
RESILIENCE IN THE FACE OF TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY IN JACQUELINE WOODSON'S *BEFORE THE EVER AFTER*

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Abstract

The author reviews the middle grades novel in verse *Before the Ever After* (2020) by Jacqueline Woodson, providing a brief summary, essential questions, and teaching ideas.

Keywords: middle grades, novel in verse, Jacqueline Woodson, *Before the Ever After*, tackle football, concussions, chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE)

Winner of the 2021 Coretta Scott King Author Award, Jacqueline Woodson depicts the long-term ramifications of repeated head injuries for tackle football players in *Before the Ever After* (2020). In this middle-grades novel in verse, 12-year-old ZJ is a budding musician whose father used to be a beloved professional football player. Now, his father suffers from memory loss, migraines, and moodiness due to the repeated concussions he endured from tackles on the field. In this poignant novel, Woodson depicts the loss and pain of seeing a parent's mental and physical health decline with little support from medical professionals.

Woodson illustrates the fear and confusion experienced by ZJ, his father Zachariah, and his mom in this poem aptly entitled "Repetition":

Repetition

Even in songs, the lines keep repeating
and it's okay. The chorus comes back around
like it's making sure you understand
how important it is to the song's story.

So how come when my dad repeats himself
it's such a big deal? How come people
have to look at him all weird? How come
my mom has to say to him

Zachariah, you okay? You want to lie down awhile?

How come he has to look so confused and mad about it?

And yell *I'm not crazy!*?

How come it feels so scary?

How come it feels so scary? (Woodson, 2020, p. 50)

In her author's note, Woodson describes the research of Dr. Bennet Omalu, who first confirmed in 2002 that the same brain disease that affected boxers was also harming football players; it wasn't until 2016, however, that the link between chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and football was finally acknowledged in the broader medical community.

Woodson's *Before the Ever After* will appeal to readers in grades 6-10; fans of poetry, football, and/or the author herself; and readers who are interested in the long-term consequences of head injuries in tackle football and other sports. It explores such essential questions as ...

1. Should tackle football be played in middle and high school sports programs?
2. Do schools (and society) put too much emphasis on sports?
3. What are the benefits and risks of contact sports? What are the benefits and risks of *non*-contact sports?
4. What other activities provide similar challenges and opportunities for success as sports?
5. How do you cope when life does not turn out the way you hoped/planned? What support systems do you already have in place? What support systems would you like to establish?

Students could explore these questions throughout their reading of the novel—before, during, and after—noting how the text informs, interrogates, and/or strengthens their stance.

In addition, students might engage in learning activities, like the ones below, to complement their reading of the novel:

1. **Small Joys Writing:** Just like ZJ writes uplifting song lyrics, compose vignettes, poems, or song lyrics that depict joyful memories/experiences that nourish and sustain you.
2. **School Sports Inquiry:** Research the risks and benefits of (non-)contact school sports, share the findings with appropriate audience(s), and consider further action in your personal and/or academic life.
3. **Advocacy Self-Reflection:** Reflect on and write about how you advocate for yourself and others (e.g., ZJ refuses to play tackle football with friends even when someone tells him “touch ain’t even really football” p. 46).

In spite of the fear and uncertainty ZJ faces in *Before the Ever After*, he remains resilient. He takes comfort in the support of his friends and solace in his mother's determined efforts to seek out answers and medical care for his dad Zachariah. This book, which offers a variety of opportunities for further inquiry, is an excellent addition to school, classroom, and personal libraries.

Readers who enjoy Woodson's novel and who are interested in sports literature or the effects of CTE should also consider reading Gordon Korman's young adult novel *Pop* (2000), which was ahead of its time in exposing the effect of repeated concussions in the National Football League while exploring the relationship between a retired linebacker and a high school football player.

Reference

Woodson, J. (2020). *Before the Ever After*. Nancy Paulsen Books.

Author Biography

Katherine (Katie) Mason Cramer, Ph.D. (she/her) is starting her 16th year as Program Chair and Professor of English Education in Wichita State University's School of Education. Prior to earning her doctorate, Katie was a middle school English teacher in Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools.

She has been a member of KATE and on the Executive Board since moving back to Kansas (from Arizona and Georgia) in 2010, and she has served as Editor of *Kansas English* since 2017. Under her leadership, *Kansas English* has been honored with NCTE's Affiliate Journal of Excellence Award in 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024. Katie's research and publications center the use of young adult literature to recognize, affirm, and teach diverse genders and sexualities in ELA classrooms and curricula. She can be reached at Katie.Cramer@wichita.edu.



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