could be arrested for it. Jackie says they are just words, and no one can be hurt by them.



Music – Jackie loves listening to Michael Jackson, and Sly and the Family Stone. She also enjoys listening to the Five Stairsteps, the Hollies, the Ohio Players, and the Funky Chicken.

Rikers Island – Robert is arrested and calls from the prison of Riker’s Island. All Mary Ann will tell her children is that Robert walked the wide road instead of the straight and narrow, and now he is paying the consequences. It makes Jackie sad.

Moving Upstate – Robert is moved to a prison upstate that Jackie and her family can visit. He is Jackie’s only uncle, but he is her favorite uncle.

On the Bus to Dannemora – Jackie and her family board a bus to travel to Dannemora to visit Robert. Jackie imagines all the prisoners being free to love their families.

Too Good – Jackie begins singing words about the scenery and mountains as she travels on the bus, which her sister overhears, and says that it is too good for Jackie to have made up.

Dannemora – The prison at Dannemora is scary to Hope. Hope realizes how quickly he could become nothing more than a number in a prison, the way Robert Leon Irby has become.

Not Robert – Robert is no longer the Robert Jackie remembers. His head is shaved and he looks sad.

Mountain Song – On the way home, Jackie completes her song about the mountains. The song makes her think of Robert, Grandpa Gunnar, and Greenville. Jackie cannot wait to get home and write the song down. She believes that when she does this, she will truly be a writer.

Poem on Paper – Whenever someone asks Jackie what she is writing, she never tells them directly. Mary Ann insists that Jackie never write about their family.

Daddy – In the early spring, Grandpa Gunnar takes a turn for the worse and passes away just after Jackie and her family arrive. It is a very sad day, and everyone is quiet with respect and grief.

How to Listen #7 – Jackie says that even the quiet has a story to tell if people only listen.

Analysis

While Jackie longs to be good at something, or to be brilliant at something like her sister is, she comes to discover that she loves to write. The act of writing itself, of reading and memorizing stories by heart, of writing down anything she hears, makes her realize just how much she simply loves the art of writing, and how much she loses herself in the process. She comes to understand that words are her brilliance, and that she truly



desires to be a writer. Jackie's first step in this direction is a small book she writes about butterflies, a collection of seven haikus. The reader should pay attention to butterflies, here, for they are symbolic of flight –of freedom –and of achieving dreams. Jackie longs to achieve her dream of being a writer in a free and honest society. The butterflies themselves become symbolic of Jackie taking wing to pursue her dreams.

As Jackie continues to visit South Carolina in the summers, the themes of racism and of family once more take center stage. The reader should pay careful attention to the fact that, although segregation ends and blacks are allowed to sit anywhere on a bus they want, they often choose to still sit at the back of the bus, like Georgiana, so as not to stir up trouble, or receive angry looks from whites. While legal racism has ended, racism on a personal level still exists very strongly. Nevertheless, Jackie is proud to ride the bus with her grandmother knowing she has the freedom to sit anywhere she wants, and admires the bravery of blacks who sit wherever they want on buses. Jackie still deeply loves her grandparents, more than ever, and comes to assist with caring for her ailing grandfather, who is now worse than ever.

Changes also come to the North, and spread across the country. The end of the 1960s and end of the 1970s bring about cultural shifts. For example, afros become very popular among blacks, and both Robert and Mary Ann eventually sport them as an illustration of their identity as African Americans. Jackie wants an afro, too, but is told by Dell that afros are styles for adults. Changes also come to the family, as Robert is arrested for reasons not given, and taken to Riker's Island, from which he is transferred upstate to Dannemora. There, his head is shaven. All of Robert's independence and identity are taken away and replaced by a prison inmate number, which Mary Ann insists Robert deserves, having brought the prison sentence on himself. By seeking to be different, by seeking an identity in doing illegal things, Robert becomes just like all the other criminals in the world, and as a result, is sent to prison, his individuality and identity gone, like his afro.

Interestingly enough, it is while on the bus to Dannemora that Jackie begins to sing a song she makes up. She's quite anxious to get home to write the song down, knowing that it will make her a writer. The song and the words are so good that Dell doesn't believe Jackie has made them up on her own, but she has done just that. As Jackie continues to write, Mary Ann tells her that she should never write about family. While a reason is not given, it is pretty clear that Mary Ann worries for her family's privacy and what the family may look like to people who read what Jackie writes. Here, the theme of family also comes to the fore, as much of what Jackie writes is indeed about her family. Family matters so much to Jackie, the way that writing does. However, the greatest tragedy that comes in Part IV is not that Jackie writes about her family, but that Grandpa Gunnar finally passes away. Jackie is devastated by his loss. This demonstrates just how important family and Grandpa Gunnar, in particular, have been to Jackie.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Mary Ann tells Jackie not to write about family?



Discussion Question 2

How does the South change racially, yet remain the same, in Part IV? How does Jackie's grandmother respond to the changes? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Jackie never tell anyone what she is writing? How does Mary Ann react to Jackie's love of writing?

Vocabulary

Brilliance, mimeographed, encyclopedia, resurrection, haiku, morph.



Part 5

Summary

After Greenville #2 – Grandma Georgiana sells her house and moves to New York to live with Mary Ann and the grandchildren. Jackie learns to jump double Dutch rope, and Grandma watches her, both of their worlds being changed forever.

