

**“I believe it is impossible to make sense of life in
this world except through art.”**

Daniel Pinkwater

Over the course of this year, we have read books that opened our eyes to the stories of people living in times, places, and circumstances different from our own. We’ve paid close attention to the way characters respond to their challenges. We’ve learned from and, even, emulated their courageous choices.

This month, we devote some of our focus to the writer. An author spends hour upon hour putting down her story, choosing just the right words to delight, move, and enlighten the reader. But, there’s a deeper reason for her work. This purpose has to do with the artist herself, with the value of creativity and self-expression.

Writing about one’s life can bring new insights, truths, and peace. In this month’s book, Jacqueline Woodson’s memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Jackie feels torn between two homes - her home in South Carolina with her grandparents and her home in New York City. She has too much of each of those places in her to fit in anywhere. She struggles to find her place in the world, and her place in her family, not knowing what she’s good at, until she realizes that her gift with words can bring a smile to people’s faces and can make her feel alive. Her story is one of listening to the world, to stories... and then to one’s self.

A practice of regularly creating art - in any format - can help us put our own lives in perspective. Sometimes expressing ourselves through art can help us solve a problem, or simply feel a bit better about it. We can share our work with the world, with a trusted few, or keep it private. An artist benefits from the creative process whether or not she shares her work with others.

During your last Girls Leadership Book Club meeting (until next school year!), perhaps you could talk about your own creativity. Tell each other how creativity figures into your lives, or how you would like it to figure into your lives. Are there ways that your group can support each other’s creativity?

Munch 'n' Chat, 20-30 minutes

As grown ups and girls arrive, allow some time for snacking and catching up. Snacks don't have to be fancy at all; it can be as simple as a picnic blanket in the backyard, or sitting around the coffee table eating popcorn and lemonade.

Check-In, 10-15 minutes

Start with a check-in about leadership goals. Did anyone participate in advocacy work this month? Grown ups should share, too. If you support causes you believe in, share what you do. Do you donate your money, time, or other resources? Do you work independently by making phone calls or writing a letter about something that matters to you? Or, do you work within a community of advocates?

Book Discussion, 30 minutes or so

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions are a good springboard to book talk because they allow readers to bring up any part of the book that made an impression, confused, delighted, or inspired them. Any question that gets grown ups and girls sharing is a good question.

- What was your favorite part of the book? If you have the book with you, read a paragraph or two of your favorite part aloud. Why was that particular part so powerful or memorable?
- Which part of the book felt important or gave you a Big Idea?
- Was any part of the book confusing? Was your confusion cleared up by the end of the book, or not?
- How is the main character like you, and how is she different? Would you have handled the situations in the story differently than she did?
- What did the main character learn in this story, if anything?

Questions About *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson

These questions about *Brown Girl Dreaming* can help you launch your book talk. Some groups might have time to get to all of these questions, but many groups might pick one or two questions and spend the whole meeting discussing those. Feel free to write your own discussion questions.

- Identity is an important part of Jackie’s childhood. She is proud of who she is, of being one of “Gunnar’s children,” of the history of her name, of her family tree, of speaking properly, of having a gap in her teeth like her mother and siblings, of her way with words. What are the things that you think of when you consider your identity?
- What are Jackie’s first impressions of New York City? What are some ways that her life in Brooklyn is different from her life in South Carolina? Do you see any similarities between her two homes?
- Jackie describes a reading experience that changed her life, when she read a picture book that had characters with brown skin, and felt surprised that someone who looked liked her “could be in the pages of the book.” Have you had the experience of reading books with characters who look like you? If so, does it happen frequently or infrequently? What does it mean to you?
- In the author’s note, Ms. Woodson describes the process of writing this book, of examining her memories, remembering family stories, and talking to relatives. Imagine writing a story about your family. What would be some of the stories you would put in it? Who would be the most important characters?

Leadership Goals, 15 minutes

In writing her memoir, author Jacqueline Woodson uses her art to make sense of her own experiences, and she creates something beautiful. Do you use artistic expression to process or examine your life? If so, what kind of creativity do you practice? And, if you don’t, would you try? Perhaps you could get a sketchbook or a journal, and spend 5-10 minutes every day putting your thoughts to paper. After a week, you might be surprised. The benefits of self-expression are not just for our children.

Reflection and Closing, 15 minutes

Think back on the books you've read with your club. Which book affected you the most strongly, or which did you most enjoy? (Those two books might not be the same.) Did any of the books change the way you've dealt with any situations in your life? Did any of the books change or grow your idea of leadership?

This is the last discussion guide for this school year, but it needn't be your last book club meeting. If you want to keep going, you could pick your own books (check out our blog, Facebook Group, and the "Further Reading!" section of discussion guides for ideas and resources). Your club could meet up for field trips, service projects, or potluck dinners. This is your community, your support network. Make it what you want it to be! And please let us hear from you so that we know what worked for you, and what didn't. Tell us what you want more of, and how we can better support your families. With your help, we want to make book club better every year.

Thank you for reading with us, and with families around the world.

Further Reading!

If you really loved this book, and you'd like to read more like it, here are some suggestions. If there are other books you would like to recommend, we'd love to hear them! Please share them on our Girls Leadership Book Club Facebook Group, so our community can keep growing our list of great titles.

Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir by Margarita Engle - A memoir in verse that tells the story of Ms. Engle's childhood growing up in LA, spending summers in Cuba, her mother's idyllic homeland. As political tensions between the U.S. and Cuba rise, Margarita worries for her family there, and wonders if she'll be able to go back.

Serafina's Promise by Ann E. Burg - Novel in verse about 11 year-old Serafina who wants nothing more than to go to school and become a doctor, though there are no schools in her rural Haitian village. She continues to strive for her goals, despite the challenges that she and her family face. This is a story of hope and perseverance.