



RIVERHEAD BOOKS

Dear Educators, Librarians, and Administrators,

Books are being banned across the United States. Increasingly, the books we love are excluded from school curriculums and libraries, denying students the access to read important literature. At Riverhead Books, we work to combat censorship. Most importantly, we want to provide educators like you with resources to continue teaching books that matter.

Many of you have asked for information about Jacqueline Woodson's novel *Red at the Bone*, a book that has impacted the lives of many readers. This particular book gives readers a better understanding about cycles of violence and discrimination through the characters of sixteen-year-old Melody, her parents, and her grandparents. It illuminates essential subject matters, including class, race, gender, and social inequality.

Herewith, you will find discussion questions to navigate these topics with students. We have compiled testimonials from educators, librarians, and authors who feel passionately about this book. There are shareable, informative graphics; videos; and a compelling statement from the author. We hope these resources will help in your teaching of the book.

In solidarity,

Geoffrey Kloske
President and Publisher
Riverhead Books
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A STATEMENT FROM AUTHOR JACQUELINE WOODSON

My name is Jacqueline Woodson. *Red at the Bone* is a novel that I wrote some years ago.

I always say I write because I have questions, not because I have answers. I wrote *Red at the Bone* because I had a number of questions I wanted to investigate, including the issue of Black economic wealth in America. I wanted to address the issue of the many ways we have family.

My novel *Red at the Bone* is now banned in a number of places. It's banned because in this book I talk about the Tulsa Race Massacre. It was a massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that destroyed a well-to-do Black community. As a result, a lot of the Black folks, the ones who survived, ended up having to move away.

So why are people challenging and banning this book? Because people don't want to talk about the Tulsa Race Massacre.

I think it's important that we talk about this, that we grow from it, that we come out better on the other side. For instance, going inside a book and experiencing a narrative; falling in love with some characters; and going to places you might not otherwise ever see in your life. Coming out on the other end of that book different, and that difference is often with more empathy. This happens with young readers and with older readers, and I believe books are the safest place to have those journeys.

Great books help students navigate important—sometimes hard-to-have—conversations. They provide a crutch by which students don't have to feel like they're exposing themselves, but rather are using the book as a reference point to talk about race, economic class, gender, and all the things that books allow us to begin to converse about.

Watch the full video of the statement: youtu.be/nd_BPefXVVw

The author reads an excerpt from her novel here: youtu.be/CSDzgtEYO90

Editor's Note: This video transcript has been slightly edited for length and clarity.



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JACQUELINE WOODSON is the bestselling author of more than two dozen award-winning books. Among her many accolades, Woodson has won the National Book Award, the Newbery Honor, the Coretta Scott King Award, and the Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement. In 2015, she was selected as the Young People's Poet Laureate by the Poetry Foundation. Woodson served as the 2018–2019 National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. She was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2020 and a Guggenheim Fellow in 2023.

TESTIMONIALS FROM LITERARY STARS

“*Red at the Bone* is a beautiful, unforgettable story filled with characters who are so alive they fly off the page and into your life. They are strong, yet vulnerable. They make mistakes. Who doesn’t? I want young people to know that making mistakes is part of life. How do we own our mistakes and move on? How do we forgive ourselves and those we love? And how do we bring our history to our personal story? . . . I’d share this book with any reader, YA or adult, and I’d welcome the discussions that would surely follow. *Red at the Bone* is a miracle of a book. And Jacqueline Woodson is a treasure.”

—Judy Blume, author of *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*

“I remember weeping when reading parts of Jacqueline Woodson’s *Red at the Bone*. I, too, had a mother who’d wanted to leave me when I was a girl, knowing that eventually, it would turn out for the best, for me, for her. My reaction to Woodson’s novel reminded me of the power of literature to both echo our experiences and take us beyond them. Books like this should be placed before readers as much as possible, not suppressed or banned. To paraphrase a line from the novel (‘The song was older than everyone in the house’), some types of literature are older and wiser than the rest of us, and this book is undoubtedly one of them.”

—Edwidge Danticat, National Book Critics Circle Award winner for *Everything Inside*

“*Red at the Bone* is virtuosic, as it is filled with characters who invite the reader into their most intimate thoughts and moments. To censor such a work would mean these characters would be silenced. . . . Students fear coming of age, as Melody does. They struggle to detangle themselves from unrequited love, as Aubrey does. And they yearn for some indefinable future, as Iris does. This book is essential reading for students because it does so much for those who spend time with it; it tells readers they are not alone, and it provides them with keys to better understand their own lives. Aren’t these the greater gifts of literature?”

—Jesmyn Ward, National Book Award winner for *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

“A true spell of a book, Woodson is one of those rare writers who make you feel like you can do anything, should do anything. The story of family and young love are timeless human stories—but through Woodson’s sentences, this novel offers us new ways to think and embody our burning world and, perhaps most mercifully, permission to dream—and to change.”