Mimosa Tree – Grandma Georgiana plants a mimosa tree in the yard, grown from seeds brought with her from South Carolina. When it snows, the sun reflects off the snow and lights up the house. It is then that Jackie can feel the promise of the tree joining them from back home.

Bubble-Gum Cigarettes – Maria and Jackie buy bubble-gum cigarettes. The girls pretend to smoke them. Dell explains that smoking is why Grandpa Gunnar died. After that, Maria and Jackie only chew the bubble gum.

What's Left Behind – Grandma Georgiana tells Jackie that she has her grandfather's easy way, that they were like two peas in a pod. Jackie always remembers her grandfather when she laughs, imagining he is still there with her.

The Stories I Tell – Jackie and her family go south just once more, for Aunt Lucinda's funeral. After that, Grandma Georgiana says she is done with the South because it makes her too sad. Jackie invents going places for summer vacation writing assignments, writing that she and her family would go to Long Island to fish. In her writing, there is a stepfather who lives in California and a church instead of a Kingdom Hall. Jackie writes so convincingly that her real world and written world seem the same, and the written world seems real.

How to Listen # 8 – Someone is always asking if someone else remembers, and someone else always does.

Fate & Faith & Reasons – Mary Ann believes everything happens for a reason. It is all part of a plan that belongs to God. Jackie wonders if sooner or later, black and white will all turn to gray. Mary Ann believes that everyone coming to Brooklyn wasn't an accident, that it was supposed to happen. Jackie asks her mother what she believes in. Her mother responds that she believes in right now, the Resurrection, Brooklyn, and the four of her children.

What If...? – Jackie wonders about her grandmother never truly "leaving" Greenville, or Maria's mother never truly leaving Puerto Rico. Jackie wonders what Brooklyn would be like if no one ever left, or if she would never have met Maria. Maria says she can never imagine any of it. Jackie cannot, either.

Bushwick History Lesson – New York was originally settled as New Amsterdam by the Dutch, and Franciscus the Negro, who bought his freedom. Slaves who could afford to



own their freedom lived on the other side of the city wall, now a place called Wall Street. The teacher asks the class to write down what this means to them. Jackie writes that she now knows that she was a long time in coming.

How to Listen #9 – Jackie loves to write under the back porch.

The Promise Land – Robert leaves prison as a Muslim. Jackie tries praying with him to see what the Mecca is that he speaks of.

Power to the People – Angela Davis, on TV, raises her fist in the air and says a revolution is going on, so Jackie and Maria do the same walking down the street. Jackie and Maria want to grow up and join the Black Panthers. Angela Davis becomes one of the FBI's Most Wanted people. Jackie and Angie are too young to understand why anyone would want to die for what they believe in, when they could believe in something and live.

Say it Loud – Mary Ann believes the Black Panthers are doing lots of good in the world to make it a better place. But Jackie doesn't understand the revolution. Across Wyckoff Avenue are all the white families, and blacks get beat up when they wander over there. The four white families living on the other side of the Avenue have all moved, except an elderly white woman who makes cookies for all the current residents. Jackie doesn't know what would make everyone want to get along.

Maybe Mecca – There is a teenager on Maria's block who only has one arm, and is called "Leftie". He says he lost his arm fighting in Vietnam. He is sad, and often takes long walks by himself as if he is looking for something. Sometimes, Jackie prays to Mecca with Robert. Jackie wonders if Mecca is the place everyone is looking for.

The Revolution – Robert has an afro again and is involved in the revolution. Jackie imagines the revolution to be like a carousel with beautiful horses, always moving, like the revolution. Jackie is ready for the ride.

How to Listen # 10 – Jackie writes down what she thinks she knows, and knows that the knowing will come.

A Writer – Jackie's teacher, a feminist named Ms. Vivo, says Jackie is a writer. She reads a poem Jackie has written about rich whites living in big houses, and poor blacks living in little shacks. Jackie feels happy about the compliment, and her voice grows stronger with each written word.

Every Wish, One Dream – Every wish Jackie makes is for her dream to be a writer to come true.

The Earth from Far Away – Jackie watches a TV show about the world being like a big, blue marble, full of many peoples and cultures. Jackie has a world of people and stories in her head.



What I Believe – Jackie lists all the things she believes in, from God and evolution to the city and the South to believing in her mother and black people refusing to ride. She also believes in Brooklyn, and in blacks and whites coming together.

Each World – There are many worlds a person can live in during life, and everyone can imagine themselves in these worlds, from a mother traveling by bus at night to love from family, to places people call home like South Carolina, to dreams and believing in oneself, and what the future will be.

Analysis

True to the form of family, following the death of Gunnar, Georgiana moves to New York to live with Mary Ann and her children, leaving South Carolina behind. Following the death of Lucinda, Georgiana no longer visits South Carolina –home –because it is entirely too painful for her. At the same time, Jackie and her siblings do all they can to make their grandmother feel welcome, and they are glad to have her with them. Out in the yard, Georgiana plants a mimosa seed, growing it into a tree, to remind her of the South. It also reminds Jackie of the South. She realizes that she is now not the only one caught between two worlds, but her grandmother is as well. They are both caught between New York and home, the present and the past, and between the home and the painful memories that home brings up.

