



## **Harbor Me**

*Jacqueline Woodson*

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**Jacqueline Woodson's first middle-grade novel since National Book Award winner *Brown Girl Dreaming* celebrates the healing that can occur when a group of students share their stories.**

It all starts when six kids have to meet for a weekly chat—by themselves, with no adults to listen in. There, in the room they soon dub the ARTT Room (short for "A Room to Talk"), they discover it's safe to talk about what's bothering them—everything from Esteban's father's deportation and Haley's father's incarceration to Amari's fears of racial profiling and Ashton's adjustment to his changing family fortunes. When the six are together, they can express the feelings and fears they have to hide from the rest of the world. And together, they can grow braver and more ready for the rest of their lives.

## **Harbor Me Details**

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ISBN : 9780399252525

Author : Jacqueline Woodson

Format : Hardcover 192 pages

Genre : Childrens, Middle Grade, Realistic Fiction, Fiction, Contemporary, Young Adult

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## From Reader Review Harbor Me for online ebook

### Laurie Anderson says

This book has EVERYTHING - love, family, friends, middle school transitions, and the devastating realities faced by so many of our children in this country. It brought me tears, goosebumps, and gratitude that I'm alive in a world with people like Jackie Woodson.

Seriously - buy copies for your libraries and every family you know!

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### Mary Lee says

Amazing book.

So beautifully written.

So needed for this country, our classrooms, our children, all our citizens RIGHT NOW.

So powerful...the power of talk, of getting to know others ("Others").

So honest about race and privilege and ability (dis- and otherwise) and family and grief and loss and prison and immigration. It's all there, but it's not too much. Because it really is all there, all the time.

And then I listened to the audio and fell in love again. Especially after listening to Jacqueline Woodson and her son in the interview after the book ends. I'm glad I didn't read it aloud this early in the school year. I think it will make a good end-of-5th-grade read aloud.

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### Betsy says

A good book, whether it's written for a nine-year-old, a nineteen-year-old, or a ninety-year-old can tilt your perspective, if only momentarily. Consider the concept of the "happy ending" and what it's supposed to resemble. What does a real happy ending actually entail in real life? In children's books, many times the ending of a given story is happy when day is done. In real life, something happy may happen to a child but where's the "ending" in all that? As an author, Jacqueline Woodson doesn't eschew a sense of completion when you get to the end of her books. Kids could spend a long time debating whether some of her endings could be so simplified as to call them "happy" or not. *Harbor Me* falls into that category. The satisfaction a reader feels upon its completion is intrinsically tied to its writing, but to call this a "happy" book is to diminish it. Shooting for the moon, Ms. Woodson manages to fill this svelte title with a host of different ideas, lessons, and teachable moments. And while I don't think it knocks it out of the park with every swing, it still manages to be one of the most interesting and well-written books of this or any other year.

It sounds like a social experiment more than anything else. Six kids are removed from their classmates and placed in their own room for a weekly discussion. Their teacher's rules are clear. "Every Friday . . . the six of you will leave my classroom at two p.m. and come into Room 501. You'll sit in this circle and you'll talk. When the bell rings at three, you're free to go home." Putting kids in a separate space together can end with either a "Breakfast Club" situation or a Lord of the Flies conundrum. Predictably, at first the kids don't want to say a word, but when Haley starts bringing in a hand recorder, something cracks open. Esteban is able to talk about his dad, recently taken by the police and sent back to another country. Amari about the restrictions

put on black boys in America. Ashton on being one of the few white kids in their Brooklyn school. But it's Haley herself that has the hardest time talking. About her mom's death. Her dad's incarceration. As the room comes together and bonds, people listen to one another and everyone gets and ending. Happy or not.