—Ocean Vuong, New York Times bestselling author of *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*

TEACHER TESTIMONIALS

“Woodson’s book gives the students at my small Midwestern university important insight into the mechanisms of transgenerational trauma while also teaching them about the Tulsa Massacre, an event about which most of them have never heard. I have used this book in three different semesters. . . . Some testify that this is the best book they have ever read. Woodson’s accessible but also beautifully lyrical prose and compelling storytelling make *Red at the Bone* one of my favorite books to teach.”

–Beth Boyens, associate professor of English and director of first-year seminar; Sioux Falls, South Dakota

“I have not only taught the book, but also recommended it to others and bought copies to give to relatives as gifts. All of Woodson’s work is outstanding, but this novel stands out on that distinguished shelf. Powerful, nuanced, and current, *Red at the Bone* is a narrative that resonates for readers of every age, and one that should be available to all readers.”

–Michelle A. Massé, professor of English; Baton Rouge, Louisiana

“This book is an act of love. My students value the novel’s fresh depiction of teen pregnancy and parenthood, its varieties of masculinity and femininity, its sparks of empathy and understanding, and its discoveries of family legacies that arise through wisdom, wealth, and education. *Red at the Bone* offers reassurance in its vivid recognition that no individual is ever alone.”

–Dr. Lars Erik Larson, associate professor of English; Portland, Oregon

“*Red at the Bone* opened my students’ eyes to a life of desperation and despair with which many were unfamiliar. In turn, it nurtured valuable conversations about how complicated social issues call us to consider compassion, accountability, and the struggle to survive life’s challenges.”

–Jon Palzer, professor of English; Canandaigua, New York

“The novel traces the ways two different families negotiate and come together to meet public, inter-generational, and personal challenges in service of strong, successful futures. Young adults and college students find immediate connections with the characters. . . . Its deft, complex construction enables students to consider fully how stories work and the benefits of drawing on multiple sources or points of view.”

–J. Ereck Jarvis, associate professor of English; Natchitoches, Louisiana

“I have taught *Red at the Bone*, as it produces rich discussions among students about family relationships, especially as they are affected by race, class, sexuality, and religion. The novel offers a range of teaching opportunities, including how it develops the literary traditions associated with American, Black, queer, and women’s fiction.”

–Kristin J. Jacobson, professor of American Literature, American Studies, and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; Galloway, New Jersey

“*Red at the Bone* is a phenomenal novel due to its deep humanity and its bold exploration of the multi-generational impacts of race and class, love and gender, dreams and desire. This novel is an essential resource in the classroom. Time and again, I’ve seen students of all backgrounds resonate powerfully with the text and the fruitful dialogues it sparks. I’m so grateful to Jaqueline Woodson for contributing this book to our culture.”

–Caro De Robertis, professor of creative writing; San Francisco, California

PRAISE FROM REVIEWS

“Readers mourning the death of Toni Morrison will find comfort in Sabe’s magnificent cadences as she rues her daughter’s teen pregnancy, which flies in the face of the lessons her mama ingrained in her from the Tulsa race riots of 1921—the massacre by whites that drove her family north and taught them to vigilantly safeguard their social and economic gains. . . . With *Red at the Bone*, Jacqueline Woodson has indeed risen—even further into the ranks of great literature.”

– NPR

“Occasionally mentioned, and never forgotten, is the fact that Iris’s family moved to Brooklyn from the South in 1921 after white people in Tulsa burned down black people’s schools, restaurants, and beauty shops. It’s not just that the past informs the present, nor is it just that the past isn’t past; it’s also the case that the past has to be remembered, has to be kept alive.”

–*The New York Times*

“*Red at the Bone* is a nuanced portrait of shifting family relationships, jumping back and forth in time and moving between the characters’ different voices. . . . Underneath it all runs the vexed and violent history of the US. Sabe’s family lost everything in the Tulsa massacre of 1921. . . . Stories may be hidden, but they will come to light.”

–*Financial Times*

“A treasure awaits readers who encounter *Red at the Bone*. . . . [A] universal American tale of striving, failing, then trying again.”

–*Time*

“Sublime . . . This short novel contains immense empathy for each member of its wide ensemble. Thus, as Woodson covers nearly a century, from the 1921 Tulsa race massacre to 9/11, her grasp of history’s weight on individuals—and definitive feel for borough life, past and present—proves to be as emotionally transfixing as ever.”

–*Entertainment Weekly*

“*Red at the Bone* is a narrative steeped in truth. . . . Thank you, Ms. Woodson, for leading me home.”

–*The Washington Post*

“An aching story of family and class, ambition and gentrification, sexual desire and what motherhood really means, rendered in beautifully precise language.”