More changes come to New York in the time after Gunnar's death. Jackie and Maria become aware of the Black Panthers, Angela Davis, and the revolution they are starting. While Jackie and Maria have no idea what the revolution is, or what it is about, they know they want to be like Angela Davis. They walk down the streets copying her fist pumping and repeating her slogans. Interestingly enough, even as legal segregation is winding down, de facto segregation is increasing. The four white families living in the mostly-minority neighborhood across Wyckoff Avenue all leave for white areas of the city. As it is, two worlds have now formed, even in New York, even in the North, where equality is supposed to be widespread. There is now a white neighborhood, and a minority neighborhood. Jackie wonders what could be done to make everyone get along, but doesn't know what that can be.

As the memoir comes to a close, Jackie is told by her teacher, Ms. Vivo, that she is indeed a real writer. This thrills Jackie, who is even more determined to make writing her life. She looks forward to the changes that are coming, both for her personally, and for the country at large. She ends the memoir by speaking about the things in which she believes. Among those things in which she believes are God and family, both absolutely essential to her childhood, and her identity as a person. Here, many of the themes of the memoir –including faith, family, and South Carolina –can be viewed as part of the many different worlds in which people live. As a writer, Jacqueline Woodson lives in many worlds.



Discussion Question 1

Why do Jackie and Maria imitate Angela Davis? Why do they support the revolution if they say they do not know what it is about?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does even New York exhibit racism? Why is this so?

Discussion Question 3

When does Jackie truly feel like a writer for the first time? Why?

Vocabulary

Bodega, revolution, feminist, courting, infinity.



Characters

Jackie Woodson

Jacqueline “Jackie” Woodson is the main character, narrator, and author of the memoir “Brown Girl Dreaming.” Jackie is the daughter of Jack and Mary Ann Woodson, the granddaughter of Georgiana and Gunnar Irby, and the sister of Dell, Hope, and Roman. Jackie’s childhood in the 1960s and early 1970s is dealt with throughout the course of the memoir. This is especially important to the memoir because Jackie and her family are black. They often contend with segregation and racism in the novel. Jackie sees the divide between North and South ultimately pull apart her parents, as her father cannot understand why her mother would consider the South not only to be home, but a place to be loved and visited despite rampant racism and segregation. Jackie knows that, although she is born in Ohio, she has South Carolina running through her veins. When Jackie’s parents split for the last time, she and her siblings move to South Carolina, to live with their grandparents, Gunnar and Georgiana.

In South Carolina, Jackie comes to fall in love with the South, despite all the bad that is going on. She comes to love her grandparents deeply, and comes to learn about God, hard work, and self-respect through them. She also comes to love the South not only for reasons of family, but because of the land –the way the air smells of dew and pine, the summer humidity, and being able to go places or simply be outside at home. Mary Ann, however, decides to move to New York, as many others from the South are headed North. Settled in, and with a new baby named Roman, Mary Ann brings Jackie, Dell, and Hope to New York. Jackie is very sad to leave her grandparents behind, and longs for home in the South. She feels trapped between two worlds –New York and Greenville, the North and the South –and loves returning to South Carolina for the summers to visit her grandparents. While Jackie does not like New York, she becomes best friends with a girl named Maria, and later in New York, comes to realize she wants to be a writer. It is a dream that she will pursue her entire life, and will make come true.

Mary Ann Woodson

Mary Ann Woodson, nee Irby, is the mother of Jackie, Hope, Dell, and Roman, is the ex-wife of Jack Woodson, and is the daughter of Gunnar and Georgiana Irby. Having grown up in the South with loving parents and family, Mary Ann deeply loves the South, despite its racial flaws. While married to Jack, she often travels to her hometown of Greenville, South Carolina, to visit her parents. This causes contention with Jack that ultimately leads to their divorce. Mary Ann later moves to New York, situates herself, gives birth to another baby (Roman), and brings Jackie, Dell, and Hope to join her in New York. Mary Ann works hard at a full-time job in New York, and does her best to provide for her children, including spiritually. She makes sure her children attend Kingdom Hall at the request of Georgiana, and does her best to look out for her younger



brother, Robert, who often gets into trouble with the police. Mary Ann ultimately becomes a hero to Jackie.

Georgiana Irby

Georgiana Irby is the wife of Gunnar Irby and the mother of Mary Ann and Robert. She is the grandmother of Jackie, Dell, Hope, and Roman. Georgiana is a devout Jehovah's Witness. Deeply faithful, she is incredibly sweet, kind, and patient. She is devoted to her family and welcomes her grandchildren into her home following Mary Ann's separation and divorce. Georgiana makes sure her grandchildren have a religious upbringing. She teaches them about God, faith, hard work, and self-respect. While Mary Ann is in New York, Georgiana becomes the mother figure in the lives of her grandchildren, and they greatly love and admire her for it. Georgiana fully supports the Civil Rights Movement, but she favors a peaceful process to bring about equal rights. While she herself has been the victim of racism on numerous occasions, nothing will challenge her love of the South, of Greenville, or of home, because it is home. She knows the South is better than it is behaving, and it can be even better. When Gunnar dies, Georgiana sells her house and moves to New York to live with Mary Anne, Jackie, and their family.

