

By Heather K. Echols and Diane M. Miller

# Meeting Books, Meeting Authors



## Abstract

Author visits in schools promote students' reading and writing growth and enhance their engagement through lifelong connections to books and their authors. The first author of this article, a preservice teacher, describes her multi-tiered experience as she sought to connect with the book *Brown Girl Dreaming* and its author Jacqueline Woodson, aiming to situate her personal, experiential discovery within the financial and logistical realities of schools. The conclusion offers several readily available options for overcoming obstacles to school author visits.

*Keywords:* school author visits, reading engagement, biographical influence, Jacqueline Woodson

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In 2013, the Society of Authors, an organization based in the United Kingdom that represents over 9,000 professional authors, surveyed schools to determine the impact of author visits in promoting reading for pleasure. The majority of all respondents, nearly 100 percent in fact, described author visits in schools as “an invaluable enrichment that encouraged reading for pleasure, wider reading, and creative writing” (p. 1). Respondents described these interactions between authors and students as having a “profound and lasting impact” (p. 3) that promoted increased student engagement in reading and writing. Despite the acknowledged benefits of such visits, respondents indicated that insufficient funding created a significant barrier to the preferred frequency of inviting authors into the schools.

Even though financial constraints are widespread among schools, many teachers, librarians, and authors continue to advocate for authentic opportunities for students to interact with and learn from their favorite authors. Deb Lund witnessed the value of author visits during her 20 years of serving as a teacher and as an elementary librarian, and she continues to espouse the benefits in her current role as a children's literature author. Lund (2012) argues that school author visits enhance students' reading appreciation, writing confidence, and individual creativity. Similarly, Silverman

Lund (2012) argues that school author visits enhance students' reading appreciation, writing confidence, and individual creativity. Similarly, Silverman (2013), a high school librarian, describes author visits as "the best venues for true engagement between readers and writers" (p. 28). When students are able to see authors as "ordinary people" (Lund, 2012, n.p.), they begin to value their own reading and writing as pursuits that transcend school walls.

(2013), a high school librarian, describes author visits as "the best venues for true engagement between readers and writers" (p. 28). When students are able to see authors as "ordinary people" (Lund, 2012, n.p.), they begin to value their own reading and writing as pursuits that transcend school walls. According to Wilde (2013), a science fiction and fantasy author who taught at both the community college and high school levels, author visits offer "a peek behind the scenes of a book ... an opportunity for students to stretch their wings creatively and talk about their own dreams and goals as writers" (n.p.). Specifically, high school librarian Lauren McBride (2015) characterizes her stance as one of advocacy. Following her article describing tips for making an author visit successful, McBride comments, "Yes, I am a huge advocate for connecting students with authors. Author visits spark creativity and get students fired up about reading. I have seen it happen time and time again" (n.p.). Interestingly enough, the strongest advocates of author visits often bring a combination of education and professional writing experience to inform their work.

Given the many benefits of meeting an author, we embarked upon a multi-tiered experience designed to explore the connections among a book, its author, and its readers and to determine how those connections might practically manifest themselves in schools. Upon discovering that Jacqueline Woodson would be speaking at the Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts (TCTELA) Annual Conference in January, 2016, our plans for such an experience began to take specific shape. The first author, a preservice teacher, would meet the book itself and delve into the pages without any outside contexts. Next, she would acquaint herself with the author and the biographical aspects of the book. Finally, she would consider the possible classroom solutions for recreating her experience. Through Heather's experiential narrative, we offer our discoveries here.

### Meeting *Brown Girl Dreaming*

When my education professor and I began discussing the possibilities for writing this article, I was a bit hesitant. Slowly, though, my love for reading and my belief in my goal to become a teacher worked to overcome my nerves! Our plan intrigued me as an undergraduate student and as a preservice teacher; moreover, the reader and writer within me were both enchanted and energized.

My first task in this plan, of course, was to meet the book itself. Although Jacqueline Woodson's book *Brown Girl Dreaming* won the National Book Award in 2014, I did not read it until my plan began in the fall of 2015. I wish I had not waited so long to join the throng of admirers who are enamored with this text. Before I even opened it, as I sat alone on my couch, curled up under a blanket with just the book and my steaming mug of hot chocolate, I ran my fingers over the deckle-edged paper and imagined I was about to open an antique book or journal full of family stories and traditions—and I was.