Now every children's book that strives to imbue its pages with weight and meaning must contend with a danger that I like to call "the rogue cute". The rogue cute is that moment where the author's writing tips from meaningful into faux meaningful. From something that is honestly moving into something that feels like it's trying too hard. All children's books novelists contend with this issue to varying degrees of success. Ms. Woodson is no different, and there are times when she is more successful than others. For example, to read this book is to accept that it is, to a certain extent, an idealized situation. Six kids, mostly strangers to one another, are placed in a room where they may argue, disagree, or even tease but who are, in the end, devoid of cruelty. That's the premise, but fortunately there's a lot more going on here than just that. As with many children's books, Ms. Woodson is conveying a message, but where she may seem to be painting with too broad a brush in some places, at other times she's quite circumspect. For example, many novels for kids stress the need for us to empathize with one another. Woodson actually turns the concept of active listening into a whole book without hitting the reader over the head with the message. Each time a kid in the classroom wants to speak, everyone lets them, with a minimal amount of interruptions or interjections. Equity and diversity trainings often include a portion of the training where people are taught this very skill. Leave it Ms. Woodson to model this behavior for the next generation.

As for the six characters, some are better delineated than others. I found myself thinking that single character points (being bullied, moving, etc.) are rarely proper stand-ins for personality traits. So I do wish just a smidgen more work had gone into showing precisely why this group has bonded as tightly as it has. I understand that much of it has to do with being able to talk honestly in a safe space. I guess I just wish there'd been 215 pages rather than 192, to allow for some more of those connections. That said, Ms. Woodson has somehow managed to write a handsome novel at less than 200 pages. If she stopped and thoroughly examined in depth every character to the same extent that she follows Haley, you'd be looking at a book that was at least twice the length of the one here. And while I wish I'd been able to know more than just one thing about some of these characters, I can't help but admire the almost Hemingway-esque succinctness of the narrative. After a while, it got me to thinking about how we meet characters in books and how we meet them in real life. When you meet someone new, your brain essentially reduces that person to their most essential parts. This is in large part because we have to find a way to consolidate and organize the information about that person as quickly as possible. Authors, in turn, have to mimic that process on the page AND for a younger readership that's been reliant on compartmentalization for years. It takes a certain amount of talent to accomplish this. Talent Ms. Woodson has in droves.

When Ms. Woodson does delve deep into a character, the story ends up in some interesting places. Four of the kids in the room are described pretty darn well. Esteban is hard to separate from his own headspace, but I liked how you got glimpses of his life away from the page. "His nails were bitten so deep, there was a ring of pink skin at the top of his fingers. It looked painful." Haley, meanwhile, was of interest to me because she highlighted something I've noticed in my own 7-year-old daughter. For children, memory can be shockingly short. I'll read a book repeatedly for months when my kid is four only to find she has no memory of it at all at six. Haley is old enough to want more of her own forgotten memories. As she says at one point, "I'd lock every moment of memory inside a room in my brain and hope they'd multiply like cells in our bodies, until I was a grown-up all filled with memories. Maybe that's what made us free. Maybe it was our memories. The stuff we survived, the good stuff and the bad stuff." And it's thoughts like this that push this book out of the ordinary into the distinguished.

In some ways, the author is working a lot of themes into a single novel. She touches on everything from the

Lenape, to the reasons why black boys have to get a talk from their dads about why they can't play with Nerf or water guns in public anymore, to the death of a dog that manages to be heartbreaking in a shockingly short amount of time. Sometimes these elements land with the reader and sometimes they don't but you cheer on the effort. Plus, you get a lot of really good lines along the way. Lines like, "I think this is what the world is – stories on top of stories, all the way back to the beginning of time." This sentiment is echoed later when Haley remembers a moment when a familiar painting was taken off the wall, leaving a pale green square behind. This disturbs the girl immeasurably. "... I didn't want to believe that was all there was. That when one thing went away, just the pale ghost of it remained. I wanted to believe in stories on top of stories. Always something else. Always one more ending." Esteban's dad's poems are a clever inclusion too. Essentially, they enable Ms. Woodson to slip some poetry in there that would be too mature for the kids to be able to write, but that remains simple enough for them to parse themselves.

