Clover and Annie Paul meet on opposite sides of a fence that separates the white and black neighborhoods of their small town in Jacqueline Woodson’s (2001) picture book The Other Side. Both girls share warnings from their mothers that the other side of the fence is not safe for them. This story of racial division unfolds to reveal issues of loneliness and friendship, inclusion and exclusion, and the overcoming of prejudice and segregation through the wisdom of children. As in Woodson’s previous books, this story is made real through the inclusion of universal complexities within the specific cultural experiences that impact even the very young.

Woodson has become acclaimed as an outstanding author of children’s literature for youths from elementary through high school, even though she began her writing career as an author of short stories for adults. Miracle’s Boys (2001) earned her the prestigious Coretta Scott King Author Award, which is awarded each year to a distinguished African American author of children’s literature. Woodson has also received two Coretta Scott King Honor Awards for I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This in 1995 and From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun in 1996.

In my interview of Woodson, she shared some of the people and experiences that influence her work and motivate her to create stories that readers can depend on for honesty, richness, and an in-depth look into the lives of her characters. Woodson recalls her beginnings as a three-year-old writer whose sister taught her to write her whole name. Even at such a young age, she could feel the power that came from “having the tools with which to create a landscape of words” (Brown, 2002, p. 156). Now, as she uses this power in her professional writing, her books provide fertile ground for the many diverse characters she creates who move within their own “detailed physical landscape” (p. 156), whether it be rural, small town, or city.

Contrasts in these settings and their impact on her characters are well illustrated in Last Summer with Maizon (2002), when Maizon leaves her home in the city to attend a private school in Connecticut where she struggles with feelings of isolation and unhappiness. When she returns home after only three months, she shares these feelings with her best friend, Margaret.

During our interview, I described Maizon as being exceptionally bright and living in the “inner city.” Woodson’s response was immediate and clear. “I hate the word ‘inner-city,’” she said. “It’s the new word for ‘ghetto.’ I mean, everyone in New York lives in the ‘inner-city.’ What makes Harlem the ‘inner-city’ and the upper west and east side not? What makes Bushwick the ‘inner-city’ and Park Slope not?”

Woodson continued to respond to my perceived bias toward Maizon, who had received an academic scholarship, by saying, “In Last Summer with Maizon, both girls are really bright—Maizon just gets rewarded academically. I think that happens a lot. I wanted to show the many ways brilliance can be revealed—Maizon’s is academic, Margaret’s is creative.”

Woodson found during the writing of this book that, “I related, in this book, more to the place than the story. I wanted to put a neighborhood I knew well from childhood and all of its diverse people on the page.”

“Inner city” is a term I often use to describe where I grew up in Detroit. When Woodson recognized the stereotyping that was embedded in my language, I wondered what other words she associated with stereotypical language, and she responded by talking about the use of terms like “alternative families” or “alternative lifestyles.” “At what
point do enough people have to live outside the ‘mainstream’ for this qualifier not to be in place? Everyone I know is ‘alternative’ in some way.” She went on to say, “I have a hard time with qualifiers in general. Our society is still so far from ‘live and let live.’”

In many books that include relationships across races, the white child is in a position of social power. That is not the case in many of Woodson’s stories, where the black child is generally situated in the more powerful position within relationships. This is true particularly of Marie in *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (1994) and Clover in *The Other Side.* I asked Woodson if children had responded to these powerful and refreshing portrayals of relationships. She responded, “Sometimes people are surprised that the relationships and situations aren’t stereotypical. I wanted to write my side of the story. I grew up reading the white side, which, surprisingly to some people, isn’t the only side.” When Woodson is asked about this, she replies by stating, “I think young people, for the most part, respond favorably. They’re happy to have another side of the story for many reasons.”

As a child, Woodson read “anything I could get my hands on that was an easy read. . . . I didn’t like having my reading interrupted with vocabulary words I didn’t know.” As with many children who find themselves surrounded by children’s literature dominated by white representation in books written and illustrated by white authors and illustrators, Woodson delighted in the discovery of the work of notable authors and illustrators of color. “I was ecstatic to discover Virginia Hamilton and Mildred Taylor later on. Once I found out there were books out there written by people of color, I always looked for them and devoured them.”

By Woodson’s account, these authors and illustrators had a major impact on her work. “I think I’m influenced most by black women writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. James Baldwin also had a major impact on me both as a reader and a writer. As did Langston Hughes.”

