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Q & A with JaNay Brown-Wood

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jun 27, 2022

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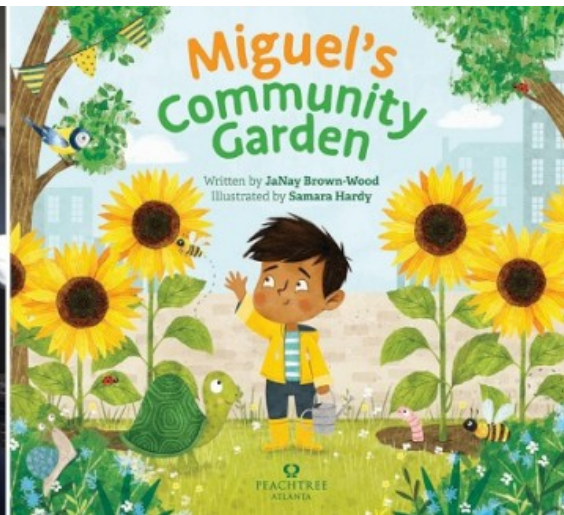
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JaNay Brown-Wood.



JaNay Brown-Wood's sixth grade teacher Mrs. Welch saw something special in her writing and predicted that she'd be a bestselling author one day. Today, Brown-Wood, PhD, educator, and children's author, is the creator of *Imani's Moon* and 10 titles coming out this year. So, she's

well on her way to making Welch's prediction come true. Brown-Wood also teaches in the early childhood education department at Folsom Lake Community College in Folsom, Calif. PW spoke with Brown-Wood about how her early school experiences turned her into a writer, when she discovered her calling to become a teacher, and what she's hoping to do with her doctoral research and her writing to help change the face of children's literature.

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You fell in love with writing as a child. How did it happen?

Yes, I did love writing. But part of the reason was I did not like reading. I despised it. I couldn't find myself in books, which speaks to why I do what I do now. So I just started writing books that had characters from my own family and about myself. One of the books was called *Detective JaNay*. It was about me going on all kinds of adventures and solving crimes. I also wrote a series of shorter books called *Taylor the Tyrannosaurus Rex* that featured my sister, Taylor, as the T. rex that got into all kinds of trouble. As it turned out, I enjoyed reading the things that I wrote.

Was there someone who encouraged your writing when you were in school?

My family was always very encouraging, and still is. And there was also my sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Welch, who would always make predictions for all of her outgoing students.



Her prediction about me was: “Bestselling author, Ja’Nay Brown has done it again...” As a sixth grader being told that someone saw value in your work, that you have talent—and that you’re going to turn that talent into something when you grow up, I think I just internalized it. This encouragement paired with the support from my family helped me grow up to become a writer.



Brown-Wood at an event with her sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Welch, reading the childhood prediction that Brown-Wood would one day be a bestselling author.

How do you think that this early writing talent impacted your education experience?

I think it was my writing that fueled my love of school, learning, and teaching. I loved learning and expanding my knowledge, and trying new things in a supportive environment. In addition, I also loved writing and reciting poetry. Anytime I had the chance to recite poetry or act things out using my body to better understand concepts, I would do it. I remember winning a poetry contest where I had to recite my poem—and that kind of solidified everything.

What led you to want to teach?

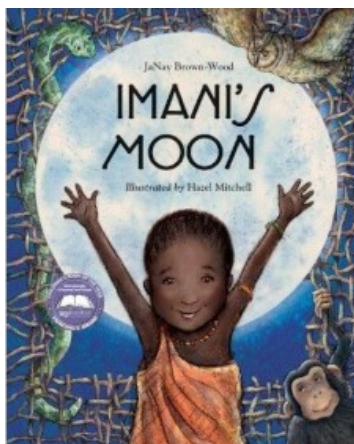
My dear Aunt Netty had a daycare called Harris Daycare in Fresno. I went to this daycare as a child, and I volunteered there when I was a teenager. While volunteering, I discovered that I loved being around kids and working and playing with them. I’d also watch my aunt in action and see so many instances of warm, responsive care and the ways she built an environment that supported children as they grew. This experience really informed my interests and set me on my path to teach—and to do all of the things I’m doing now.

How did you ultimately decide on early childhood education?

