



Red at the Bone Discussion Guide

By Jacqueline Woodson

Book Summary

Moving forward and backward in time, Jacqueline Woodson's taut and powerful novel uncovers the role that history and community have played in the experiences, decisions, and relationships of these families, and in the life of the new child.

As the book opens in 2001, it is the evening of sixteen-year-old Melody's coming of age ceremony in her grandparents' Brooklyn brownstone. Watched lovingly by her relatives and friends, making her entrance to the music of Prince, she wears a special custom-made dress. But the event is not without poignancy. Sixteen years earlier, that very dress was measured and sewn for a different wearer: Melody's mother, for her own ceremony-- a celebration that ultimately never took place.

Unfurling the history of Melody's parents and grandparents to show how they all arrived at this moment, Woodson considers not just their ambitions and successes but also the costs, the tolls they've paid for striving to overcome expectations and escape the pull of history. As it explores sexual desire and identity, ambition, gentrification, education, class and status, and the life-altering facts of parenthood, *Red at the Bone* most strikingly looks at the ways in which young people must so often make long-lasting decisions about their lives--even before they have begun to figure out who they are and what they want to be. (www.goodreads.com)

Themes

Gentrification, teen pregnancy, class, identity, family relationships, mothers and daughters

Reader Discussion Questions

1. Author Jacqueline Woodson has said that she likes to write about hope and love. Where do you see or feel hope and love in the characters of *Red at the Bone*?

2. The title *Red at the Bone* is referenced in the hardcover book on page 162. “She felt red at the bone like there was something inside of her undone and bleeding.” What does this phrase mean to you?
3. How do the characters search for self-identity rather than equality or social justice?
4. The theme of mothers and daughters runs throughout the book. How would you describe the relationship of the female characters in the context of family? What are some of the similarities and differences between them?
5. When Aubrey first brings Iris to his house, he sees his home through the lens of Iris and feels a sense of shame about his mother and his way of life that he never experienced before. Does this change how he feels about his life? Does it affect his relationship with Iris? His mother? Both?
6. How do the other characters in the novel struggle with their class or social status? Consider the upbringings of CathyMarie, Aubrey, Sabe, Melody, and Iris. What do you think the novel is saying about the relationship between race, class, and education?
7. How does personal ambition tie into the characters’ actions throughout the story? For Sabe, Po’boy, Iris, Aubrey and Melody how do they differ and who do you think is happier?
8. What do you think the author is saying about generational trauma? Sabe declares: “I carry the goneness. Iris carries the goneness. And watching her walk down those stairs, I know now that my grandbaby [Melody] carries the goneness too.” What do you think Sabe means by this? How does this goneness affect their lives and relationships with others? Is there an opposite of goneness, and if so, is it achievable for any of the characters?
9. Some of the big historic events that happen in the background of the narrative include the Tulsa massacre of 1921, the crack epidemic of the 1980s and ’90s, and the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001. How does the author use these events in the book? What do they provide to the structure of the story and time line? What do they contribute to our emotional understanding of the characters? Are the individual characters changed by these events? Do you see this history influencing their outlooks and their ambitions or their legacies? As a child Iris fought with Sabe about the Tulsa story, claiming it wasn’t her history. Is Iris right? Can history truly belong to someone? And who is allowed to tell the story?
10. Did any thought, scene or idea in the book make you feel uncomfortable? Without sharing the specific scene or idea unless you want to, in general terms why do you think it made you uncomfortable? For example, did it expose you to something that you were unaware of, you don’t agree with or don’t believe exists?

11. Brooklyn is an important place in many of Woodson’s books. How do you think the characters were shaped by their environments in Brooklyn, Oakland, and Ohio? How were they effected by the past in Tulsa, even if they did not live there? Were they affected by an ancestor inhabiting a place and time where significant events took place? How do you think the lives of the characters who lived in these places compare to the African American experience in Southern Oregon during the same time frame, in the 1920s, 1980s, and 2000s? Has anything changed? If so how?
12. Discuss the use of musical references in the novel. How does “Darling Nikki” shape our impression of Melody in the first chapter? How does music aid in telling the stories of the other characters and their respective generations: Sabe and Po’Boy? Iris and Aubrey? Slip Rock and CathyMarie?
13. Jacqueline Woodson has said she doesn’t write for the “white gaze.” What do you think she means by that?
14. What do you remember the most about the book? What surprised you the most?
15. Is there anything in the book you felt was unresolved?
16. Was there a character you liked more than the rest? If so who and why? Who did you like the least? Why?
17. Has anything in the book changed how you view people based on race, gender, marital status or anything else?
18. Did you learn something you did not already know? Did you learn something about yourself through reading this novel?
19. What do you think of the spare style of the language compared to a longer literary family saga you may have read?
20. Will you read more books by this author, if yes why, if no why not? Will you recommend this to others to read? Would you reread it?

JCLS Discussions of *Red at the Bone*

Do you want to share your thoughts with others reading *Red at the Bone*? Join us in one of these online discussions.

Gold Hill Library Book Club, Friday, December 18 | 3 PM

Eagle Point Book Club, Tuesday, February 2 | 2 PM

***Red at the Bone* Book Discussion**, Sunday, February 7 | 4 PM

Author Talk with Jaqueline Woodson, Sunday, February 21 | 4 PM

More Rogue Reads *Red at the Bone* Programs

These programs delve deeper into certain themes or topics in *Red at the Bone*.

What is a Modern Family Anyway? Tuesday January 19 | 6 PM

Tulsa Race Massacre: Historical Through-Line, Saturday, February 6 | 1 PM

Prince, Louis Armstrong and Wu-Tang Clan: A Playlist Discussion, Tuesday, February 16 | 6 PM