Woodson reflected on the influence of her formal education, stating, “I know it impacted me and I’m grateful for the privilege of being educated. I love the fact that I’m smart and critical and I think school had something to do with that.” However, she feels that other influences more significantly impact her work. “Just being in the world and being hyper aware of it and the people in it has made a difference in me. What gets onto the page are my ideas about what I see, hear, feel—and I guess the ability to do that is a gift of both formal and ‘informal’ education.”

Bashir (2001) describes Woodson as a “fun-loving, thirty-something, Brooklyn-based author, who first garnered the attention of young readers with piercing stories geared toward 12-year-olds, addressing difficult issues like divorce and family diversity” (p. 78). Bashir describes Woodson’s books as “some of the most vibrant, politically relevant and original writing to be found in adult, young-adult, middle-grade and children’s literature” (p. 78).

But, Woodson does not write with a message in mind. “I write because I have questions I am asking of myself, and even this I don’t know until I’m almost halfway through the book sometimes.” Using *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* as an example, Woodson explained that she knew that “I wanted to write about girls and fathers but I didn’t know the book was asking ‘Why can’t we all just be people here?’ until Lena asked that question.” In fact, she added, “I didn’t even know she was going to ask it!” She further explains that she never outlines but rather “just let [s] the story come as it comes.” At the time of our interview, Woodson was writing “about an 11-year-old boy who is in foster care and is discovering something about who he is through writing—I don’t know what it is he’s discovering nor do I know how writing will save him.” This story became *Locomotion* (2003).

As a writer, Woodson “take[s] it one sentence at a time and it always leads me somewhere.” There is an element of surprise for her in her own process. “Sometimes I think writing chose me rather than me choosing writing. It’s weird sometimes to look back on the pages I’ve written and ask ‘Well, where did this come from?’”

Woodson’s writing includes many of the issues that are present in the real world but seldom appear in children’s literature, such as racial division, child abuse, interracial dating, and sexual orientation. I asked if she was ever concerned that her work would be considered too controversial and her response was emphatic. “I never thought my work would be considered controversial. It’s wild. I mean, I wrote what I believed in.” She explained that she writes “about what I feel is real and a part of our world. I write characters that face circumstances and deal with them as best they can.”

As I heard her response, I thought of Ty’ree in *Miracle’s Boys* struggling to keep himself and his two younger
brothers together as a family after the loss of their parents and Evie in *Hush* (2002) facing a life where her past was taken from her because of the courage of her father to confront injustice. Woodson explained, “This is the world’s everyday. I guess I was naïve. I’m still surprised when people say my writing is ‘edgy,’ or ‘controversial,’ or ‘disturbing.’ I mean, I’m just trying to keep it real.”

This honesty has been recognized and responded to by Woodson’s readers. She receives “a lot of letters from young people asking why I wrote something and/or how did I do it. I am happy when people respond to my work in a way that shows they’re really thinking about what I’ve written.” She has also received a couple of letters stating that she shouldn’t write about certain issues. “I just think, if people don’t like what I’m writing about, just don’t read the book! I don’t believe in censorship on any level.”

Woodson was a young adult when she began her career, and this affected her perspective: “I had to realize that I could actually finish a book. It was very scary and there weren’t any people I knew personally who had done it.” Because Woodson was not only young, but looked even younger, she found herself in an unusual position. “I always felt like I had to prove that I had something worthwhile to say when I was in public as a published author. I’m glad I’m older now. It’s a relief.”

After proving herself as a successful author of adult short stories, middle grade novels, and young adult novels, Woodson began to write picture books. When I asked why, she exclaimed, “What’s left?” Woodson was not satisfied with an earlier attempt at writing picture books. “My first book was a picture book—a bio about Martin Luther King that Floyd Cooper illustrated. Fortunately, because it was badly written, it is no longer in print.”

The transition to picture books was not seamless. “It took time to get my writing honed enough to be able to tell a story that is, hopefully, concise and creative at the same time.” Woodson is now the author of a number of picture books. Her recent books include *Visiting Day* (2002) illustrated by James Ransome, the story of little girl visiting her imprisoned father, and *Our Gracie Aunt* (2002) illustrated by Jon Muth, the story of a brother and sister placed with their aunt while their mother is in recovery. These picture books, along with those that preceded them, *The Other Side* illustrated by E. B. Lewis, *We Had a Picnic This Sunday Past* (1998) illustrated by Diane Greenseid, and *Sweet Sweet Memory* (2000) illustrated by Floyd Cooper are all stories complex enough to interest readers from early grades through middle school.