From the very beginning, her use of imagery, her careful arrangement of words, and even the cleverly simplistic chapter titles effectively guided my reader's mind and pulled me into her story. Woodson's descriptive powers transported me to another place. I found myself sitting with her on the porch stairs wrapped in a warm South Carolina night, listening quietly to the crickets chirp, watching the fireflies flicker while the adults told stories. She brought me into her grandmother's kitchen where I could almost smell the fried chicken wrapped in wax paper, the warm slices of fluffy corn bread, and the fresh sugar snaps straight from the garden. I could hear her sharp pencil scratching against the crisp, white paper in her composition notebook as Jacqueline writes her name for the very first time. I could feel the cold, dewy grass against my feet as she watches her mother slowly sip her morning coffee in the front yard of their Ohio home. I cried with her, was frightened with her, was joyful, sad, and proud with her.

As if Woodson's vivid words are not enough to give a crystal clear view of her childhood memories, the way she arranges the words and stanzas make her stories even more relatable to my writer's mind. One of my favorite arrangements in this book is the following passage in which Woodson describes her mother's visit to Greenville. Although her mother has already made the move to New York, the children are still living with their grandparents and breathing the pure country air of South Carolina:

And the air is what I'll remember.  
Even once we move to New York.

*It always smelled like this*, my mother says,  
*Wet grass and pine.*

Like memory. (Woodson, 2014, pp. 95-96)

As soon as I read this, I closed my book and put it in my lap. I remembered back to when I was a small child at my house in the woods. Every time my dad built a bonfire, my little sister and I would run outside, jump on our swings, and watch the breeze

carry the flickering sparks high up into the air. We would watch him strategically place each piece of chopped wood and old branches onto the growing flames, with the smell of the burning wood and damp leaves slightly charring the insides of our noses. We would close our eyes and breathe the smell of smoke. When the breeze blew out the sparks and the ashes slowly drifted down like snowflakes, we would jump off of our swings in midair and twirl around, pretending it was snowing. When I read that one small passage from *Brown Girl Dreaming*, I closed my eyes and was taken back to that very day, that very air, that very memory.

Reading Woodson's book took me longer than I thought it would—not because it was too long or too hard, but because I constantly found myself staring at the page, somewhere in between my subconscious and reality, relishing each word she uses as she describes some of her most intimate realizations. In one chapter, she writes about seeing a public bathroom in downtown Greenville, and the words “White Only” are thinly painted over. They did not use much paint on the doors, and she could still see the words “like a ghost standing in front, still keeping you out” (Woodson, 2014, p. 92). Reading those lines physically gave me chills as I imagined young Jacqueline standing in front of the bathroom doors, a haunting reminder of how life used to be and unfortunately, in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways, still was.

Another realization comes when her usually quiet brother begins to sing beautifully, surprising everyone and prompting young Jacqueline to wonder if everyone has something special—a special gift just waiting to be discovered. She soon realizes that words are her special gift; they are what she calls her brilliance. Throughout the book we see Woodson's journey to discovering that brilliance and transforming into the writer she is today. She grows from being proud of writing her first letter, the letter “J,” to writing her full name for the first time, to rushing home to write down poems that come to her while riding in a bus. She smiles inside when her sister taunts her and says the writing is “too good” to have come from her (Woodson, 2014, p. 269).

With the publication of many books since her sister's sarcastic disbelief, such as *Locomotion*, *The Other Side*, and especially *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Woodson has shown the world that she is more than “good” enough to produce exquisitely authentic poetry. In fact, she is currently serving a two-year term as the Young People's Poet Laureate for the Poetry Foundation. What a privilege it was to meet and get to know this memoir written in verse.

### Meeting Jacqueline Woodson

After reading Woodson's stunningly crafted book, I wanted to meet her immediately. I read every “Meet the Author” interview I could find, watched every video, and read about every book she has ever written. I wanted to see—to know—the person these stories molded her into. Watching those videos and actually seeing the person who transformed her memories into this book was magical. I felt like I was getting to know her, connecting with her through my computer screen. In one video, she explains how she came up with the book title and why she wrote in verse. Woodson remarks,

Memory doesn't come as a straight narrative; it doesn't come as a block of story. It just comes in these moments, and the moments are photographs and the photographs begin to tell the story. And when it's memory, it has to be represented as memory on the page. Verse does that in a way that other means of writing don't. (Penguin Middle School, 2014, n.p.)