Gunnar Irby

Gunnar Irby is the husband of Georgiana and the father of Mary Ann and Robert. He is the grandfather of Jackie, Hope, Dell, and Roman. Gunnar is a hardworking gentleman who serves as a foreman at a printing press. He comes home from work each day to work the earth with his bare hands by planting vegetables, fruits, and crops. Even though he does not attend church of any kind, Gunnar believes in God. He believes God sees the goodness in people even if they don't go to church or pray. Gunnar teaches his grandchildren the value of hard work and the importance of self-respect. Gunnar deeply loves his family and wants to see all of his children and grandchildren achieve their dreams and succeed in life. Gunnar, however, is a heavy smoker, and ultimately dies from the habit. Though the illness is not specifically named in the book, it can be imagined that Gunnar suffered from either cancer or emphysema. Perhaps, he suffered from both.

Jack Woodson

Jack Woodson is the father of Jackie, Dell, and Hope. He is the ex-husband of Mary Ann. The Ohio native is able to trace his family's ancestry to Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Jack detests the South and hates the fact that his wife wants to visit her home state of South Carolina. He can't understand how she can love a place notorious for racism and inequality. He wants his children to have the best in life. He believes that the South is no place for them. Ultimately, the differences Jack and Mary Ann have about the South lead to their divorce. Following the divorce, Jack drops out of his children's lives, and the memoir.



Dell Woodson

Odella “Dell” Woodson is the older sister of Jackie by nearly a year. She and Jackie are often confused for one another in appearance, but not in character or intelligence. Dell loves to read. She excels academically, and is often referred to as brilliant. Jackie looks up to Dell and longs to be viewed as brilliant, too.

Hope Woodson

Hope Woodson is the older brother of Jackie and Dell. He is kind, patient, and very quiet. He loves to read comic books. Later, he becomes fascinated by science and chemistry. He has an incredible singing voice.

Roman Woodson

Roman Woodson is the youngest sibling of Jackie, Hope, and Dell. He is very pale and has soft brown hair. Few people believe outright that he is related to Jackie and her family at all. As a child, Roman eats lead paint from the wall of his bedroom, which leads to lead poisoning. As a result, he spends much of his young childhood in and out of hospitals.

Robert Irby

Robert Irby is the younger brother of Mary Ann. He is loved by his nieces and nephews, including Jackie. However, he is often in trouble with the law. Ultimately, he is arrested and sent to Riker’s Island. Then, he is transferred to Dannemora. He becomes a Muslim while in prison.

Maria

Maria is a Puerto Rican girl of Jackie’s age, and the two girls fast become best friends. They do everything together --from eating over at each of their houses, to dressing the same, to imitating Angela Davis.



Symbols and Symbolism

Composition Notebook

A composition notebook becomes Jackie's first window into writing. She does not remember who gave her the notebook, or when, but she knows that she is in love with the book for the smell of the pages and the promise of what can be written inside it. Jackie loves to hear the sound of the pencils she uses on the paper. The mere act of writing delights her. She does everything from writing down what she hears other people say, to what she hears on television, to creating her own stories and ideas in the notebook. It propels her along toward her dream of writing.

Hocking River

The Hocking River is a branch of the Ohio River that leaves and then returns to the Ohio River. It is along the Hocking River that Jackie and her family travel when returning from visiting South Carolina. The Hocking River becomes symbolic of the separation of her parents. They argued over leaving Ohio for South Carolina, even just to visit. The river becomes symbolic of their making up and rejoining one another in Ohio.

Bus

A bus is the main means of transportation in the novel, either while traveling in the South, in the North, or from one region to another. Buses are ridden by Jackie and her family at night, so as to avoid having to deal with white people stopping them and questioning them. Here, they become representative of the racism inherent in the South, including the fact that blacks must ride at the backs of busses. In the North, busses allow Jackie and her family the ability to visit Robert in prison. It is while on that particular bus trip to visit Rob that Jackie begins creating words for a song that will ultimately allow her to consider herself a writer. Here, the bus becomes symbolic of Jackie heading toward her dream of writing.

Afro

Afros are a popular hairstyle among black people in the late 1960s through the 1970s. They are symbolic of black identity and independence. Robert and Mary Ann both sport afros, while Jackie longs to have one. When Robert is arrested and imprisoned, his head is shaved. This is symbolic of his identity and independence disappearing, for Robert has also lost his freedom in the world by committing criminal acts. The afro is a reminder to Jackie and a warning from Jackie's mother to always do the right thing and to stay on the straight and narrow.



Fabric Store

Fabric is sold at a store in Greenville, South Carolina. It is used by Georgiana to make dresses and clothing for her family. The store that is frequented by Georgiana is owned by a white woman who treats Georgiana like a friend and fellow human being worthy of . Georgiana is glad to give her business to the woman.

Vegetables

Vegetables are grown by Gunnar in his garden outside his house in the Nicholtown neighborhood of Greenville. The vegetables represent Gunnar's love of hard work and how he seeks to provide and cultivate a loving home for his family.

Board games

Board games are purchased by Mary Ann for Jackie, Dell, and Hope to play because the children are rarely allowed outside to play while in New York on their own at first. Mary Ann insists that playing board games is more than enough friendship among Jackie, Dell, and Hope.

Cigarettes

Cigarettes are smoked regularly by Gunnar throughout the memoir. Gunnar is a very heavy smoker, and the cigarettes end up killing him. He dies either of emphysema, cancer, or both, though the exact illness is never given.