Certainly one of the elements of story that draws in readers and sustains their interest in her picture books and novels is her development of authentic, believable characters. In *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*, Melanin Sun is a young man dealing with his own adolescent issues when his single mother announces that she is in love with a white woman. Lafayette and his two older brothers, each with markedly different personalities, come alive for readers of *Miracle’s Boys*. I asked her if she was ever in doubt that she could put voice to these young men and what had given her confidence. Her response provides a window into the fragility and vulnerability that comes from creating characters, “I’m always in doubt about my ability as a writer to write about people I don’t know a whole lot about. I think this is a good thing because it makes me work hard, think hard, challenge myself.” Sometimes the process isn’t smooth and she finds herself faltering because “the voices sound cardboard and unrealistic. Then I have to start again. Rewrite and rewrite and rewrite. Listen and rewrite some more.” When Woodson faces problems in her writing, she draws confidence from “the book that came before. I always try to make the next one a little more challenging for myself and the book that is already in the world is sort of a grounding point for me.”

Woodson’s recent book *Hush* (2002) is the story of an African American family torn from their comfortable lives when the father testifies against two white fellow police officers, and the family is moved by the witness protection program. As with most of her books, *Hush* has met with positive reviews from the leading children’s literature magazines and journals. Most of her early works have been reprinted in an age when many children’s books are dropped after the first printing.

I asked Woodson if, because of this success and the acclaim of having received two Coretta Scott King Award Honors and the Coretta Scott King Author Award, she feels pressure as she begins to write a new novel or picture book. She responded, “I have to distance myself...
from the awards I’ve received in the past in order to write.” She is realistic about what these awards represent. “I know that those awards were for those books—not because I’m Jacqueline Woodson but because at some point in time, I told a good story. I tell myself that that point has passed and now it’s time to write some more.”

At the same time, Woodson is appreciative of receiving the recognition of these awards. “I was thrilled to get the Coretta Scott King Award. I still can’t believe it. I love it every time someone puts a plaque in my hand.” She does, however, find writing and receiving awards is a bit surreal. “I do what I love and then people love it? It’s wild that this can be!”

Although receiving awards is exciting, Woodson considers the writing itself to be her major reward. “When I sit down to write, it’s hard and scary and thrilling all over again. I look back on the last book and say ‘You did it before, you can do it again’—not get the award, but tell a story. And once I’ve done it again, I am relieved and surprised.”

One of the reasons Woodson has received these awards is that she writes about social issues by telling a story rather than preaching about the issue. Woodson’s work is characterized by a profound honoring of her characters, creating multidimensional people who transcend the didactic, stereotypical intentionality that is frequently seen in work that speaks to current social issues. Roger Sutton, editor of the children’s literature magazine Horn Book, observes that books written to prove a point are likely to put the reader to sleep. “The goal of literature is not to provide role models but to show people as they are” (Cooper, 2000, p. 9). While Woodson (2001) has expressed hope that readers will “learn about people other than themselves through literature” (p. 58), her approach is not to push but to share, not to preach but to provide stories where children can empathize with characters both like and unlike themselves.

Jacqueline Woodson’s books can be described as poetic and lyrical, sensitive and poignant, subtle yet powerful. Her work reflects an author who is intensely honest about her own life and listens with genuine interest to the voices of young people around her. With strong, black, often female protagonists, with plots and themes reflecting genuine experiences in authentic settings, her books give young readers the opportunity to look at life from a perspective that is different from that found in most children’s books today. Woodson says she has moved from feeling that she needs to censor herself as an author of young adult fiction to realizing that her stories now grow in strength and power because she is uncensored, writing as passionately as she feels (Bashir, 2001). Jacqueline Woodson has come a long way from her earliest writings. She remembers, “The first time I wrote something I really liked was when I was about seven. I wrote this little collection of poems about butterflies, stapled the pages together, and carried my book around with me for a long time.” Woodson’s advice for young aspiring writers is, “Write every single day no matter what. Turn off the television! Believe that your passion is the most important thing in the world and follow it.”

References

Children’s Books by Jacqueline Woodson

Author Biography

Rose Casement is assistant professor at the University of Michigan–Flint.