A friend of mine mentioned to me recently that in some ways, Jacqueline Woodson's two books for children out in 2018, *Harbor Me* and *The Day You Begin* contain similar themes. Of the two they preferred the picture book, and I do see why. For a lot of people Woodson manages an emotional resonance in those scant 32 pages that can be elusive in novels like this one. *Harbor Me* has strong emotional beats in the usual places, even as it doesn't go for the jugular as often as I wanted, personally. For example, when it becomes clear that Esteban and his father are gone, I wanted more of a kick to my heart. Other choices didn't appeal to me personally, like the fact that most of the book is a flashback from present day, right at the beginning. For the first fifteen pages I was confused and felt that the book had some difficulty finding its feet. Once it did, however, it continued forward cool and collected. That pretty much summarizes a lot of how I felt about the book. I didn't always agree with the author's choices, but I couldn't argue with the results. At one point I wrote in my notes, "Oh, man. It's good." It is. I don't think it's perfect but perfection is kind of beside the point. I've only touched on a few of the myriad elements spotted throughout this book. Ripe for discussion, this is the book that will get kids thinking and talking and (maybe most importantly for some) listening for decades to come.

For ages 9-12.

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### **Jessica says**

I think this is a strong contender for next year's ALA awards, and with good reason. It's a slim little book, but the style is almost more poetry than prose, and each of the words and stories is lovely and clear. As these kids sit around in the old art room that their teacher gives them just to be a safe harbor where they can talk, the reader gently learns of the sorrows and joys of their lives. Two of the characters are central: Haley (the narrator) and Esteban, whose father was just taken away by immigration. I do wish that more weight was given to the other characters (not that I wanted their stories to be as heavy as Haley and Esteban's, but to make them feel more real. And I had a poor sense of the timeline of what was happening with Haley's family. But I don't think that will prevent a younger reader from enjoying and benefiting from this book.

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### **Desiree says**

I absolutely love the idea of being a safe harbor for someone. As a librarian, I believe that libraries are safe harbors. The students in this story battled their own perception of themselves and each other to create a unique safe harbor. Each character had such rich complexity! I absolutely loved the story line.

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## Phil Jensen says

Two years ago, this country elected a leader who promised to "Make America Great Again." But what does that mean? What is America, and what does it look like when it's great? In *Harbor Me*, Jacqueline Woodson offers her vision of America at its best.

The plot is simple. Six tweens meet weekly to discuss their issues. Many issues emerge, with police shootings, loss of parents, and families separated by deportation getting the most coverage. The story breathes and moves naturally. The characters are honestly describing their experiences and feelings, so it never feels preachy. In spite of a plot in which practically nothing happens, Woodson crafts a suspenseful page-turner. I couldn't put it down because I was dying to know how the characters would develop next.

Some of Woodson's books, such as *Feathers*, suffer from being about too many things at once. Not here. This book is honestly, heart-rendingly focused on the simple questions every teen must ask: "What does it mean to live in America today? Am I free? Am I safe? How do I relate to the people around me?" The characters struggle to answer these questions in ways that are vulnerable and honest. It might have been better if Woodson had kept her original title, *The Dream of America*; I wonder why she changed it.

*You know how, in the middle of the yard, there's that huge flagpole? Ashton said. And up at the very top, there's the flag?*

*...On the first day I got here, I stared up at that flag thinking, this is happening all over America. All over America, kids were walking into school yards and classrooms, and the American flag was waving. All over America, kids were saying the Pledge of Allegiance, saying 'indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.' All over America, we had memorized this, but did anybody know what it meant?*

*...It gave us a sameness. I stood in the school yard looking up at that flag and I felt something. Not just like a new kid. Not just like a white kid, but like I was a... a part of everybody running and jumping and playing all over America. Not just in our school yard. I mean-everywhere.* **Quote from an uncorrected galley provided by Goodreads Giveaways**

Some critiques:

- \* The first chapter is a little too artsy and off-putting. The second chapter would have been a stronger beginning.
- \* I work with sixth graders with learning disabilities, and none of them are as articulate as the characters in this book. For that matter, I am less articulate than the characters in this book. However, this is not really a problem. These characters talk the way my students wish they could talk, and put into words the things my students wish they could say. My students will definitely connect with this book.