Butterflies

Butterflies are studied and written about in poetry form by Jackie. Seven of these poems, in haiku form, compose Jackie's first book. Butterflies become symbolic of flight –of freedom –and of achieving dreams. Jackie's dream is to become a writer in a free and honest society. The butterflies themselves also become symbolic of Jackie taking wings to pursue her dreams.

Lead paint

Lead paint is used on the walls in Jackie's New York apartment bedroom. It is eaten by Roman, who enjoys the feel of melting paint on his tongue. Roman is ultimately diagnosed with lead poisoning as a result. As a result, he spends much of his time in and out of hospitals throughout his childhood.



Settings

Ohio

Ohio is a Northern state in the United States of America. It is the home state of Jackie, Dell, and Hope, as well as the entire Woodson family. Ohio is a state with greater opportunities for blacks and greater freedoms for them as well. To Jack, Ohio is home, and he longs to see his children grow up and succeed beyond their expectations in Ohio. His children, however, are young enough so that Ohio never truly becomes home to them, as they travel south, and South Carolina ultimately becomes what they consider to be home.

Greenville

Greenville is a large town in South Carolina where Gunnar and Georgiana Irby live. It is where Mary Ann and Robert are raised. The town is divided into sections for whites and blacks, and racism is institutionalized through legal segregation. Despite this, Greenville is considered home and a beautiful place to live by Georgiana, Gunnar, and Mary Ann. Gunnar works as a foreman in Greenville at a printing press, where white people even work under him. Though it is not perfect, Greenville is home.

South Carolina

South Carolina is the location of Greenville, and it is the home state of Georgiana, Gunnar, Mary Ann, and Robert. South Carolina, despite its flaws, is considered home by the family. Later, Jackie, Hope, and Dell will look upon South Carolina as their home, too Jack cannot understand how they can consider South Carolina to be home because of the racism and segregation, but to Jackie and the others, South Carolina is home because it is where family is and where their roots are planted. They have fallen in love with the land itself –from the clear skies to the humid summers to the smell of dew on the grass and pine in the air.

New York City

New York City is the largest city in New York state. It is where many residents of South Carolina move to live. Mary Ann decides that she and her children will move to New York to do the same. Though Jackie decides to become a writer in New York, she dislikes New York because it is cold, gray, and unfriendly. There is nowhere to go in New York, and Jackie is often kept indoors by her mother, who doesn't want her running around the city. While in New York, Jackie feels caught between two worlds –the North and the South, and New York and South Carolina. When Gunnar dies, Georgiana moves to New York with Mary Ann, and like Jackie, feels caught between two worlds.

Dannemora

Dannemora is a prison in upstate New York where Robert serves out a year's sentence. Dannemora is a lesson to Jackie and her siblings to always stay on the straight and narrow and to always seek to do good in life. For Hope, Dannemora represents a lack of freedom and individuality. It is especially frightening to him, for he never wants to end up in such a place without any independence at all.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is a major theme in the memoir “Brown Girl Dreaming” by Jacqueline Woodson. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the fashion of the traditional family unit. In the memoir, family proves not only to be a defining force in the life of Jackie, but it has its shortcomings as well.

Jackie’s nuclear family –her siblings Dell, Hope, and later Roman, and her mother and father, Mary Ann and Jack –surrounds her during her early childhood in Ohio. The Woodson line of the family can trace its ancestry back to Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, and owing to such esteemed ancestry, Woodsons are expected to be hard-workers and high-achievers. The family line is full of doctors, lawyers, teachers, and various other kinds of professionals. Jackie and her siblings are expected to follow the same paths, to succeed wildly in life. It is owing to her family ancestry, and her father’s high expectations, that Jackie gets much of her ambition.

However, Jackie’s parents do not stay together for long. They are torn over their geographic differences. Jackie’s mother loves to visit the South. She considers it home, though Jack cannot understand her feelings because racism and segregation are rampant there. Ultimately, this leads Jack and Mary Ann to divorce. As a result, Jack becomes absent from the lives of Jackie and her siblings. For the remainder of the memoir, Jack is not seen, is more and more rarely heard from, until he does not keep in touch at all. Here, family has tremendous shortcomings, as passions and anger get in the way of love and compassion.

Jackie is not without a father figure, however, as her Grandpa Gunnar comes to assume such a role. While Mary Ann is away in New York preparing things for her children to come and live with her, Jackie and her siblings grow very close to Grandma Georgiana and Grandpa Gunnar. Both grandparents financially support and lovingly care for one another and their grandchildren and their daughter, Mary Ann. They teach their grandchildren the value of hard work and make sure they know they are human beings that are worthy of giving and receiving respect. Grandma Georgiana tends to the spiritual needs of Jackie and her siblings, keeping them attending services at Kingdom Hall, and speaking frequently to them about God and faith. Lessons of faith are deeply absorbed and valued by Jackie and her siblings.

When Jackie and her siblings move to New York, they are happy to be with their mother again, but they miss their grandparents terribly. It feels as if their family has once again been torn apart. Mary Ann works hard to provide for her children, and her children recognize her efforts and her hard work. They love their mother deeply, but they are happy to return to South Carolina each summer, accompanied by their Uncle Robert on the trips to and from Greenville. Robert himself becomes something of a fixture in the



lives of Jackie and her siblings, and they come to deeply love and value Robert, even if he is not always reliable.

