

CHILDREN'S BOOK REVIEW

Reviewed by Michelle Swanson

The Year We Learned to Fly

Written by Jacqueline Woodson

Illustrated by Rafael López

Nancy Paulsen Books, an imprint of Penguin

Random House, LLC, 2022



Jacqueline Woodson's *The Day You Begin* (2018) brought joy to readers everywhere. Teaming again with award-winning illustrator Rafael López, Woodson has crafted another masterpiece for young readers, *The Year We Learned to Fly* (also available in Spanish as *El Año en que Aprendimos a Volar*). In this beautiful work, Woodson creatively describes the perseverance of enslaved Africans in America and empowers readers with survival elements for overcoming challenges—what she identified in an interview as veracity, beauty, and hope. Together, Woodson and López create a literary and pictorial avenue for the introduction of many complex and often-avoided topics.

In this modern-day story, a sister and brother are stuck in their high-rise apartment with nothing to do. It is raining, and they are bored. Their grandmother encourages them to use the power of their minds to help them “fly” out of their boredom as well as any difficult circumstance in life. The story proceeds throughout the seasons, with each one bringing a new dilemma to overcome. Neither anger in summer, nor loneliness in autumn, nor unfriendly kids in winter can keep the sibling duo down!

The children's imaginations lift them up and out of their boredom, away from their quarrels, away from whatever is troubling them, to a place of happiness and contentment. Their

grandmother explains this is a skill dating back to their ancestors, who showed the world the strength and resilience of their minds, too. The children are encouraged to leave their problems behind, to “use those beautiful and brilliant minds” and to “lift your arms, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and believe in a thing.” They dream of vividly depicted winged escapes over images of a slave ship as well as contemporary high-rise buildings.

The pentameter of Woodson's lyrical text reads easily and is beautifully and naturally rhythmic. López's illustrations include imagery of butterflies and a small bird that represent the freedom the characters are striving to achieve. Even grandmother's earrings are butterflies! López employs muted coloring in the interior of the apartment contrasted with the vibrant colors representing the freedom and excitement that awaits.

Although the narrator's point of view is that of having ancestors who were enslaved, all readers can reflect on and learn from these models of resilience. As the grandmother points out, “Nobody can ever cuff your beautiful and brilliant mind.” Throughout the story, she reminds the siblings—and readers—that “somebody somewhere at some point had to figure out how they could fly” out of the places and situations where they were stuck, to overcome and survive.

At the conclusion of the story, Woodson includes a note sharing her insights, inspirations, and intentions for writing this book, including the influence of Virginia Hamilton's 1985 collection

Figure 1. The Year We Learned to Fly Song Arrangement.

$\text{♩} = 96$

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system contains the first four measures of the song, and the second system contains the next five measures. The score is written for four parts: Voices, Sticks, SM* (Soprano Metallophones), and BX (Bells). The time signature is 4/4, and the tempo is marked as quarter note = 96. The lyrics are written below the voice part. The SM* part features glissandos, indicated by asterisks and diagonal lines. The BX part provides a steady harmonic accompaniment.

System 1:

- Voices:** Lift your arms, close your eyes, take a deep breath and be lieve in a thi - ng be lieve in a thing. Soar - ing, ex -
- Sticks:** (Rhythmic accompaniment)
- SM*:** (Glissandos)
- BX:** (Harmonic accompaniment)

System 2:

- Voices:** plor - ing. Tight - er, and deep - er. We dreamed a dream and made it hap-pen closed our eyes and flew a-way home!
- Sticks:** (Rhythmic accompaniment)
- SM*:** (Glissandos)
- BX:** (Harmonic accompaniment)

* Soprano Metallophones set in pentatonic (for glissandos)

SOURCE: ARRANGED BY MICHELLE SWANSON.

The People Who Could Fly: American Black Folktales. The Year We Learned to Fly is truly an intergenerational family story of freedom and overcoming circumstances with a creative, positive mindset.

In the Classroom

The potential for bringing *The Year We Learned to Fly* into the music room is multifold, as many musical concepts could connect to this beautiful book.

- **Melody/Song:** Students can use repetitive phrases from the book in song, such as arranged in Figure 1. This 10-measure melody relates to the imaginative and unpredictable setting of the story. It could

be inserted into the reading of the story every time the repeated phrases occur.

- **Instruments/Orchestration:** Students can enhance singing with classroom instruments as shown in Figure 1, adding to the musical experience.
- **Form/Improvisation:** Consider expanding the song with additional sections such as a rhythmic “B section” with a related ostinato as shown in Figure 2 (p. 47) (rhythm from Keetman’s *Rhymische Übung*, No. 34, p. 9).

Students can speak this B section, perform it with body percussion, melodically improvise it on instruments, or enjoy any combination to create contrasting sections for a final form.

Figure 2. Example of Rhythmic “B Section.”

4
4



Yes, we learned to fly! - Yes, we learned to fly! - Dream a thing and make it hap-pen. Lift your arms and close your eyes

SOURCE: ARRANGED BY MICHELLE SWANSON.

Conclusion

All children struggle. Adults struggle, too. People can find themselves bored, angry, frustrated, or lonely, or they can choose to fly and be carried away by their “beautiful and brilliant minds.” This book might suggest a possible outlet or provide a revised outlook to a student greatly in need of hope. The reference to ancestors can also spark a conversation about the diversity and resilience of who we are today and how we got here.

Woodson does not shy away from portraying the truth of history in works for young people, recognizing that stories of pain and struggle are also stories of healing and beauty. As Woodson wrote at the end of her note to readers,

“Sometimes the first step toward change is closing our eyes, taking a breath and imagining a different way.” May your students understand and feel exactly this while spreading their wings with *The Year We Learned to Fly*. ■

MICHELLE SWANSON teaches music education classes in elementary general music, choral methods, and choral piano skills at the University of Northern Iowa. Additionally, she advises the upperclassmen music education majors and also observes music student teachers. Michelle is a frequent honor choir conductor and music contest judge around Iowa and the Midwest. She completed three levels of Orff Schulwerk Teacher Education and curriculum courses, has taught Level I, and enjoyed serving in multiple leadership roles for the First Iowa Orff Chapter.

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