

# MASSACHUSETTS LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE 2023

## HONORS LEVEL II

Dear Jacqueline Woodson,

Jacqueline who is sometimes Jackie, and Jackie who won't ever be Jack. The name game. I am Damilola, sometimes called Graciella, or Dami, but never called Gracie. *Brown Girl Dreaming* was a crucial step in learning to love myself. Ever since I read the book, I've found multiple ways to connect and understand the emotions you had as a young child. It opened up a gateway for me to find other books with similar aspects and feel more acknowledged in books.

Miss Jackie, your book was the first I had ever bought from the school book fair. It was fifth grade and my mom gave me just enough money to buy one treasure from the book fair. I looked and most books were either too expensive or seemed uninteresting. Your book fascinated me from the way that the pages looked ripped with their jagged edges and how on each page were multiple stanzas instead of those infuriatingly long paragraphs, filled with useless, unimportant details. What drew me closer was the image of a little black girl on the cover, holding a book in her hand and reading the pages aloud as the story comes to life. I spent \$12.99 on the book, and I haven't regretted it since.

A few weeks later my librarian read *The Day You Begin* to my class, and I found myself constantly using the ruler to measure myself, trying to see if I could stretch myself up to the expectations of others forcing me to be the paragon of myself. What I wanted and what others envisioned for me clashed until they came apart later on.

Jackie, you brought more melanin into the world of stories for me  
The stories that I read about little white girls weren't relatable  
The few stories of black girls showed the ones with lighter skin  
Long luscious hair, loose curls falling down their backs  
So as I sat there and read the pages of the girl who wrote stories,  
Her dark skin and her thick coils of hair sitting at her shoulders,  
and grew up to be an author with books so special everyone knew them  
As a child, I finally thought, "So I have a chance."

My family is also one of the few black families that live in my town, except we don't live in a big white house on top of a hill. Instead, we live in the middle of a street, in a rich town on a poor road. We don't have the privilege of a long story of how we are teachers, doctors, lawyers, scholars, athletes, or politicians. We don't have any idea what our family coming before would ever leave behind, but we'll make sure to leave plenty of stories for the generation after.

We do have a story, a story that holds no relevance in America. A story of nurses and doctors. A story of moving to another country, speaking no English, and working hard to make it work. A tale of learning, trying, and teaching. It's a story of starting over and succeeding. A story where my mother worked two jobs. Where all my aunts and uncles worked in the same nursing center. A narrative where my mother carries her fathers' reputation with her last name. Where when people hear her name, they think of my twelve aunts and uncles who have worked hard to make it where they are.

But like you, I'll make my own stories. Stories where the characters won't be trite. Where people will be forced to listen to the words of someone so audacious yet so frank they don't know what to do with themselves. I aspire to be someone like you, someone whose name has turned the heads of many, someone who has found a way to infiltrate the brains of so many people, young and old alike.

*“Star light, star bright,  
The first star I see tonight*

My wish is always the same.

The dream remains.

*What did you wish for?*

To be a writer.” (313)

To be someone memorable.

To be extraordinary, independent, and resourceful.

To be dependable, and considerate.

My one dream is to be the best version of myself. To be someone who can have dreams and inspire others.

Thank you, Miss Jackie, for being someone authentic and sharing your narrative with people everywhere. Thank you for inspiring me and showing me that there are representative books out there. I appreciate you so much. Thank you for being the “Stevie” in my life. Jackie and me.

Sincerely,

*Damilola*