When Grandpa Gunnar dies, Georgiana moves up to New York to be with Mary Ann, Jackie, and the others. They do their best to make Georgiana feel at home, and Georgiana is grateful for the love, warmth, welcome, and support from her family. While she still considers South Carolina home, it is too sad for her to return there anymore. As such, she is all the more grateful for the love her family gives her. Even when Robert runs astray of the law and is imprisoned, the family does not give up on him or walk away from him. They still love him.

Civil Rights and Racism

Civil rights and racism form an important theme in the memoir “Brown Girl Dreaming” by Jacqueline Woodson. Civil rights have to do with equality under the law, society, and culture, for all people regardless of things like skin color. Civil rights arise out of the American idea that all human beings, regardless, are given rights by God that must be borne out in life. Civil rights, in the novel, forms an important backdrop to Jackie’s own life, and is a response to the racism that is rampant in the South of the 1960s in which Jackie spends her childhood.

Traveling down to visit her parents in South Carolina by bus, Mary Ann and her children always travel by night, for there are less white people out. There is a much less chance that they will be stopped and questioned and made to feel like dirt by white people. Additionally, they always sit at the back of the bus, as required by Southern laws. As children, Jackie and her siblings don’t quite understand the bus traveling arrangements, or racism, but they do understand their mother telling them that they are as good as anybody. Even after civil rights reforms are enacted, many blacks still sit in the back of the bus, not wanting to rock the boat or receive dirty looks from whites for sitting anywhere they please. By that time, Jackie is older. She admires the bravery of blacks who choose to sit anywhere they wish.

Racism also becomes apparent in many ways as Civil Rights protests increase in size and scope. The high school Mary Ann attended years before is burned down by white supremacists in retaliation for the protests. Miss Bell, a neighbor of Georgiana and Gunnar’s, is forbidden to participate in Civil Rights demonstrations by her employer, a white woman, but participates anyways. In the North, as the Black Panthers become more radical and gain more power, the white families in racially-mixed neighborhoods move out for white, or nearly all-white neighborhoods. Even as Civil Rights laws pass, racism remains rampant. For example, “whites only” signs are painted over according to the new laws, but are painted with only one coat so that the words still show through the paint, with the intent of intimidating blacks.

Jackie, however, comes to learn from her grandmother that nonviolence is the best way to achieve goals, and that not everyone in the South is racist. For example, the never-named white woman who owns the fabric store in Greenville has long been friends with



Grandma Georgiana, and treats her with respect, like a human being –as she does all her black customers. In New York, the sole remaining white person in Jackie’s neighborhood is an elderly lady who bakes cookies for everyone, and does not care what color her friends and neighbors are. Indeed, Georgiana insists that peaceful protests, like the kind Jesus made, are the only way to achieve real and lasting justice. When people do the right things, God smiles on them and blesses them. As such, Georgiana participates in peaceful Civil Rights protests, happily and willingly.

Two Worlds

The theme of two worlds is an important part of Jacqueline Woodson’s memoir, “Brown Girl Dreaming”. The theme of two worlds essentially encompasses the idea that an individual feels stuck between two different places, for various reasons. The theme of two worlds appears repeatedly throughout the novel, affecting the characters of Mary Ann, Jackie, and Georgiana, in similar and in different ways.

The first person to feel as if she is straddling two worlds is Mary Ann. Born and raised in South Carolina, Mary Ann marries Jack and moves to Ohio to raise a family. But Ohio is not home to her. South Carolina, despite its racism and segregation, is home to her. Jack can’t understand why Mary Ann would feel torn by the South, but Mary Ann’s reasoning is clear and sound. Not everyone in the South is racist, caught between black and white, and home is more than merely a place. It is where Mary Ann’s roots are, the place she grew up and fell in love with. Everything about South Carolina –from the humidity in the summer to the smell of the dew on the grass, to the fact that her parents still live in South Carolina –makes the state home to her. Ohio is too cold, too dry, and too far away from South Carolina for Mary Ann’s liking, though her own family now exists in Ohio. As such, Mary Ann feels trapped between the North and South, between Ohio and South Carolina –trapped between two different worlds without committing to one or the other.

Jackie and her siblings also come to feel trapped between two worlds at different points throughout the memoir. They are too young for Ohio to take root in them, and come to view South Carolina as home. To Jackie, South Carolina is home not only because of the land, the smells, the atmosphere, and the people, but especially because her grandparents live there. Her childhood truly takes off in South Carolina, as she is allowed to play outdoors and gets to know God, grows closer to her family, and feels as if she has truly taken root in the South. When she moves to New York with her mother, Mary Ann, Jackie feels trapped between two worlds –between home and New York, between the city and the country, and between the North and the South. She does not like New York’s cold, gray climate, and longs to return to South Carolina each summer. Yet ironically, in South Carolina during the summers, other children make fun of Jackie and her siblings for having lived in New York, and for their city ways, which causes Jackie and her siblings to again feel trapped between two worlds, unable to fully live in one or the other.



The third and final person who truly feels trapped between two worlds is Georgiana. When Gunnar dies later in the memoir, Georgiana decides to sell her house and move in with Mary Ann, Jackie, and the others in New York. Georgiana plants a mimosa tree in the front yard to remind her of home, though she no longer wishes to return to South Carolina, because the memories are too painful. As such, Georgiana is stuck between two worlds –between the past and the present, between New York and South Carolina, and between the North and the South. Jackie, for all of the struggles she has endured in moving back and forth, is able to sympathize with her grandmother, knowing firsthand how it feels to live between two worlds.