These videos gave me a new level of understanding and visually sharp appreciation of *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

Furthermore, in January of this year, I was given a most spectacular opportunity. As a preservice teacher, I applied for and received a grant to volunteer at, and partially attend, the Texas Council of Teachers of English/Language Arts (TCTELA) conference in Austin, Texas. Not only did I meet many influential educators at this conference, but I was also assigned to accompany Jacqueline Woodson throughout her time there. I tried my hardest to keep my composure and not “geek out” while following her around, getting her water, holding her bags, and handing her markers to sign books, but I couldn't help myself when the opportunity presented itself to take a selfie with her (which I plan to keep forever and show all of my future students).

The most amazing experience of the entire weekend, though, was introducing Jacqueline Woodson at the luncheon and hearing her speak about *Brown Girl Dreaming* (see Appendix A for the text of my luncheon introduction script). Her velvety smooth voice as she read from her book was poetic and almost song-like, creating a hush in the large room and effortlessly captivating her audience. As I sat in my seat listening, ignoring the dessert on the plate in front of me, all of those stories I had sat on my couch and read about just weeks before became real. I began to see her as the little girl learning how to write her name for the first time, the one who rushed home to write down those bus-ride poems. She became the one who sat quietly on the porch steps, listening to the grown-ups tell stories, the girl who caught fireflies in jars with her siblings, relishing the few days they had left in Greenville, and in my mind she was now the girl who visited the fabric store with her grandmother, feeling for the first time not like a thief or something to be hidden away but like a person. Meeting the author of the book I had befriended in the fall only served to expand and deepen my connection with *Brown Girl Dreaming*.

### When Meetings Are Not Practical

Not surprisingly, meeting Jacqueline Woodson and introducing her to a group of my future colleagues was a once in a lifetime experience. Upon meeting her, I realized how important it is for readers, especially young readers, to get to know the authors of their favorite books. Of course, it is not always feasible to have an author physically come into your classroom, whether it be because of budget, location, or scheduling conflicts, but thankfully, technology has made it possible to bring authors to our students in authentic ways. See Figure 1 for the key steps in the process of arranging a face-to-face or virtual meeting with an author at your school. By utilizing our resources, teachers and librarians can foster that relationship between the student and author that would not have been possible otherwise. Following are just a few of the ways we can make this happen.

Table 1  
 Technology Resources for "Meeting Authors"

Type	Web Address	Suggestions for Use
<b>Social Media Tools</b>		
YouTube	www.youtube.com	To find author interviews, book reviews, read-alouds, and more, type in the author's name or title of the book into the search bar (e.g., "Linda Urban"; "Milo Speck: Accidental Agent"; "A Crooked Kind of Perfect").
Facebook Twitter	www.facebook.com www.twitter.com	Whether you want to request an author visit, voice your opinion of their newest book, plead for another book in your favorite series, or just look up information about authors' upcoming book releases, photos, and giveaways, Facebook and Twitter are your go-to sources. Simply type in the author's name in the search bar and click "like" or "follow" to see your favorite author's posts as soon as they are written.
<b>Publisher and Author Websites</b>		
Author websites		To find your students' favorite author's website, type the author's name in the search bar of any search engine. Once you locate the author's website, you will most likely see tabs at the top of the page to read about upcoming books, appearances, and the link to the author's blog.
Reading Rockets	www.readingrockets.org	Visit Reading Rockets to find author interviews, themed book lists, tips on helping struggling readers, and more. Dozens of interviews are available under the "Children's Books & Authors" tab on the homepage.
<b>Instructional Resources</b>		
Voki	www.voki.com	Voki is a refreshingly simple and creative way to introduce an author, book, or concept to your students. Just follow these five steps to create your own Voki avatar:  <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Select an avatar</li> <li>2. Customize it</li> <li>3. Add a voice</li> <li>4. Choose a background</li> <li>5. Publish and share</li> </ol>
Skype	www.skype.com	Skype is an ideal tool to bring an author into the classroom virtually. Visit the author's website and locate the contact information to inquire about a Skype session. In your initial request, include details such as the location and time zone of your school, the grade level of study the author will potentially be speaking with, preferred dates, your Skype username, and a phone number and email address.

- 1 DISCOVER students' favorite authors and topics.
- 2 RESEARCH the availability of relevant authors.
- 3 ASSESS your school's financial and technological resources to support a visit.
- 4 INVITE the author through his/her preferred contact information.
- 5 PREPARE for the visit by reading from the author's works and brainstorming possible questions.
- 6 ORGANIZE the logistics of the visit in terms of school policy and technology capabilities.
- 7 ENJOY the visit as a reader and writer and fan alongside your students!