**Newbery Comment** Regardless of whether this book wins a Newbery, it will be a huge hit. It will be read, loved, and discussed all over America this school year, and for as long as it is relevant.

**Recommended for** any students who are interested in the topic. There is no objectionable content. The complexity of the language is around sixth grade, depending on the reader.

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## Philip says

Stunning middle grade novel tells the tale of six students who bond over stories of their young lives. Woodson's writing combines beauty and ease, making *Harbor Me* an easy, artfully written book. I read this with hope, seeing the future of our beautiful country through the eyes of these six, enlightened children. Gorgeous, simple yet complex stories sure to capture your heart. *Harbor Me* is on the right side of history.

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## Michelle says

*"The hardest part of telling a story is finding the beginning."*

Where do we start the dialogue in this country about acceptance and respect for others? It seems as if the collective has lost their minds. Each side is focused on rhetoric, everyone consumed by a war of "Us" versus "Them". We have forgotten that **WE** the people are the country that we are supposed to *"indivisible"* and what we are supposed to stand for is *"justice and liberty for ALL"*.

**Harbor Me** is Jacqueline Woodson's first middle grade novel since her moving autobiographical novel **Brown Girl Dreaming** which earned her the *National Book Award for Young People's Literature* and a nomination for the *Newberry Medal*. The protagonists are Esteban, Tiago, Holly, Amari, Ashton and Haley are six students assigned to a special education class. Their teacher understands the need for them to have their voices heard, to have someone understand where they are coming from. She creates a safe space for them to talk free from adult oversight. As their walls come down the group realizes that they can turn to each other in dealing with problems like bullying, racial profiling, deportation and parental incarceration. They gain comfort in being each other's harbor from the storm. **Harbor Me** is a wonderful book that serves as a testament of the power and beauty at the heart of the human spirit.

*"If the worst thing in the world happened, would I help protect someone else? Would I let myself be a harbor for someone who needs it?" Then she said, 'I want each of you to say to the other: I will harbor you.' I will harbor you."*

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## Gary Anderson says

Jacqueline Woodson's *Harbor Me* is a book for right now. We can't always help what happens to us, and some kids are dealt really tough hands. The kids in *Harbor Me* are living with the realities of incarcerated parents, deportation threats, deceased parents, and mindless prejudice for all kinds of reasons. When they are sent together to the "ARTT (A Room To Talk) Room," the only thing they have in common is their different-ness from other kids. Then a wise teacher relies on their resilience as she tries to let them find their way to each other. The audiobook version of *Harbor Me* sets a new standard. With a full cast, including Woodson herself as the teacher, the characters and story have an immediacy rare in audiobook narrations. Even the author interview at the end is remarkable as Woodson and her son Jackson-Leroi discuss issues arising from *Harbor Me*. This sensitive book leads us to consider who and why we harbor, who is harboring us, and why more harboring isn't happening when it is so desperately needed.

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### **Kate Olson says**

Thanks to a Kid Lit Exchange reviewer for sharing her free review copy from #NerdCampMI with us!

There are some books that I label "teaching books" and this is most certainly one of them. Of course it's one I want kids to pick up on their own as well, but it's one I want read out loud to every 5th and 6th grade class in the US this school year. It's one that might seem so so familiar to many students, but it's also a story that may need a bit (or a lot) of adult-led discussion to truly get the messages across to students in areas not as familiar with the issues of parent incarceration, deportation, and city life. I'll be honest, this is true of my tiny rural school district in Wisconsin. Kids will (or should!) have lots of questions about the content, and it would be such a rich class discussion novel. Loved the poetry included and the kid-led discussions. An incredibly short/fast read.

I'd say the sweet spot for this book is 5th and 6th grade, up through middle school if students are willing to read about characters several years younger than them. Fine for 4th grade, but there may be a lot more questions about police brutality the younger the readers are, and depending on the location of the readers.....again with my suggestion for whole class read aloud.