Faith

Faith is an important theme in the memoir “Brown Girl Dreaming” by Jacqueline Woodson. Faith has to do with belief, and in this context, is of a religious nature. Faith, in “Brown Girl Dreaming” refers to belief in God, and adherence to the religious faith of Jehovah’s Witness, as well as non-religious but theistic faith. Later in the memoir, Islam also makes an appearance as a mark of religious faith. Faith is incredibly important to Jackie, as well as all of her experiences with it.

Jackie believes in God early on as a child, though her parents, Mary Ann and Jack, are not devoutly religious or church attendees. Jackie’s grandmother, Georgiana, however, is deeply religious and devout, however. Georgiana becomes Jackie’s primary religious instructor, and teaches Jackie about God and makes sure Jackie and her siblings are regular attendees at Kingdom Hall, for Georgiana is a passionate Jehovah’s Witness. Georgiana explains that all good things in life are attributable to, and blessings from, God, whether it is health to work a good job or love from family. When Jackie and her siblings return to New York, it is their mother who makes sure they continue to attend Kingdom Hall.

While Georgiana maintains an Old Testament view of God, one of fear, trembling, and awe, Grandpa Gunnar retains a casual, New Testament relationship with God, one that is close, intimate, and friendly. Gunnar is not religious in terms of attending church or Kingdom Hall, but is indeed a believer in God. He maintains that God sees the good in men’s hearts, whether they pray or attend church, or not. What truly matters is that people do good and do right by God. While Gunnar is appreciative for prayers on his behalf, he tells others not to pray for him, because he already knows he is right with God, and that is all that matters.

At the end of the memoir, Robert is released from prison, and comes out as a Muslim, having converted while in prison. Jackie reflects on the fact that Robert, like all people, are searching for something, and ultimately, people are seeking God, whether it is in Kingdom Hall or praying toward Mecca. Jackie herself ultimately comes to continue believing deeply in God, and in the idea that He has a plan for everyone, including her. She considers that all of history has led up to the present, and has led up to her. So how could she not have a purpose from God, she wonders.



South Carolina

South Carolina forms an important theme and motif in the memoir “Brown Girl Dreaming” by Jacqueline Woodson. South Carolina is a state in the southern United States, and in the regional American South. South Carolina, thematically, draws together pieces of other themes, such as being stuck between two worlds, civil rights, and racism, and becomes a theme in its own right as representative of home, and a distinctive place and culture in the midst of change that forms a backdrop to the memoir.

Jack cannot understand, at the beginning of the memoir, why on earth Mary Ann would willingly want to go to South Carolina to visit her parents, or why Mary Ann would consider South Carolina home. Jack sees South Carolina as the epitome of evil, where racism and segregation rule the day, and blacks are inferiors in both treatment and law. In South Carolina, there are separate facilities, from water fountains to bathrooms, for whites and blacks. In South Carolina, blacks are treated with contempt, scorn, and like dirt by whites. In South Carolina, blacks must sit at the backs of buses so white people can have seats closer to the front of the bus. In South Carolina, blacks prefer to travel by night so they stand less of a chance of being stopped and questioned by whites. Even when segregation legally ends, and things change, cultural segregation continues. Georgiana still prefers to ride in the back of the bus, so as to avoid stirring things up, and earning the disapproving looks of whites. As such, Jack cannot understand why Mary Ann would love a place like that.

Jackie comes to discover why, as she too, comes to view South Carolina as home. First, not all whites in South Carolina are racist, as evidenced by the white woman who owns the fabric shop in Greenville. She treats Georgiana with respect, and like a human being, as she does for all her black customers. Second, there is more to South Carolina than racism and segregation. There is also home, where families have taken root, and where love between families is born and grown. There is much more to South Carolina as well—a Heideggerian sense of dwelling, of belonging to the very land itself. Jackie, and her mother, both love the smell of dew on the grass and pine in the air, of the humidity in the summer, and how green and warm the state usually is. Gunnar, whose ancestors worked the South Carolina land as slaves, now fulfills the dream of working the land as a free man, providing for his family, rather than a plantation owner. The earth is full of promise, and any place, no matter where it is, will only yield to someone what someone puts into it. The same is true of South Carolina, as it is of New York and Ohio.

Styles

Point of View

Jacqueline Woodson tells her memoir “Brown Girl Dreaming” from the first-person, limited-omniscient, present-tense point of view of herself as a child. She does this for several reasons. First and foremost, the memoir being told is Jacqueline’s, and there is no better person to tell her childhood story than herself. Second, this allows Jacqueline to communicate intimate thoughts, ideas, and feelings with the reader directly, allowing them to see and feel things as she did. It also allows readers a sort of intimacy as if the story was being told by one friend to another. The limited-omniscient aspect lends itself to Jacqueline telling the story as her child-self in present-tense, and not knowing everything going on in the world around her, but having vague ideas or inclinations about events and circumstances beyond her control.