–*Library Journal* ★

“Woodson channels deeply true-feeling characters, all of whom readers will empathize with in turn. . . . She reveals rich histories and moments in swirling eddies, while also leaving many fateful details for readers to divine.”

–*Booklist*

“[*Red at the Bone*] subtly explores the ways in which desire can reconfigure our best-laid plans, and its expansive outlook suggests how easily, in African-American life, hard-won privileges can be dissolved.”

–*The New Yorker*

“Woodson’s nuanced voice evokes the complexities of race, class, religion, and sexuality in fluid prose. . . . This is a wise, powerful, and compassionate novel.”

–*Publishers Weekly*

“A remarkable, intergenerational harmony of voices. At its center is hope for both individual and hereditary survival.”

–*USA Today*

AWARDS AND HONORS

Awards

Women's Prize for Fiction: Longlist

Lambda Literary Award: Finalist

Andrew Carnegie Medals for Excellence in Fiction: Longlist

Black Caucus of the American Library Association
(BCALA) Fiction Award: Honor



Distinctions

New York Times: Notable Book of the Year

NPR: Books We Love

Kirkus Reviews: Best Book of the Year



Notable Lists

New York Public Library: Top Ten Adult Books

Boston Public Library Staff Picks: Best Reads of the Year

Chicago Public Library: Adults Best of the Best

RUSA CODES Listen List

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *RED AT THE BONE*

TEACHING GUIDE

1. The novel alludes to big historical events, including the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, the crack epidemic of the 1980s and '90s, and the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001. As the characters individually reckon with American history, how do their viewpoints differ from one another? How do their perspectives add to your knowledge of these events? Who has the authority to tell stories of what has transpired in history?

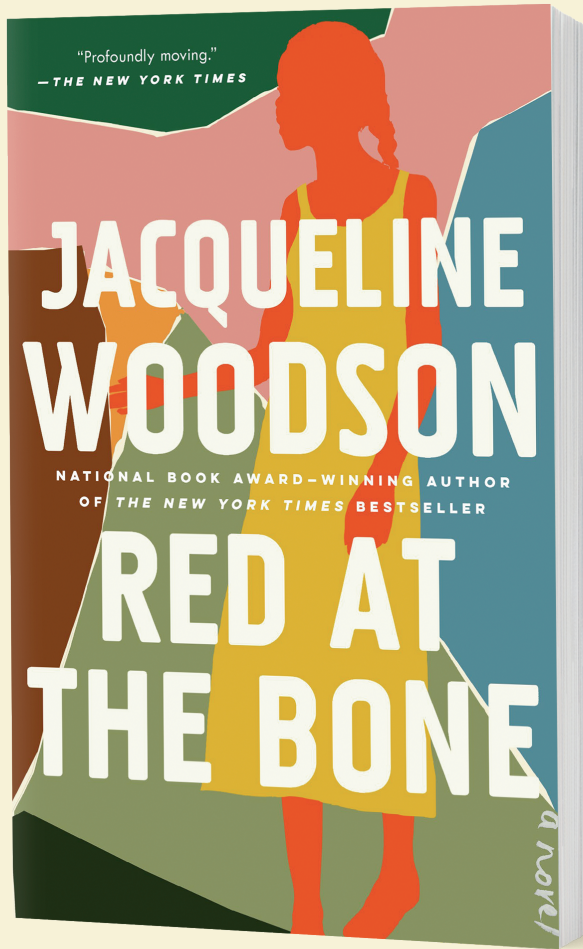
2. The novel demonstrates how Black wealth can be accumulated, destroyed, and/or taken away from families. What do you think the author is saying about the relationship between race, class, and education? How is social inequality depicted in this book? How do social bonds affect these characters? Can one fully escape family legacies and ties?

3. Were there scenes, ideas, or thoughts in the novel that gave you discomfort? Why might the author have chosen to make the reader feel uncomfortable? What can a reader gain from reading such material? How might the elicited emotions or responses change your understanding of what the characters are going through?

4. The novel explores themes of identity, sexual desire, teen pregnancy, and young parenthood. How do the characters overcome social or familial expectations? What do you see as the characters' flaws and strengths as they navigate their own struggles? Do you view them as transformed individuals by the end of the book?

5. The characters aren't always perfect human beings, as they make mistakes, grow, and adapt. From your point of view, what are some moments where you can sympathize with the characters and others where you might not? Do you agree or disagree with their decisions and actions—why or why not?

6. Consider the characters' upbringings, such as family background, culture, music, lessons, and lived experiences. How do the characters' upbringings influence their beliefs and their sense of the world? Think about the ways the characters have been raised by their parents and about the stories passed on from their grandparents and ancestors. How have their lives been impacted by generational trauma and oral history?



Banned **Read**
in

your school/library here