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### **Katie B says**

For a middle grade novel that is less than 200 pages, this story manages to cram in quite a few serious subjects including race, imprisonment, deportation, and the death of a parent. The ARTT Room (short for "A Room to Talk"), is a place where 6 students in a special learning class get to meet every Friday unsupervised for an hour. They are allowed to talk about whatever is on their minds and throughout the course of the school year they share some of their deepest thoughts and fears.

There was a little bit of a Breakfast Club type vibe going on in terms of a group of kids who by the end of their time together share this bond and really opened themselves up to one another. Some really touching moments in the book. Would definitely recommend if you are looking to support books with diversity that explore important and timely topics.

Thank you to First to Read for the opportunity to read an advance digital copy! I was under no obligation to post a review and all views expressed are my honest opinion.

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### **DaNae says**

I'm having a hard time with this. The writing is so lovely and the children are dear and genuine.

But I wanted a different book, which may not be fair.

This is mainly a collection of monologues told with eloquence. The reader gets the stories, the friends share, at a distance. I can't help but wish they were shown in real time, allowing the reader a stronger connection. In the end I felt like this was more a book to teach about 'important' issues rather than strong story-telling.

I did have the thought that it may have worked better if Woodson had chosen to once again do a verse novel. Allowing poetry to tell the segmented stories may have helped me feel the connection stronger.

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### **Diane S ? says**

I don't often read books targeted for the middle school reader, but this is Woodson and I love how she tackles difficult subject. She does the same here, portraying six eleven and twelve year olds, all a different ethnicity, and from different backgrounds. All six have a harder time academically in school, for a few it is the language barrier, for another, not being able to be still. They are in an experimental classroom, and have an amazing teacher who sees a need, and fills it the best way. She lets them leave her classroom, making available an empty art room, just so they can talk about whatever they want, without adult involvement. The kids call it ARTT, a room to talk. At first they find this awkward, but eventually we learn their stories, and what herartfelt stories they are.

Woodson show how the many problems so many face, whether it is a parent in prison, the abrupt growing up of a black boy, or a young boy whose father has been taken by ICE, affect these young people. She does it in a way that is easy to relate to, and takes many of our nation's headlines, making them personal. If one can see and get to know someone different than you, ones views change, as these six kids experience this for themselves. I felt for all of them, quite impossible to not.

A fantastic reading and learning experience for middle schoolers, a book that will open the lines of communication, or so I believe. I know just the young lady, a big reader, who will appreciate this book, and she will be receiving it for her tenth birthday.

ARC from Edelweiss.

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### **Kiera says**

Six kids. A room to talk.

For a whole school year six kids go into a room where they are to talk to each other. Throughout the course of this book they reveal stories about their diverse backgrounds.

Harbor me was great. I flew through this book, it is quite short but I loved every bit about it. This is the first book of Jacqueline Woodson's that I have read...I know right? She's such a great well-known author and I hope to read more from her in the future.

Harbor me stood out to me specifically because of the diverse cast of characters and seeing the characters open up to each other throughout the meetings was so interesting and seeing these characters with different backgrounds connect with each other because of their stories was truly beautiful.

While Harbor me was a short book, just shy of 200 pages, it included a lot about race, deportation, death and bullying. Each of these topics were well represented in realistic ways throughout this book.

I didn't enjoy Harbor Me as much as I wanted to but I still really liked the story and all the characters. I wish

it was a longer book and that we could have gone more into Holly's character and maybe explored a bit more.

Age rating:

Nothing inappropriate but more of a ya interest level.

Ages 12-up

Harbor me was a beautiful story about friendship that stole my heart.

4.5 stars.

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### **Katrina says**

There is a tiny bit of story around the edges with the main character, but the overall plot of the book is: 6 kids sit around in a room and talk (often monologue) about Issues. That is not a story. It might work OK in verse (although a plot would still be a good thing to have), but it's in prose. And it's prose that keeps the impressionistic style and psychic distance of poetry, so it winds up being the worst of both worlds. It's a girl reminiscing about people sitting around a room talking, which is distance upon distance upon distance. I always felt like I was watching them talk, not even experiencing it from inside the room, much less experiencing anything they were talking about.

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