Figure 1. General steps for "Meeting Authors"

### Skype

Skype is probably the most well-known VoIP (voice-over Internet protocol). Many authors offer 15 to 20 minute Skype Q&A sessions with classes for free. Once the entire class has finished reading a book, this is a perfect opportunity to get answers to all of the questions they may have about the book and its creator. Several authors admit to having written more books based on readers' requests during these types of sessions. The students will begin to see that they have a voice and that it matters. Having the children choose their questions beforehand would be ideal since there is limited time, but if you find that all of their important questions cannot possibly be answered in 20 minutes, most authors will extend the session for a fee. Visiting the authors' websites and using the contact information available is the best way to find out if your students' favorite authors offer this service. Table 1 offers additional, more specific tips about accessing Skype and the other options listed in the following sections.

At the TCTELA conference, I had the pleasure of meeting Katrina Gonzales, a veteran teacher who has successfully invited authors into her high school English classroom. I interviewed her to find out more about her role in the process and her students' reactions to the session (see Appendix B for a detailed account of that interview).

### YouTube

If you find out that the author you were hoping for is not available to Skype, most likely you can find a "Meet the Author" video on YouTube. Some are geared more towards the parent or teacher, but many are created specifically to get students interested in reading a particular book. Many times you can even find book readings from the authors themselves, especially if those authors have won well-known awards for their books. They often give readings at the

awards ceremonies. This is an extra special treat for the children to see and to hear the book read just as it was intended.

### Voki

An especially creative way to educate your students about a specific author is to create a Voki character. Offering many free options, Voki allows teachers to customize a character's physical appearance, background, and even use a microphone or cell phone to give them a unique voice. By gathering information for your Voki character to talk about, students can still learn about and connect with an author by listening to the Voki character as if it were the actual author.

### Reading Rockets

Reading Rockets is an organization geared towards young readers and their parents and teachers, and its website offers a substantial list of video interviews with many children's authors, including Jacqueline Woodson speaking about her book *Locomotion*. The website also offers rationales and instructional suggestions for planning an author study unit for your students.

### Author Websites

Visiting author websites directly is a targeted way to obtain all kinds of information about your author of choice. For example, Kate Messner (2016) offers a gold mine of valuable information for students, parents, prospective writers, teachers, and librarians. In her blog, she even includes a list of authors who have volunteered to Skype in classrooms for World Read-Aloud Day. She kept the list current as to the authors' availability for this year's event, which occurred on February 24. Watch for her announcements for next year's event. Author websites are also the predominant ways to research authors' contact information, biographical details, and publication lists.

### Social Media Outlets

Many authors maintain an active presence on one or more social media sites. Whether authors share succinct thoughts through sites such as Tumblr or Twitter or they decide to interact more in-depth through blogs, forums, a Google Hangout session, or official Facebook pages, a simple Internet search will get you started as you search for each of your favorite author's online presence. Depending upon the age of your students, you may want to prescreen comments and posts to share selectively.

### Other Cost-Effective Options

Make a point of staying current with the literary events in your city by regularly checking the events calendars of literacy-based organizations, including bookstores, non-profits, museums, libraries, universities, and local school districts. Book festivals and independent bookstores often host dynamic, interactive, free, or low-cost events that connect authors and their readers.

Also, consider a collaborative, cost-sharing approach with nearby schools to share the financial obligations. Additionally, promotional book tours for new authors are often free or low in cost when coupled with the option of selling books during the visit.

### Conclusion

Meeting the authors of their favorite books, or even books unknown to them, is important for encouraging literacy in children. Author visits “get children excited about reading and improve their literacy skills” (Eyre, 2015, p. 15). Furthermore, seeing and hearing authors talk about their books and why they wrote them can be empowering. Heather would definitely attest to this after her experience with Jacqueline Woodson. In many of these interviews, the author begins by saying something like, “I never for a second thought I would be an author,” or “If you told me 10 years ago I would be a children’s book author, I would have laughed.”

Megan McDonald, author of the Judy Moody series, among others, is a featured author on the Reading Rockets website (described in the previous section). In her interview, she recounts the tales of the pranks she played on her sisters when she was younger. She laughs about a specific prank and talks about how she decided to include it in a Judy Moody book (Reading Rockets, *Megan McDonald*, n.d.). When children see authors get excited about their books and talk passionately about why they wrote them, it draws them in one step closer to becoming lifelong readers.

