

Article of the Week (AoW) Directions

1. Mark your confusion – either highlighting or underlining.
2. Mark up the text. Annotate the article with comments, questions, inferences, etc. You can use a variety of sentences, phrases, and symbols to show your thinking.
3. Write a developed paragraph response to one of the prompts below.

The Pain of the Watermelon Joke

Source: Jacqueline Woodson/The New York Times/November 28, 2014

AS a child in South Carolina, I spent summers like so many children — sitting on my grandparents' back porch with my siblings, spitting watermelon seeds into the garden or, even worse, swallowing them and trembling as my older brother and sister spoke of the vine that was probably already growing in my belly.

It was the late '60s and early '70s, and even though Jim Crow was supposed to be far behind us, we spent our days in the all-black community called Nicholtown in a still segregated South.

One year, we bought a watermelon off the back of a man's pickup truck and placed it in our garden. As my grandfather snapped pictures from his box camera, we laughed about how we'd fool my mother, who was in New York, by telling her we'd grown it ourselves. I still have the photo of me in a pale pink dress, beribboned and smiling, sitting on that melon.

But by the time I was 11 years old, even the smell of watermelon was enough to send me running to the bathroom with my most recent meal returning to my throat. It seemed I had grown violently allergic to the fruit.

I was a brown girl growing up in the United States. By that point in my life, I had seen the racist representations associated with African-Americans and watermelons, heard the terrifying stories of black men being lynched with watermelons hanging around them, watched black migrants from the South try to eke out a living in the big city by driving through neighborhoods like my own — Bushwick, in Brooklyn — with trucks loaded down with the fruit.

In a book I found at the library, a camp song about a watermelon vine was illustrated with caricatures of sleepy-looking black people sitting by trees, grinning and eating watermelon. Slowly, the hideousness of the stereotype began to sink in. In the eyes of those who told and repeated the jokes, we were shuffling, googly-eyed and lesser than.

Perhaps my allergy was actually a deep physical revulsion that came from the psychological impression and weight of the association. Whatever it was, I could no longer eat watermelon.

In the midst of observing the world and coming to consciousness, I was becoming a writer, and what I wanted to put on the page were the stories of people who looked like me. I was a child on a mission — to change the face of literature and erase stereotypes. Forever. By the time I was in fifth grade, I was dreaming of the Pulitzer Prize. By the time I was 45, I had won just about every award one could win for young people's literature. Just this month, I received the National Book Award in the young-adult category for my memoir, "Brown Girl Dreaming."

As I walked away from the stage to a standing ovation after my acceptance speech, it was the last place in the world I thought I'd hear the watermelon joke — directed by the M.C., Daniel Handler, at me. “Jackie’s allergic to watermelon,” he said. “Just let that sink in your mind.” Daniel and I have been friends for years. Last summer, at his home on Cape Cod, he served watermelon soup and I let him know I was allergic to the fruit. I was astonished when he brought this up before the National Book Award audience — in the form of a wink-nudge joke about being black.

In a few short words, the audience and I were asked to take a step back from everything I've ever written, a step back from the power and meaning of the National Book Award, lest we forget, lest I forget, where I came from. By making light of that deep and troubled history, he showed that he believed we were at a point where we could laugh about it all. His historical context, unlike my own, came from a place of ignorance.

“Brown Girl Dreaming” is the story of my family, moving from slavery through Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the civil rights movement, and ends with me as a child of the '70s. It is steeped in the history of not only my family but of America. As African-Americans, we were given this history daily as weapons against our stories' being erased in the world or, even worse, delivered to us offhandedly in the form of humor.

As I interviewed relatives in both Ohio and Greenville, S.C., I began to piece together the story of my mother's life, my grandparents' lives and the lives of cousins, aunts and uncles. These stories, and the stories I had heard throughout my childhood, were told with the hope that I would carry on this family history and American history, so that those coming after me could walk through the world as armed as I am.

Mr. Handler's watermelon comment was made at a time of change. We Need Diverse Books, a grass-roots organization committed to diversifying all children's literature, had only months before stormed the BookCon conference because of its all-white panels. The world of publishing has been getting shaken like a pecan tree and called to the floor because of its lack of diversity in the workplace. At this year's National Book Awards, many of the books featured nonwhite protagonists, and three of the 20 finalists were people of color. One of those brown finalists (me!), in the very first category, Young People's Literature, had just won.

Just let that sink in your mind.

I would have written “Brown Girl Dreaming” if no one had ever wanted to buy it, if it went nowhere but inside a desk drawer that my own children pulled out one day to find a tool for survival, a symbol of how strong we are and how much we've come through. Their great-great-great-grandfather fought in the Civil War. Their great-grandfather, Hope, and great-grandmother, Grace, raised one of the few black families in Nelsonville, Ohio, and saw five children through college. Their grandmother's school in Greenville, Sterling High, was set on fire and burned to the ground.

To know that we African-Americans came here enslaved to work until we died but didn't die, and instead grew up to become doctors and teachers, architects and presidents — how can these children not carry this history with them for those many moments when someone will attempt to make light of it, or want them to forget the depth and amazingness of their journey?

How could I come from such a past and not know that I am on a mission, too?

This mission is what's been passed down to me — to write stories that have been historically absent in this country's body of literature, to create mirrors for the people who so rarely see themselves inside contemporary fiction, and windows for those who think we are no more than the stereotypes they're so afraid of. To give young people — and all people — a sense of this country's brilliant and brutal history, so that no one ever thinks they can walk onto a stage one evening and laugh at another's too often painful past.

Respond to one of the following prompts. Use the space below or a separate sheet of paper.

1. What is your take on Handler's words and Woodson's response? Support your ideas with details and examples.
2. Do you agree that there needs to be a change in literature to show more diversity? Why or why not?
3. Choose a word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph from the article and respond to it.