While getting my bachelor’s degree, I took a class on culture and learned about the academic achievement gap, and I think that’s what made my decision for me. I learned how Black and brown children were trailing other groups in academics—especially in reading and math—that this happened early on in a child’s education, and that the foundation needs to be stronger to help these children improve their academic skills. Learning these things catapulted me into the field of early childhood education and to becoming a preschool teacher.

Can you tell us a little about your doctorate degree and your dissertation?

Pursuing my doctorate degree allowed me to research aspects of how the lack of diversity in children’s books can affect children. I looked at whether the race of a character in a picture book would influence children’s interest in reading that book. This allowed me to delve into things like biases and prejudices that some children might have. I thought that if we are able to identify this, it would give us more evidence for why we need more diverse books. If we can find that there are these biases and then we can also find that giving children books that serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors we can see how this affects biases, and can decrease them. Then, this can lead us to ask, “Why aren’t we putting more diverse books in the classroom, curriculum, and libraries?” I finished my doctoral program and graduated in 2019, and I’m currently finishing and preparing my dissertation for publication. My dissertation specifically looks at children’s picture book covers and narrative development.



How did you move from teaching to creative writing and publishing your own books for kids?

After I graduated with my bachelor’s degree, I decided to give writing books for kids a try. Through my doctoral studies, I had learned that there was a lack of diversity in children’s books when you look at the statistics—the numbers of books that were being published featuring diverse characters. And all of these things just came together. I knew that I had a voice that I wanted to share, that I wanted to talk about the Black experience that wasn’t stereotypical, and that could be pulled from my own experience. It took me eight years, from the idea of my first picture book to holding *Imani’s Moon* in my hands. The story is about perseverance and parallels my journey as a children’s author. Along the way, I have heard many “nos” and people telling me, “You can’t do this!” But I didn’t let any of that stop me.

You have been quite busy since *Imani’s Moon* came out in 2014. What is it that continues to keep you going?

I think that it’s this belief in myself and that I have an important voice to share. It’s also when I have experiences with children reading or listening to *Imani’s Moon*, and they see themselves in the book, and in me; it’s a powerful motivation. These children deserve to find themselves in books and in the creators of these books, and to know that being an author is a viable career choice for them, too. Because if we don’t do that, we’re not going to have diverse authors writing diverse books. I think my drive to do these things helped me power through to accomplish all that I have done, and continue to do. I’m also so blessed to have such a supportive family. I couldn’t accomplish half of what I do if it weren’t for them!

How do you think your teaching experience informs your writing?

I think my teaching requires me to be intentional in writing. Like when I am teaching, I must find a way to try to make concepts concrete and to tie them into my students' experiences to make my lessons meaningful to them. I think that this goes hand in hand with storytelling, too. That's because in a story you also have to be able to marry all of these pieces together in a meaningful way. So, whether I am teaching a lesson or writing a story, I need to create something that allows the learner or reader to feel seen and to learn something while engaging them in a compelling narrative.

For example, I'm writing a series of chapter books called *Love Puppies* about magical puppies who help children navigate difficult social situations. With these, I'm writing stories where I'm also trying to infuse them with strategies to help my readers navigate the difficulties of making friends and other social skills.

Can you tell us about a couple of your current books—and what you're working on now?

I have a new title, *Why Not You?*, that I wrote with Grammy artist Ciara Wilson and Super Bowl quarterback Russell Wilson, two *Chicken Soup for the Soul Babies* titles, a new series, *Where in the Garden?*, and many more coming in 2023 and 2024. As for works in progress, I'm working on branching out into longer form books, including a poetry collection and a middle grade novel. I'm also working on my *Love Puppies* series, among other titles.

What are your hopes for the readers of your books?

I want my readers to be able to find themselves in authentic ways in my books. While many of my protagonists are African American or Black, my new *What's in the Garden?* series follows four diverse children through different gardens. One character is Black, one is Latinx, and one is white and is in a wheelchair, and one is Asian. Each child has a different family composition, too. Amara has two grandparents who are raising her, Miguel has dads, Lynn has a single mother, but two grandparents who are also in the picture, so there is diversity, but it's more than racial diversity. This is important to me to portray in my books.

I also want readers to walk away learning something new and/or practicing a skill that will help them be successful in whatever endeavor they choose. In addition, I want them to be engaged in literacy, to be excited about reading my books, causing them to want to read more and more books—and, maybe, even write their own.

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