



Vermont Reads

Brown Girl Dreaming

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. *Brown Girl Dreaming* is a memoir written in verse. Do you enjoy this format? Have you read other books written in verse?
2. This memoir is broken into five distinct parts. How does this structure add to the story?
3. Interspersed throughout the book is a series of ten haiku poems, entitled “how to listen.” Why do you think that Woodson chose to do this? What do they mean?
4. The Civil Rights Movement is a backdrop for Woodson’s childhood. What role does history play in this book? What can we learn from this first-person perspective of American history?
5. What experiences does Woodson have with racial discrimination in the book? What about other members of the family? How do the different generations of her family respond to racism?
6. What and/or who are the strongest influences on Woodson’s identity? How do they help her find her voice?
7. An important theme in the book is family. What does family mean to her? What does it mean to you?
8. What is Woodson’s attitude toward God and religion? Does she seem conflicted about religion? If so, how?
9. When growing up, Woodson lived in South Carolina and Brooklyn at different times in her life. How was she shaped by differences in her locations?
10. What types of discussions do you think Woodson hopes to inspire with this book? What themes from the book do you feel continue to be relevant in the lives of young children in the United States?
11. Woodson describes the impact of finding a particular book in the library: a “... picture book filled with brown people, more/ brown people than I’d ever seen/ in a book before.” She goes on to write, “...I’d never have believed/ that someone who looked like me/ could be in the pages of the book/ that someone who looked like me/ had a story” (p.228). In what ways is it important to see oneself in the stories one reads? In what ways does *Brown Girl Dreaming* promote diverse stories?
12. Woodson’s mother tells her children that they will experience a “moment when you walk into a room and/no one there is like you” (p. 14). Have you ever experienced this? What did it feel like or what might it feel like?

13. Woodson loves writing because it allows her to create worlds that she imagines. What roles do imagination, reading, and listening play in her early development as a storyteller?
14. There are many references to other works of art in this book, including popular music, books, and poems. Were there particular references that you connected with? In what ways do these references help to set the tone for the book?
15. Veronica Chambers wrote in her *New York Times* review of this book, "...there are poems galore. Poems about sibling rivalry, poems about parents who don't take no mess, poems about grown-ups who make a mess of things and, most poignantly, poems about the friends who help see you through.... This is a book full of poems that cry out to be learned by heart. These are poems that will, for years to come, be stored in our bloodstream." Which poems from the book resonated most strongly for you?

Some questions adapted from the [Penguin Guide to Jacqueline Woodson books](#) and the Kalamazoo Public Library's [Brown Girl Dreaming book guide](#).

Additional Ideas for a Dynamic Discussion

- Use a facilitator, preferably someone who loves literature, has experience leading discussions, and has taken the time to read and research the book carefully. They should be prepared with a list of stimulating questions (the above list is a good start) and should try to include everyone in the conversation. They should also provide a brief biography of the author. Consult with VHC for trained discussion facilitators in your area.
- Make every attempt to seat people in a circle. If the group is too large for this configuration, ask people to speak loudly and clearly so that everyone can hear, or, as appropriate, ask them to stand and face the group when talking.
- Don't forget the introductions! Be creative — in addition to stating their names, people might briefly share their general impressions of the book, their reason for attending, or something about the book for discussion.
- Discussion facilitators should end the discussion with some kind of "closer." One example is asking everyone (or, if the group is large, volunteers) to share a final thought about the book or the experience they've just had discussing it. Or ask volunteers to read their favorite sentence or paragraph from the book.
- Serve refreshments!

Vermont Humanities Council • 11 Loomis Street, Montpelier, Vermont 05602 • 802.262.2626
info@vermonthumanities.org • vermonthumanities.org