Language and Meaning

Jacqueline Woodson tells her memoir “Brown Girl Dreaming” in language that is lyrical, poetic, but simple. This is done for at least three reasons. First, the simple language owes itself to the present-tense narrative mode of a small child. As such, the language will be simple given the formative education Jackie is undergoing as a youth. Second, the lyrical, poetic language is reflective of the beauty Jackie felt and experienced as a child, even in the darkest situations, and is reflective of the beauty and passion that she feels while writing as a child. Third, the book’s structure, taking the form of numerous poems and free-verse, requires language that is poetic and lyrical, rather than merely straightforward prose.

Structure

Jacqueline Woodson divides her novel “Brown Girl Dreaming” into five major, linear parts, running from Part I to Part V. Each part is further subdivided into chapters. Each chapter takes the form of a poem or lyrical free verse. Each chapter deals with a specific memory or incident, while each part focuses around a general time in Jackie’s childhood. For example, the chapter “New York City” describes Jackie’s first encounters and experiences with living in New York, while Part III, in which the chapter takes places, deals with life between New York during the school year and South Carolina during the summer.



Quotes

USA –a country caught between Black and White.

-- Jacqueline Woodson (Part I, February 12, 1963 paragraph 1)

Importance: The racism and Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s is the backdrop for the world into which Jackie is born. This backdrop will serve to be important to Jackie's childhood as she moves between Ohio, South Carolina, New York, and then returns to South Carolina to spend summers with her grandparents.

You'll face this in your lives someday... A moment when you walk into a room and no one there is like you.

-- Mary Ann Woodson (Part I, It'll Be Scary Sometimes paragraph 7)

Importance: Mary Ann reminds Jackie that her ancestor, William Woodson, was the only black child in an all-white class, and that Jackie will one day face a similar situation. Here, Mary Ann speaks not only of race, but of anything that may make Jackie different from everyone else. In a family full of doctors, lawyers, and professionals, Jackie will want to become a writer –something different from everyone else.

This isn't Ohio.

-- Mary Ann Woodson (Part I, Greenville, South Carolina, 1963 paragraph 2)

Importance: While traveling to South Carolina, Mary Ann is aware that people will be watching her and judging her and her children. Racism and segregation still exist in South Carolina, and she reminds her children to be on their best behavior because they are no longer in the North.

And now coming back home isn't really coming back home at all.

-- Jacqueline Woodson (Part II, Ohio Behind Us paragraph 4)

Importance: Following her separation from Jack, Mary Ann moves with her children back to her home in South Carolina. With all of her siblings, many cousins, and most friends having moved away in the intervening years, home no longer truly feels like home, since everyone is gone. Nevertheless, South Carolina will come to feel like home to Jackie and her siblings.

God gives you what you need. Best not to ask for more than that.

-- Georgiana Irby (Part II, The Garden paragraph 5)

Importance: Jackie's grandmother is a deeply religious woman, who becomes integral to Jackie's spiritual upbringing. Georgiana makes sure her grandchildren know that God provides what is needed and that they should never be greedy and ask for too much. God can always be trusted and relied upon, and Jackie takes this to heart.



Because we have a right to walk and sit and dream wherever we want.

-- Gunnar Irby (Part II, South Carolina at War paragraph 1)

Importance: With the Civil Rights Movement in full swing, Gunnar reminds his grandchildren that they are worthy of giving and receiving respect. Human beings have God-given rights that they are free to exercise. Even the simplest things, such as going places, is a right that all men have, regardless of color or origin. He explains that this is a reason worth marching and dying for.

At the fabric store, we're just people.

-- Jacqueline Woodson (Part II, The Fabric Store paragraph 1)

Importance: The white woman who owns the fabric store treats Georgiana and her family with respect and as her friends. It is a rare place where blacks are treated as equal, as just people rather than dirt.

And even though she's smarter than anything, this is something my sister can't even begin to understand.

-- Jacqueline Woodson (Part III, Composition Notebook paragraph 7)

Importance: Jackie loves to write, though her sister questions why, especially because early on, Jackie can barely write, period. Jackie loves writing for writing, and it has become a passion of hers down to the very sound a pencil makes on a page. It is something that she knows Dell cannot, and will not, ever understand.

Too fast the summer leaves us.

-- Jacqueline Woodson (Part IV, End of Summer paragraph 1)

Importance: After moving to New York, Jackie and her siblings spend every summer in South Carolina with their grandparents. It is a wonderful time that always ends too quickly. As one summer ends, the children already look forward to the next. This is not only because they love their grandparents deeply, but because South Carolina is home.

Stories are like air to me, I breathe them in and let them out over and over again.

-- Jacqueline Woodson (Part IV, The Selfish Giant paragraph 9)

Importance: Here, Jackie explains how important reading and writing are to her –as important as breathing. Indeed, writing becomes the very air itself to Jackie. She knows that her purpose in life is to be a writer. She feels it in every bone in her body and in every breath she takes.

On paper, things can live forever.

-- Jacqueline Woodson (Part IV, The Butterfly Poems paragraph 4)

Importance: Jackie's brother finds it difficult to believe she is writing a book about butterflies because butterflies live such a short time. Jackie contends that once



something is written down, it can live forever. As long as the words themselves exist on paper, so do the things they mean.

I want to be a writer.

-- Jacqueline Woodson (Part V, One Wish, One Dream paragraph 7)

Importance: As the memoir concludes, Jackie's purpose in life –to write –becomes the central focus of her childhood and life going forward. It is not only something she loves doing, but something she wants to make a living doing. Her family is skeptical, for she will be the only writer –but Jackie herself is not.