Additionally, meeting authors, in whatever feasible forum, can encourage students in becoming writers. After meeting an author face-to-face or through technological means, students are often inspired not only to read more but also to explore the possibilities of a writing life (Lund, 2012; Wilde, 2013). Valarie Hunsinger (2015), a school librarian who works in the Bronx, New York, calls herself and other librarians “equity warriors” (p. E10). After a visit to a local BookCon, Hunsinger reports that meeting authors showed her students “how they could one day be authors” themselves (p. E14). The students get to see these authors as regular people—people who thought deeply about and hand-crafted these books they are reading. They may think, “If these authors can do it, one day, maybe I can too.” As Mary Pope Osborne, author of the Magic Treehouse series, said, “I don’t think I really knew that writing was my calling, but I knew that I loved living in my imagination. ... I think in that way, I was always an author” (Reading Rockets, *Mary Pope Osborne*, n.d., n.p.).

Building significant connections between students and authors, between readers and books, and between the reading and writing processes is the “basic backbone” of creating and encouraging literacy in students (Silverman, 2013, p. 27). Even if a face-to-face author visit is not a financial or logistical possibility for you and your students, consider incorporating one of the alternative solutions discussed in this article. With a little determined creativity and technological bravery, you and your students will soon be meeting authors.

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**Luncheon Introduction Script**

*Delivered at the 2016 TCTELA Annual Conference, Austin, Texas*

Good afternoon, everyone! My name is Heather Echols, and I am a preservice teacher at the University of Houston-Downtown. I am honored to welcome you to the Saturday author's luncheon. Although our speaker for today does not need an introduction, I have the privilege of introducing Jacqueline Woodson, author of many award-winning books for children and young adults.

Since its publication in 2014, her memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming* has garnered exceptional accolades such as the National Book Award, the NAACP Image Award, the Coretta Scott King Author Award, and the Newbery Honor. I read *Brown Girl Dreaming* twice last semester, and I delved into it once again over the winter break. Each time, I was more and more captivated by her use of evocative imagery and her capacity to weave a powerful story through verse form.

Because I am not a teacher yet, I don't have the immediate chance to share this book with students. But you all have this opportunity ... maybe even next week! I do know that the day is coming soon when I will show the power of imagery to my students through Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming*. I look forward to traveling with them in the world Ms. Woodson depicts.

In my readings, she transported me to the kitchen table in her grandmother's house with the smell of fried chicken and biscuits in the air, to her grandfather's garden full of sweet peas and melons, and to join her mother on the front porch awash in the smell of wet grass and pine. Jacqueline Woodson took me on a physical journey to all of these authentic places, and I am eager to see where she will take all of us today. Everyone, please help me give a warm Texas welcome to Jacqueline Woodson!

**Interview with Katrina Gonzales, Eldorado High School**

Katrina Gonzales, a high school English teacher, knows firsthand how students benefit from author visits. When asked how she determined which authors to invite into her classroom via Skype, Gonzales spoke about how she set up a meeting with E. E. Charlton-Trujillo, author of *Fat Angie*. After attending a conference and meeting Trujillo at a session, Gonzales purchased *Fat Angie* and read it to her class of high schoolers. Because her students loved the book so much, she took to social media and messaged the author, telling her about how much the students enjoyed her book, expanding on one student's experience in particular. Gonzales remarked, "When we make the effort to communicate and build relationships with authors, they are more willing to offer to do video chats and interviews" (personal communication, May 2, 2016).

According to Gonzales, having students write down questions for the author before the Skype session was a good way to prepare the students and get their minds engaged. Even the students who did not read the book came up with questions about writing in general and what inspired Ms. Charlton-Trujillo to become an author. A student who was fascinated by E. E. Charlton-Trujillo aided a lot in the preparation before the video chat. Gonzales also suggested that "it would be beneficial to prep the students by using biographies on social media."

One of the most compelling responses Gonzales provided was when she was asked about the atmosphere in the room while the author was Skyping. She described her students as "involved," "hanging on every word," and "enchanted." Remembering back to the Skype session with Charlton-Trujillo, Gonzales stated, "Students from other classes were begging to come in and listen." Gonzales added that it created an open community in the classroom, adding trust and collaboration as the author revealed personal details about herself.

Afterwards, Gonzales had her students write thank-you notes to Trujillo. Not only did the students express their gratitude to the author for setting aside time in her busy schedule, but the notes were also a way for the students to reflect on the session and realize how powerful it really was. The reflections served as an encouragement for future Skype sessions.

One last question addressed the short- and long-term impact of the Skype session. Gonzales was inspired by her students' reactions. The session "empowered them to see themselves as writers." It allowed them "to see a big difference in the things they were writing." The students were no longer apprehensive about making their voices heard in their writing. "They felt freer to write in the way they wanted to be heard."